

Masks

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Pairings: Harry/Draco

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Spoilers: Heck, I don't know what's applicable. Up to OotP, I suppose.

Warnings: Slash, sap, fluff, purple prose, identity hopping, horribly improbable situations. . . .

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Summary: A rather bizarre (in my opinion) solution to the issue of Voldemort.

Notes: The viewpoint is all over the place in this story, which is a naughty thing to do in my opinion, but that's how it is. On a side note, I was, actually, more or less convinced by Batsutousai (so you can blame her) to go ahead and put this up for people to read.

1 : ALPHA

Harry arrived early and stood waiting out of the way, shielded from sight by his invisibility cloak. Watching the people thronging Diagon Alley he jittered with impatience as he waited for Draco to arrive. Spotting him finally, he exhaled in relief as Draco sauntered over to the agreed upon location, pausing along the way to glance into shop windows and scowl for no apparent reason other than that he was a Malfoy and that was something Malfoys did.

As he reached the spot where he expected Harry to be Draco turned and faced the street, fussing at the nonexistent dust on his cloak. Harry leaned in and whispered softly, “Draco, meet me in room one-oh-six at the Leaky Cauldron in ten minutes. I’ll be waiting for you, mon amour.” He carefully crept away, glancing back only long enough to see Draco slap at his cloak a few times before heading on to further shop windows, scaring a number of people out of his way with a malicious smirk.

In his temporary sanctuary he waited again, still hidden beneath his cloak until a sound at the door made him stiffen. He held his breath as Draco slipped in and locked the door behind him, then shrugged off the cloak to move swiftly into the arms of his beloved.

After several minutes of holding and being held, the trembling in his body ceased and he asked the question he must ask. “Draco, do you trust me? Do you trust me with your life and mine?”

His answer was the feeling of his beloved’s lips on his neck, working their way up to his jaw and to his mouth, whereupon the word whispered into his parted lips was, “Yes.”

Draco wondered just what he’d been doing and why he was standing there in a shady spot of Diagon Alley like a prat, staring at the sky for no particular reason. He shook himself to clear his head and remembered there were a few things he needed to pick up before heading back to the Malfoy estate and the oh-so-loving embrace of his family. He snorted and began to walk toward the shops, intent on traumatizing a few clerks so long as he had to be there anyway.

Not far away a silent figure watched sadly as his beloved sauntered off, then he, too, walked away into the shadows of the deepening night, and back to one of the two banes of his existence, the Dursleys.

Harry woke with a start and slipped from his bed, making sure for the tenth time that everything he owned was packed and ready to go, that Hedwig was safely in her cage, and that there was nothing left in his desk, under the bed, or under the loose floor boards he had been using as a hiding place for years.

He paced quietly back and forth in his room, ears alert for any alarming sounds from the Dursleys, until he was ready to scream and holler and stamp his feet like a silly child. By the time Tonks appeared outside his window, he'd bitten every fingernail down to the quick. In a soundless display of exasperation he flung his arms up in the air and hastened to the window, unlatching and opening it to let her in.

For once, Tonks was silence itself, which relieved Harry to no end, and he flashed her a grin in the dim light. As Harry watched Tonks shrunk his trunk down to a miniature, which he picked up and placed in his pocket for safekeeping. She mounted her broom again and hovered outside the window as Harry passed her Hedwig's cage, then fastened it to her broom as Harry mounted his own and joined her outside.

With one last look at the place he had hated for his entire life, Harry took off. Tonks zoomed up beside him, made a quick gesture, and both flew away into the night. After what felt like hours of flying Tonks made another gesture and they leaned into a dive, both coming to rest at a clearing in the middle of a forest. Harry gazed around but could see nothing particularly interesting, snapping his attention back to Tonks as she shoved a piece of parchment into his hand.

After she grabbed her wand and cast *Lumos* he quickly scanned the familiar handwriting to read, "Your temporary home is located in the clearing you currently stand in, just next to the tree stump." He looked back up to see a neat little cottage shimmer into existence in the previously empty space, and both hastened to it and inside.

The second the door was closed Harry let out a piercing scream, shocking Tonks into dropping her broom, though she managed to keep hold of Hedwig's cage.

"Wotcher, Harry! What the bloody hell was that for?" she shrieked as she crossed the room, setting the cage down on the table and opening its door. Hedwig hooted and flew out while Tonks turned around and crossed her arms in an attempt to look forbidding.

Harry gave her a sheepish smile saying, "I just needed to scream, you know? I've been a nervous wreck ever since Professor Dumbledore came up with this plan and the waiting has me shattered. I'm sorry that I startled you, but I do feel a bit better now. Though, it's not likely I'll ever feel quite right until all of this is over and done with, one way or the other."

Her expression softened and she moved forward to catch him in a hug, dropping a quick kiss on his forehead before stepping back. "Look, why don't you bring out your trunk so I can unshrink it and we'll both get some sleep before we start in on everything we have to do. To be honest, you look like hell."

Harry placed his trunk on the floor and watched as Tonks waved her wand at it, then dragged it over to the room she pointed out and shoved it into place at the foot of the bed. Taking her advice to heart he shucked off his clothing quickly and tossed it in a heap for the nonce. Deciding that was good enough to be getting on with, he burned the parchment he had been

given to ashes, blew out the bedside candle, and threw himself onto the bed. Drawing the covers around himself, he rolled over and fell back into his interrupted sleep.

The next morning he came out to see a cheerful Tonks finishing up her breakfast and gratefully slipped into a seat at the table, pulling food toward him like a starving man. Tonks merely chuckled and began going over a few things as he ate.

“Harry, you already have Occlumency down cold so that’s nothing we need worry about, and a vault has already been set up for your new identity so we don’t have to worry about that, either. Also, all your credentials are just about ready, waiting only until we’ve got down exactly what you’re going to look like when we’re done here.”

Harry continued to eat, listening to her words as he filled the aching void in his stomach. To let her know he was in fact paying attention he kept looking up and nodding at her between bites, flashing her the odd smile from time to time.

“Also, it just so happens that I’m on holiday from the Ministry for the next few weeks, which is an extremely convenient coincidence if I do say so myself, so we don’t have to worry about interruptions. Well, unless Albus decides to come visit, which I’m sure he will at some point.”

Harry merely grinned and pushed himself back with a replete groan, having a full stomach for the first time in weeks. “So, how do we start?”

Tonks considered for a moment and glanced back up at him. “Well, let’s talk about what you want to look like, shall we? Obviously the scar has to go, and I think it would be better if we fixed your eyesight and their colour as well—that particular shade of green is pretty rare, not to mention unnerving to the faint of heart.” She snorted and rolled her eyes, fanning herself like a lovesick twit. “Aside from that, I think pretty much anything goes. What do you think?”

It was Harry’s turn to consider, thinking back to the last conversation he’d had with Draco. Tapping his fingers on the surface of the table he said, “Longer hair, black, maybe down a little past my shoulders. I think you’re right about the eyes, and all I can think is that deep blue might work, if only in memory of the sky the last time I saw Draco. Sappy, I know.” Here he flashed her another sheepish smile and ducked his head a little.

“All right. How about the rest of you?” She tilted her head to one side, sweeping her gaze over him in a somewhat clinical manner.

“We talked about that, actually. Before he. . . Well, we agreed that I may as well look rather a bit like him. Around the same height, build . . . you know.” He rolled his eyes at the way he sounded, but he couldn’t help it. He still couldn’t shake the shivers that persisted deep inside at this whole undertaking. “Nothing *horribly* obvious, like a carbon copy in dark, but . . . similar.” He shrugged, not sure he was articulating things very well.

Tonks nodded and stood up, clearing away the remainder of the meal. When she was done she returned and sat back down, beginning the first of many intense sessions designed to train him in how to handle the abilities of a metamorphmagus, which was one of the keystones to the entire plan, along with how to apparate without splinching himself (as he had only ever done it before as a child, and then under extreme duress) and several other hardly things not worth mentioning.

They were sitting in front of the fire one evening simply talking and enjoying each other's company when the door opened, causing both of them to swivel their heads around in time to see Dumbledore enter the cottage. Both leapt to their feet and hastened over to greet him.

Eyes twinkling as usual, Dumbledore took the time to give Harry a once-over, approving heartily of what stood before him. Silky hair swept back from Harry's forehead and flowed down to the middle of his back, a far cry from the rather short and wildly untamed mess it had insisted upon being by nature. Eyes like flawless sapphires blazed in the setting of a finely boned face with translucent skin like thinnest porcelain. He betrayed just the slightest hint of the ethereal, something that Dumbledore was sure would drive his classmates wild, making him chortle inside just to think about it.

The figure before him stood with confidence, proud of what he'd been able to accomplish, and it was obvious to Dumbledore that Harry's form was deceptive in nature. Muscled, but not overly so, and wiry enough that he suspected that anyone with a brain and eyes to see with wouldn't want to get into a physical fight with the young man without at least having second thoughts on the matter.

He nodded and placed his hand on Harry's shoulder, smiling gently. "I see, Harry, that you have accomplished everything we set out to do thus far with distinction. I trust that the rest of our plan will be so as well. Please know that you have my utmost confidence."

Harry smiled back and said, "Thank you, sir. You know that I will do my best, not only for myself, but for the world, and if I should fail, it will not be for lack of trying or training."

Dumbledore was pleased to note that Harry's voice was deeper than before and tinged with a faint French accent. Amazing what magic could do, really. Nodding again he spoke up, "Well, from this point forward you shall now be known as Alex Ouroboros, a student transferring in from Beauxbatons Academy. As I'm sure Tonks has told you, your account at Gringotts has already been arranged, and I am here to assure you that your identity has been established beyond question."

Harry and Tonks nodded as Dumbledore continued. "For the short time that it is necessary, Tonks here will pose as your mother, such as when you go to Diagon Alley to purchase anything you need for the school year, and once again to escort you to the train. After that, Tonks will irrevocably forget that any of this happened, as we arranged."

He paused for a moment, letting his gaze sweep the room. “Ah yes, lest I forget. We will need to do something about your Hedwig.”

Harry—no, Alex—looked a little startled at this, never even having considered his owl. He looked up at Dumbledore nervously and fidgeted a little in his concern.

“Ah, Alex, do not worry. We shall simply change her appearance a little and you may rename her. With a little persuasion, she will accept the change of name, especially with a hint of magic to back it up should it be necessary. She will not otherwise change from the bird you have grown to love.”

Alex immediately relaxed, feeling a little foolish for having worried in the first place. This was Dumbledore talking after all.

“Tonks can handle that part of things. Before I go, here is your letter, and I’ll remind you that you have a week or so left before school starts. Get used to thinking of yourself as Alex Ouroboros, and if you have any problems, ask Tonks here to give you a little magical reinforcement to help you to avoid inadvertent mistakes. Have fun shopping at Diagon Alley and I will see you back at school shortly.”

Dumbledore stayed for just a little while longer, moving on to talk of inconsequential things and then took his leave. Alex wandered over to the fireplace and sat down, feeling both exhilarated and nervous as Tonks eyed Hedwig up and down a few times.

“Any suggestions on colour, Alex?” she asked thoughtfully.

“Er . . . I don’t know. Why don’t you make her sort of greyish with some black edgings and I’ll rename her something simple like . . . Aki?” he replied off the top of his head.

Tonks nodded and got to work. When she was done, Alex spent some time with his owl, letting her know her new name and so forth until she hooted softly and nibbled his fingers affectionately.

“All right, Alex. This is the last time you’ll be seeing this place, since we’ll be staying at the Leaky Cauldron overnight. Mind now, you *are* seventeen in case you’d forgotten, so it’s perfectly all right for you to use magic outside of school if you need to. Got all your things ready?” Alex immediately mourned having had to shrink his Firebolt and pretend it was a working miniature, but shrugged it off.

Alex nodded and they swept through the door of the cottage into a bright, late summer morning, then apparated to the Leaky Cauldron. Tonks, morphed to look like an older, much more feminine version of Alex, collected their keys and they stopped at their rooms long enough to drop things off, leaving behind everything except the list of supplies he needed.

She also spoke with a faint French accent as they stopped at Gringotts to visit his new vault and then started along the alley to begin their shopping, the experience tinged with a hint of sadness because both knew this was probably the last time. Alex had grown to like Tonks a great deal during their weeks in the cottage and had come to feel like a younger brother of sorts or a cousin, a feeling which she shared in. Much as he wanted to get on and do his damndest to fulfill his prophesied destiny, the sacrifices he was being asked to make, and the sacrifices of those around him who weren't even aware of what they would be forced to suffer through tore at his heart.

He wanted to rail and rant about the unfairness of it all, about being forced into a destiny he had never asked for or wanted, especially when he caught glimpses of Ron and Hermione shopping together that same day. But, he knew they had each other, and would have even if they hadn't finally broken down and admitted how they felt. He only knew that he would miss them terribly. He smiled though, seeing them lean toward each other as they walked along, holding hands.

Back at the Leaky Cauldron some hours later, he shared dinner with Tonks in companionable silence, then went to bed in his room, staring for a long time at the ceiling before sleep overtook him.

The next morning he dressed in new clothing suited to his changed figure and appearance (he had decided blue-green really set off his new looks) and donned some plain robes, much like the set he had bought six years ago at the beginning of his journey. Tonks met him and led him down to breakfast, which was punctuated by desultory conversation, and then they set off for the station and entered the platform, arriving fairly early.

Tonks played the dutiful mother, straightening Alex's robes and combing his hair back with her fingers, amusement dancing in her eyes at the expression on his face. "Come now, Alex. You should get settled on the train in comfort. Please do not forget to owl me if there's anything you should need." She gave him a hug and kissed him warmly on the cheek.

"Yes, mother," was all he said before turning away to board the train with his belongings. One last glance back at a waving Tonks and he set off to find an empty compartment. Luckily, having arrived as early as they had, he was able to find one immediately and hoisted his trunk onto the rack along with Aki's cage, then sat down with one of his new school books to pass the time reading.

Inside he kept telling himself to settle down and stop being so nervous, but frankly, his inner voice of reason was fighting a losing battle. His eyes wandered across the same page countless times before he finally gave it up and left the book open on his lap in favor of staring out the window at the platform to gaze at the many students larking and prancing about.

He sighed heavily as he watched Ron and Hermione arrive outside, both glancing around with worried expressions on their faces, losing sight of them only after they'd said their good-byes

to their respective parents and boarded the train. Luckily they did not stop at his particular compartment, having only glanced in long enough to see that it was not empty, and so he listened as the sounds of their passage faded. He heaved another sigh, feeling somewhat childishly annoyed with himself, and went back to staring out the window.

More footsteps made their way down the corridor, mixed with laughter and merriment, none of which interested Alex at the moment. He was compelled to turn his head, though, when a very familiar face appeared at the door to his compartment followed almost immediately by the figure of Draco Malfoy. Predictably, the twin bulks of Crabbe and Goyle were not far behind.

Draco glanced over at the stranger, obviously not a first year, and calmly sized him up. Coming to some sort of decision, he sat down across from Alex and stretched out his hand. "I'm Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

Alex stretched out his own hand and grasped Draco's firmly and shook. "Allow me to introduce myself," he said, "I am called Alex Ouroboros." There was only a slight sense of being tested during that handshake, and Alex did his best to maintain his composure at being so close to his love again, holding off on the temptation to yank violently enough that Draco ended up in his lap. Draco, of course, hadn't a clue in the world just who he was speaking to.

Draco allowed himself one of his trademark smirks, though his overall expression was not one of malice. "I detect a certain something in your voice, Alex. You don't hail from around here." He didn't want to scare this one off, not if he had any potential. The accent was very familiar to him.

Alex shook his head slightly saying, "Ah, no, not exactly. I have been away at school in France for some years. I suppose that certain things taint without one being aware of it." He flashed a charming smile at Draco and bowed slightly in his seat. He was almost immediately rewarded with a flicker of something in Draco's eyes, though the corresponding smile never touched more than the corners of the young man's mouth.

Alex understood this perfectly. Draco wasn't one to rush into turning on the full charm with a stranger, not after the debacle of their first year. He was undoubtedly reserving judgment on this stranger until he'd been sorted. Alex glanced sidelong at Crabbe and Goyle to see them standing there as they usually did, mouths slightly open like a person with adenoid problems, and with expressions of utter imbecility. Some things never seemed to change, though he knew that their outward appearance, much like his own, was highly deceptive.

The interminable journey to Hogwarts was broken up by somewhat wary conversation and verbal fencing, mainly between Alex and Draco, though some of the other Slytherins stopped in from time to time to join in, each scurrying off a short while later when Draco's expression grew thunderous. Alex could tell he was being carefully felt out and weighed so he made sure

to emphasize the parts of his nature which suited Slytherin, without being too bloody obvious about it.

As the train rolled onward, Draco became more and more relaxed in his company, though never quite losing a touch of tension around his eyes. Draco tried not to let his eyes sweep over this fellow too blatantly, but he could not help thinking that he wouldn't mind having a shot at him personally. He could only hope given the way Alex had been conversing that he'd be sorted into Slytherin as quickly as he himself had been. The French always were a rather sly bunch as countries go. That would make things much, much easier for Draco's personal designs.

The rich, faintly-accented voice and breathtaking looks of this young man definitely had him at the top of Draco's list of people to chat up in more detail. Still, until they knew for sure, he and his would be treating him well enough, since he seemed amiable, was easy on the eyes and ears, and quite good company thus far. He never realized, of course, that Alex knew exactly what to say and do to ensure his good will. After all, how could he?

In due time the train rolled into the station and students began to disembark. Draco made it a personal point to escort Alex toward the carriages, stepping back to let him enter first before he, Crabbe, and Goyle followed him inside. Conversation continued to flow up to the castle, and Alex dutifully paused to make appropriate noises about the scenery and the castle up ahead.

On arrival Alex was whisked away and delivered to Dumbledore's office to be met by the man himself along with the head of each house. Having 'transferred' in, he was not to be sorted with the first years. And as expected, the sorting hat duly belted out, "SLYTHERIN!" to the people waiting in a fraction of a heartbeat, and Alex was relieved of the hat (and its acerbic comments into his mind).

Snape, as the head of his new house, led him to the Great Hall and pointed out the table he would be sitting at during meals for the next year. Alex had to keep reminding himself that he wasn't supposed to have any clue of where anything was or who anyone was (never mind how each house treated the others), so his progress toward the Slytherin table was somewhat restrained, and being the sort of person he was, he never noticed half the student population following his every move, most of them female.

Draco had looked up, along with most of the students, when the doors had opened and smirked when Alex appeared flanked by Professor Snape. As Alex made his careful way toward the table Draco raised one hand and motioned when he was sure Alex had noticed him. He nudged the person next to him to budge over and warmed inside when Alex flashed him another one of those charming smiles. Obviously this young man had been brought up by people who still believed in social graces. It never once crossed Draco's mind to worry about family aside from that.

Draco was feeling mightily pleased (and just a bit shivery inside) as Alex took the spot next to him and immediately set about explaining to him what was about to happen. “Every year before dinner starts the first years are sorted into their houses. Like I expect you just were, except they get to parade in here and be sorted in full view of the student body. And may I say, congratulations and welcome to Slytherin. I’m pleased to see I was right about you being with us.” The smirk was back in full force.

He continued with, “I expect you’ll be wanting to know the names of the professors—” when he was cut off by the arrival of McGonagall and a line of youngsters, some of which were trembling while others looked around with wide-eyed excitement at the hall or up toward the ceiling. After several of the first years had been sorted Draco went back to his commentary, pointing out the adults at the head table and giving Alex a run down on what class they each taught and what type of teacher they were.

During dinner he nattered on (in an oh-so-sophisticated way) about various aspects of the school, breaking off his current topic long enough to point out several of the castle ghosts before returning back to what he’d been explaining before. Draco noticed, though, that Alex was getting more than a few soulful stares from various students and they were arrowing over from more than just his fellow Slytherins.

He felt a bit put out at the knowledge, but resolved to not let it upset him. He was a Malfoy, and Malfoys always got what they wanted. Nobody was going to touch Alex if he had anything to say about it, and that was that. He never even felt the smirk that twisted his lips as he leaned in toward Alex again, or saw the several people who blanched and found other places to rest their eyes.

Sometime around dessert a certain issue blossomed into full flower inside Draco’s head as the conversation around them finally sunk in, so he lifted himself slightly and stared at the Gryffindors, reflexively adjusting his expression to one of cold disdain. He scanned the entire table quickly, pausing for a moment when his eyes alighted on Weasley and Granger, then sat back down with a narky little sneer plastered on his face. Leaning toward Alex he said in a low voice, “There’s something not right. Saint Potter isn’t here.”

But before he could elaborate dinner ended and everyone stood up to leave, trundling toward the exit like a herd of giggly sheep. Draco tugged at Alex’s sleeve and motioned him to follow, so they strode off toward the dungeons, and Alex’s second ever real view of them. A bare stretch of wall greeted them with silence, sliding open when Draco spoke the password. Draco strode in, Alex right behind him, and both collapsed into squashy armchairs near the fire and looked at each other.

“Apparently we have to wait for Severus before we know where we’ll be sleeping as seventh years,” remarked Draco, giving Alex a speculative gaze. Alex merely nodded and murmured something noncommittal, already knowing he would be paired up with Draco. Both watched wearily as the fifth year prefects waltzed in leading a small group of first years and explained about the sleeping arrangements for each gender, then wasted no time informing the

youngsters that they would be required to be present for a short meeting the next morning at ten.

Within minutes the common room was empty of everyone but seventh years and there was a great deal more yawning than talking going on. Draco rested his head against the back of his chair, continuing to watch Alex in a sidelong glance until Professor Snape stalked in like an avenging angel on a bad hair day, his cloak billowing out behind him like a living thing.

And then, he broke into a genuine smile and immediately got down to business. Alex, for his part, clutched at his chest surreptitiously thinking he was having a heart attack, never having seen Snape drop his smarmy little sneer and smile like a actual person. Realizing what he was doing he lowered his hand into his lap and forced himself to pay attention.

“It’s good to see you all back, and I’d like to welcome a new seventh year into our midst. For anyone who has not already met him, please make Alex feel at home here with us when you have the chance,” Snape said as he gestured toward Alex’s chair. Since most of them had already dropped in to see who Draco had been chatting up on the train, the others simply waved sleepily and flashed friendly smiles in his direction before hurriedly turning back to their head of house when Draco started scowling.

Well, this was certainly a shock to Alex. He’d listened to Draco try to tell him what it was *really* like in Slytherin, but actually being there was a far more concrete experience. Merlin’s beard—these people were all bloody well wearing masks outside the confines of their house. In fact, he would not have been surprised if there was a special class taught within the Slytherin dungeons on how to achieve things precisely like that. But since Snape was speaking again he mentally shook himself awake and turned toward him courteously.

“As you are no doubt aware, seventh years are paired up instead of sharing one large room, so let me get those assignments out of the way so you can all get some rest after your journey.” Alex knew that these assignments were complete tripe considering that people their age were likely to hop beds as often as the sun rose. He strained his power of attention long enough to hear his own name along with Draco’s, based on the idea that the new guy would most benefit from being paired up with the Head Boy, before desperately trying to stifle a yawn.

He snapped back into focus, however, when people started to rise and realized that Snape was standing before Draco and himself. So he flashed his charming smile again and listened attentively as Snape asked Draco to make sure that Alex understood the facts of life for someone living in Slytherin House. Alex then realized he might have to be a little more careful with that smile when he noticed Snape’s eyes widen a little in response and fidget ever so slightly. Apparently this disguise of his had a little more oomph to it than he’d realized.

As Snape started to back up in preparation of leaving, Alex rose and bowed slightly and murmured, “Thank you, Professor,” before turning to wait for Draco’s lead. He was a little startled when he heard the professor reply, “Please do call me Severus. All Slytherins do when

we're in our own space. Outside these walls is a different matter." And with that, he stalked off again, robes flapping behind him.

Alex was impressed—obviously there were some things Draco simply had not been prepared to mention, or felt he couldn't, in the interests of house rivalry. Draco quirked the corner of his mouth in a half smile, inwardly skipping at the room assignment (not that he would ever, ever admit such a thing to anyone still breathing), and motioned for Alex to follow him. In this instance, since Alex had never seen more than the common room itself, that was just as well, as he hadn't got a clue where they were supposed to go.

Once inside their shared room, Alex was grateful that his belongings were already in place and that all he needed to do was brush his teeth and change before throwing himself desperately at his bed. After he'd rummaged in his trunk for things to arrange in the bathroom that each suite contained (and quite the luxury indeed) he cocked an eyebrow at Draco questioningly and received a nod in response, so he busied himself with nighttime things for a few minutes and then reappeared in their room.

Knowing that the French were hardly the type to be body shy (and not minding anyway since this was his beloved even if Draco didn't and couldn't remember that), he stripped down to his boxers without a second thought. Turning around he allowed himself a full body stretch then sat on the bed, sneaking a look Draco through half-lidded eyes, then slipped under the covers. He rested on his side with his head propped on one hand and watched as Draco entered the bathroom.

Draco arrived in front of the mirror to see a slightly shell-shocked look on his face, which in his experience was decidedly uncommon. In fact, he wasn't sure it had ever happened before. He shook his head, trying to get the image out of his mind of a slim but sculptured Alex stretching like some pampered house cat, but closing his eyes to do so was a very bad idea. He sleepwalked his way through his bedtime routine and returned to his own bed on auto-pilot.

His eyes were closed as he waited, and when Draco returned he opened them to ask, "Did you want to explain what Severus meant now or would you prefer to wait until morning?" all while running his free hand through his hair as he watched the young man strip down even as he had.

Draco narrowed his eyes and considered as he slipped beneath the sheets on his bed. "In the morning, if that's all right. I'm pretty well fagged at this point and I expect you are, too. Good night, Alex." He heard a mumbled, "Night, Draco," as the lights went out and they both got comfortable for the night, not that their respective thoughts allowed either of them any sleep for a considerable amount of time.

In the Gryffindor common room a perplexed Ron watched as his girlfriend Hermione stalked around in circles pulling at her hair in frustration. “Where is he, Ron? Where did Harry go, why isn’t he here?” Around and around she went shrieking things like, “He hasn’t written in over four weeks!” and “What in blazes is going on!?” Naturally, being as confused and ignorant as she was on this issue, Ron wisely decided to keep his mouth shut. Truth be told, Ron couldn’t help but be reminded of an angry Crookshanks after Wormtail not so long ago, though he didn’t think Hermione would find that comparison flattering in the least.

Hermione came to a sudden stop and glared at Ron, who cringed away from her and considered getting behind one of the chairs. “We are going to see Dumbledore about this right after breakfast, okay!?” And Ron, being an unusually perceptive fellow that evening, nodded his head vigorously and started edging away toward the boy’s staircase. As soon as her back was turned he fled without a backward glance to the room he was sharing with Neville.

2: AND

The next morning Draco was treated to another cat-like stretch from his roommate and found himself nibbling his lower lip while pretending he wasn't actually paying attention. Bloody hell! Did the man have a clue what he was about? He spent a little more time deluding himself into thinking he was still a bit woozy from sleep, giving Alex first go at the bathroom. Once he was out of sight, Draco flopped over on his back and threw his arms back over his head. He wanted to scream like a girl! A girl, damn it!

The sound of the shower got him to sit up and he ran his fingers through his shoulder length hair, idly wondering if he should get it cut shorter. He'd been letting it grow for some reason he couldn't quite remember. That brought a frown to his face and made him feel a little uneasy. Then he shrugged and decided to leave the matter for another time, at which point Alex appeared again, clothed only in a towel loosely secured around his hips.

After Draco got his heart convinced that it really belonged in his chest and not his throat, he pushed himself away from the bed and entered the bathroom himself. Cold water would be a good idea. In fact, it was a splendid idea. As the cool water sluiced over his body, he considered asking Alex what *he* thought about his hair. That might produce an interesting response. That might tell him if Alex was his type of guy.

He toweled himself off then wrapped it around his waist, sauntered back into the bedroom, and rummaged around in his trunk for something to wear. Since it was the weekend still, he could please himself (and incidentally many other people, not that he gave a damn, of course) by wearing something that suited his icy blond perfection. So he snatched out some close-fitting black trousers and a dark blue silk shirt.

A quick glance showed that Alex was rummaging through his trunk, so Draco shrugged off his towel and slipped into a pair of boxers, then finished dressing. As he turned around he realized that a pair of bright blue eyes had been watching him and almost blushed, though not from embarrassment. "Let's go have breakfast and then I can explain about what Severus meant," he suggested.

Alex nodded and the pair made their way to the Great Hall to sit down and tuck into the myriad dishes placed on the table. It was fairly early, so there weren't a lot of people around, and most of them were yawning and talking in sleepy murmurs. Alex kept his expression clear when he noticed Hermione and Ron were actually present at the Gryffindor table, but smiled inside at the sight of Ron awake so early on a weekend day.

He wished he could push himself back and relax now that he was done, but that was rather difficult to do on a bench, so he looked instead at Draco who was finishing up a last bit of buttered toast. Alex gave him another one of his charming smiles and set himself to follow the blond out of the room, the castle, and onto the grounds, again letting his eyes wander all over the place to try and see things as a newcomer would.

Draco was amiable enough to point out things here and there as he led Alex to a quiet place that only Slytherins seemed to frequent. He would have done for any new Slytherin, in point of fact, had he been assigned to one. Generally speaking that duty went to younger students, as they had more time to show around the first years, and had at the bare minimum a year of wearing the Slytherin mask to the world. The only real difference was that Draco was going out of his way to brush against Alex in the process.

Sure, Alex was gorgeous, but Draco had never been stupid enough to put pure looks at the forefront of a contest of interest. So why, he wondered, was he verging on breaking his outwardly cool reserve and making a complete prat out of himself? The more Draco thought about it, the more he wondered if it might be the way Alex seemed to look at him, appreciate what he saw, but not show what he was really thinking back there. Maybe it was the allure of the one person he'd seen (Slytherins included) who didn't let longing and worship of Draco dominate his eyes. Alex somehow seemed both close and very far away from him.

When they finally arrived, Draco sat down with his back against a tree and stretched his legs out in front, while Alex dropped to the ground and laid his head on Draco's lap as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Draco, being the cool, calm sort (really, he was) simply said, "I'm sorry?"

Alex smiled up at him. "Do you not do this in this country? It is comfortable."

Draco didn't have much of a response for that, and since he didn't particularly want Alex to move anyway he shrugged. "So about Severus, and about Slytherin. This is *very* important, Alex. You'll come to notice that around Hogwarts we Slytherins are seen as nothing less than evil abiding. They think we're all just drooling over the chance to join the Dark Lord the second we get the nod. But it's the furthest thing from the truth."

Draco sighed a little and continued, "You see . . . for a very long time that was the truth. Salazar Slytherin had a pure-blood mania and wanted nothing more than to sweep the school out of muggle-borns, muggle lovers, and anything else that didn't fit his idea of trust and perfection. But people change over time. There are still plenty of people who've come out of Slytherin house in the last fifty years or so that have followed that credo, but like I said, people change. We've changed enough that you'll find none of us currently here have those leanings, but we can't just give up the lie publicly, not yet anyway."

Alex shifted his head a little and stared up at the sky, happy for once to just listen and know he was getting the whole story.

"Every person wears masks. Slytherin just happens to be the best at it, that's all. On the outside we sneer and smirk and insult anything and everything that isn't Slytherin, or dark, or evil. On the inside we're trying desperately to make things better. None of us want to be Death Eaters, bow down to what we see as a psychotic man, if he even really *is* a man anymore, and be led by false promises of power into acts that any sane man would find disgusting."

Draco didn't notice that his fingers were slowly working their way through Alex's hair as he continued on with his explanation. "What I'm saying is, you need to build your own mask for now, like mine. Present that mask to the world, while in private you'll be helping like the rest of us. Sometimes I think our housemates are close enough to be a family simply because we have only each other. Come the end of this year, if things haven't been resolved, those of age are going to have to either go into hiding, take the Dark Mark, or end up dead.

"The one thing that's really got me worried," mused Draco, "is that Saint Potter hasn't been seen. I don't know what's happened, but he *should* be here. We're counting on him just like every Light-sider out there."

Alex shifted again, catching Draco's complete attention, and with a slight smile said, "I understand."

Draco nodded. "Now that that's out of the way, do you think I should cut my hair?"

An owl fluttered over Dumbledore's head and dropped a parchment into his cereal, then flew off. Hermione watched as he opened and read the note. When he looked up at her and Ron, he nodded once and went back to his breakfast.

Hermione tugged at Ron's sleeve as she rose, giving him one of those meaningful looks she'd taken the time to perfect, and started off toward the doors fully confident that he'd follow. They were silent as they walked to the statue that guarded Dumbledore's office and on their arrival simply stood there waiting.

After an age he appeared and the three continued on into his office, where he sat in his usual place behind a desk filled with what would have normally fascinated Hermione. She opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by a vague gesture from Dumbledore's hand.

"I know you have come here to ask about Harry," he said. "Sherbet lemon?"

Hermione prevented herself from rolling her eyes with effort. "No, thank you, professor."

"All I can tell you is that Harry is perfectly safe and doing his part in this war even now."

His eyes twinkled at them in a way that had come to infuriate her, knowing that all she would get from this meeting was vague proclamations of reassurance.

"Does this mean we won't be able to talk to him, write to him . . . anything?" she asked.

Having finally woken up a little Ron asked, "We can't see our best mate? Is he even *here* right now?"

Dumbledore gave them one of his slight, knowing smiles and shook his head. “Know that he is safe. Know that he is gearing up for the final battle. And know that he has the two of you in his hearts as comfort, and expects, as do I, that you will both also work toward this. There is far more at stake here than one person’s desires. If you or your house should come up with anything that could help us in what is to come, please let me know.”

Knowing this for a dismissal they both stood with a, “Yes, professor,” and left the office. Outside Ron watched in amazement as Hermione kicked the wall a few times before he dragged her off toward their common room.

Schedules were passed out, people groaned or laughed, and breakfast wound down to a close. “Our first class is double potions, hm. Come on, I’ll show you the way, though I think you’re a bit better off now since our tour yesterday,” said Draco to Alex, who nodded.

Down into the depths of the castle they went, along with the other seventh years, to arrive at the potions classroom. The Gryffindors were sitting in seats at the back as usual, never warming to the idea of being any closer to Snape than they had to.

Alex let a slight smirk appear on his lips at that, though he was thinking it was nice to see them at all. Draco steered Alex to the seat beside him and looked up fairly attentively. Potions was his best and favorite class, after all. He only hoped Alex was all right at it, if not good. He wasn’t sure what they taught over at that French school anyway. He knew Durmstrang was a bit on the dodgy side.

Snape swept in like a storm overtaking a small defenseless village and faced the class. A violent gesture at the blackboard revealed the day’s work, and the first day of classes had thus begun. Since this was Alex’s first day here, Draco was the one to gather the ingredients as Alex perused the instructions. As usual, the Gryffindors (and members of other houses) were treated to Slytherin masks of sneers and smirks, laced with a few very rude comments about their abilities, parentage, and whatever else sounded good at the time.

As they sat side by side, Draco realized that Alex really was good at this. There was no hesitation in his movements, no inane questions, and he didn’t get in Draco’s way. He couldn’t help but smirk a little at hearing Snape snap out another loss of points to some unfortunate Gryffindor along with a few choice comments. He also noticed that Alex’s mouth had curled up into a perfect sneer just before he’d glanced over his shoulder to see the commotion.

Glory be, Neville had melted yet another cauldron and was skittering back like a spider in reverse. Alex kept the sneer in place as he turned back to ask in a low voice, “What’s up with that guy? Is he always like that?”

Draco gave his seat mate a small though genuine smile and whispered in his ear, “Always. He’s scared to death of Professor Snape, which is funny since he isn’t really *that* bad at potions. Makes for good comic relief. A shame, though, since he’s not such a bad sort.”

They continued to work on their potions, but Draco was starting to feel a bit uneasy. Was someone staring at him? Surreptitious glances around the room showed him that someone was staring all right, several someones, but not for once at him. They were staring at Alex instead.

Draco couldn't decide if he should be pissed off that he was out of the spotlight for the nonce or outraged that Alex was getting so much attention from someone that wasn't him. So Draco did what he did best. He scowled threateningly at the watchers until a tug at his hand got his attention back. He was met with laughing blue eyes and a secretive smile.

Alex sighed inwardly and slumped a little. It had been a very long day. So close and yet so far away from his love and his friends. He knew going in it wouldn't be easy. The quill in his hand flicked back and forth as he worked on his essay with only half his attention.

Draco had Alex under a watchful gaze, which wasn't unusual. He was disturbed to see Alex looking so . . . depressed. He'd read the same page for a half hour now and still had no idea what it actually said. The dark hair that fell across Alex's face couldn't quite shadow the look of sadness in his eyes.

Alex let his thoughts tumble around in chaotic confusion, not that he himself was confused. He knew what was what, but he didn't have to like it. It was a pity that so many people had to wear these masks, and it was more than a shame that he had to hide away from two people he'd counted as friends for years. The essay kept on writing itself, a specimen that didn't compare to his best work by any stretch of the imagination.

Apparently Alex had a mask besides the Slytherin one and Draco really wanted to know what it was about. Alex was usually calm and often cheerful. Without really stopping to consider what he was about to do, Draco heard himself asking, "Have you ever been in love?"

Dark hair flipped back as Alex raised his head and looked at him in surprise. "Er . . . once."

Draco tilted his head. Maybe that was the problem? "What was she like?"

Alex blinked at him and ran his fingers through his hair. "Not she, he. A bit like you, actually."

Draco took that bit of news with admirable composure. "Does it bother you, then, that we're rooming together? I only ask because you look depressed and like your mind is somewhere off in the sky. Did you want to talk about it?" Draco squirmed inside as Alex graced him with a smile tinged with ineffable sadness.

"No. I like being here with you. I just . . . miss my friends, that's all. The people I left behind when I came here. Don't worry about it, Draco. Things will be all right in the end. Besides, I

have you to cheer me up.” And at that, Alex’s expression changed to one of light-hearted flirtatiousness.

Draco’s heart tried another journey to the region of his throat, but he suppressed the feeling. Was Alex saying what it sounded like he was saying? So he smiled and ghosted his hand across Alex’s and said, “I will surely do my best. Can’t have you feeling lonely.”

A note dropped onto his plate and he heard the flutter of retreating wings. With a slight frown Alex opened and read the parchment, then in a low voice said, “Hm, I’ve got to see the headmaster. I haven’t done anything wrong have I, do you think?”

Draco shook his head and replied, “Not that I’m aware of. Maybe he just wants to see if you’re fitting in all right now you’ve been here a week.”

Alex shrugged and pushed the parchment into the pocket of his robes. “I’ll see you in a bit, then. Try not to miss me too much.” He flashed a provocative smile at Draco and left the table.

Draco was beginning to get used to his heart jumping all over the place when he was around Alex. He just wished he knew if all this flirting was serious, or just Alex’s way. It did strike then him that Alex never did it to anyone else, despite the ardent gazes he was showered with on a regular basis. The most his fellow Slytherins got were artless smiles, cheerful good humor, and a strictly hands-off policy of interaction. Those thoughts accompanied him all the way back to the common room.

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Ah yes, young Alex. As you no doubt may have wondered, I wanted to see how you were getting on here with us.”

“I’m fine, sir. My housemates are treating me well.”

“Good, good. I’ll let you go, then. I’m sure you have *things* you wish to get started on, sooner rather than later, I hope. If you have any problems, please let me know.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

Ron leaned back into the yielding embrace of the couch and frowned as the words of his housemates washed over him. Everyone was worried, desperately worried, about Harry. Rumor, theory, and rampant speculation flowed through the room like swift ocean currents, getting everywhere and nowhere in an unending dance.

The only person who wasn't involved in the ongoing debate was Hermione, who sat at a table with a stack of books higher than her head, apparently intent on force-feeding their knowledge into her mind at an alarming rate of speed. Ron wondered what she was up to, but knew she'd come to him sooner or later.

Alex knew he should get back to the common room, but he preferred for the moment to stand there looking at the moon in all its cold beauty. He thought back over the years while picking out formations on her barren surface and came to a chilling realization.

There was something, one thing, that could betray him and ruin everything they'd managed so far. If someone else got their hands on it. . . . Well, he didn't want to finish the thought. With that he lifted his wand and cast a summoning charm.

In a quiet, private place, Alex and Dumbledore met. Alex stalked around the room in nervous circles after handing a piece of parchment to the older man. "Can you fix it, sir? I'd really like to keep it, but if it has to be destroyed. . . ."

Dumbledore spent a great while studying the paper, working his way through the tangle of spells that charmed it. After ages, and the loss of Alex's perfectly manicured nails, Dumbledore lifted his head and nodded. Now that he knew how it worked, he could fix it so that it would not betray his protégé

Some time later Dumbledore handed Alex the Marauder's Map, and started to bid him a good evening.

Alex startled him by saying, "Sir? I think. . . . I think we could use this to our advantage."

Dumbledore noted that Alex had a very peculiar look on his face, one he was not used to seeing.

"Sir? What if. . . . Merlin, how do I explain this?"

Dumbledore raised one brow and said, "Take your time."

"I've been thinking, sir, while you fixed it. All Death Eaters have a mark, right? How do they work? Hermione made us something similar in nature for the DA meetings, except she used the protean charm to enchant the coins. So I've been thinking . . . is there any way we can use the marks, unravel them to see what's really there, and use that information to create a map like this one . . . one that shows us where every Death Eater is that isn't under magical wards?"

Dumbledore started in obvious surprise, looking at Alex with new eyes. This young man, who had surprised him at every turn with his strength in the face of what no one should ever have

to bear, had just voiced the most brilliant idea he'd heard in a century. Out of the mouths of babes, indeed!

“Let us see, let us see. Yes, young Alex. Let me ponder this idea most fully. I will get back to you on this, or not. You may hear more from a different venue. Yes, yes. . . .” And then he was gone.

When Alex tested the map, he was relieved beyond measure to see that he appeared in his new guise. On that note he glanced at his fingernails, swore, and fixed them.

It was like any other Saturday morning as Draco and Alex wandered into the common room after breakfast. Groups of people were huddled together, talking, playing games, or helping each other study. Several looked up as the twosome arrived looking like a pair of bishonen angels. More than a few had started laying bets on how long before Alex and Draco were a couple after seeing the record number of scowls Draco had produced lately when people dared to catch Alex's attention for any reason. There weren't many secrets inside the dungeons, but nobody wanted to have Draco in a raging terror over finding out this one.

Everyone looked up, though, as Severus swept in looking like a thundercloud, and gave him their full attention.

“Right. I have a very important project for those of you who feel you're up to the task.” Snape looked around to see interest on the sea of young faces around him.

“Someone has come up with a very interesting idea, and we're to see if we can make it a reality. How it came about I'm not at liberty to reveal, but I think I can safely say that you'll be intrigued enough to do your best to make it work. You're all aware that the Dark Lord marks his people.”

Every head nodded, speculation in their eyes.

“Good. What I'm asking you to accomplish is the unraveling of the mark itself, with an eye toward a way to use them to be able to produce a map that will show us exactly where every Death Eater is at any given time. This would be invaluable to us, not only in being able to track them down and negate their effectiveness, but also in learning how to remove the marks from people after the fact, people that have been all along spying for the Light.”

Heads nodded again, looks of pleasure spreading across every face in the room.

“I'll be needing a few of you to start with. . . .”

The Boy Who Lived—Presumed Dead?

Confidential sources report that the Boy Who Lived, Harry Potter, has been missing for over a month and is presumed dead. The Ministry of Magic denies any such allegations, noting that it was believed for a year that the boy was dangerously unbalanced with his adamant belief that You Know Who was indeed back among the living.

This reporter notes that it was the Ministry who fueled those stories with a degree of such vigor that it is hard to know what to believe in these obviously troubled times. The question raised by many is over the non-appearance of Potter for his seventh year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Unfortunately, no one is talking, and to date there are no answers to the myriad questions which surround the situation.

Alex ignored the rest of the article and tossed the paper to Draco in favor of his breakfast.

The common room was a scene of feverish work. Younger students huddled over essays and books, while their elders shared their thoughts and ideas about the workings of the Dark Mark and how to convert it to their own purposes. Some slight progress had been made, at least. They had all the components, even if much of it was a morass of muddlement.

Arguments went round in circles as they struggled to rearrange what they had into a new whole, and eventually it became late enough that everyone left off for the time being and began straggling off to their beds. Draco thought that Alex was being unusually quiet that evening. This pensiveness was beginning to worry him. Alex got ready for bed in a kind of daze, neither looking up or speaking. Maybe he'd tackle him about it tomorrow, thought Draco.

I sat there in the dank graveyard gazing at the fibrous growths that threatened to overtake the time-weathered stones tilting against a stormy grey sky. I knew he would not understand, not at first. But I had to begin trying. I knew he would resist me, but I would have my way in the end. It was only because I'd seen something like this in an earlier vision that we thought it had any kind of chance to work.

So I looked up into the slit-pupiled eyes of Lord Voldemort and began to speak, asking him about his hates and obsessions. I knew the man was not sane, but I also knew that in this guise he would talk to me, for I was him, the voice in the back of his head, come to him as the very picture of his youth.

I continued to speak, and to listen as venomous words were spat out at an uncaring sky. And so I began to understand my only real foe in this world. With time, I could begin to twist his mind. Twist it back into some semblance of reality and sanity. And when that time came, it would finally be over.

Draco watched Alex toss and turn and mutter in his bed, something that had awoken him in the first place. Alex didn't seem to be in any particular pain, though judging by the odd looks that kept flitting across his face whatever dream he was having couldn't have been deemed pleasant. Gradually Alex settled back into something that looked like normal sleep.

“Ron, do you remember when Harry showed us it was possible to resist the imperius curse?” asked Hermione over breakfast. When he nodded she continued with, “Well, what do you think about Gryffindor house working on ways to resist, repel, or even negate all the Unforgivables?”

“Let's go see Dumbledore.”

Alex sat in the stands, draped in Slytherin green and silver. His smile was a mixture of pleasure and pain as he watched Draco fly like the North Wind after the snitch, and catch it. Such cold beauty. But the look on Draco's face made him smile, this time with unalloyed pleasure. He rose and left the stands for the private place only Slytherins frequented. He stood a good chance at being alone there for a while.

He never sang around other people. It was mainly for his own pleasure that he did it. He'd heard the songs once before by chance and they had stuck in his mind. It was good that he had the music to accompany him, thankful for the little device he held in one hand, his own little magical form of karaoke. So he sang one, alone there in the gathering twilight. A silly little way to wallow in what he was feeling.

Alex smiled to himself when he was done. Silly games. There were some extraordinarily talented people in the muggle world. The slow sound of clapping that penetrated his thoughts had him whipping around in a blur, mortified that someone had been listening, his face a study of shock and embarrassment, to look into the silvery eyes of Draco Malfoy.

He slipped the device into his pocket and shuffled his feet, not sure where to look anymore.

“You sing like an angel, Alex. I'm impressed.”

“Er . . . thank you.” He was still looking anywhere but at Draco.

“I'm glad I got to hear you. It was poignant, to say the least. Dare I ask if that was about anything in particular?” Draco asked with a hint of anxiety.

“It's just a song I like. I just . . . felt like singing, you know? N-no special reason.”

Now this was different. Draco wasn't used to seeing Alex in such a dither. He was acting like Draco had caught him in the middle of shagging someone. The red flush on Alex's cheeks was oddly becoming.

"I'll just self-centeredly assume you were thinking about me," he drawled and was rewarded by seeing the flush deepen dramatically. His insides started skipping around like children on their way to a much desired treat.

Draco moved until he was inches away from his friend and slowly leaned closer, hoping desperately that Alex wouldn't pull away. One hand came up to ghost across the soft skin of his cheek as Draco's lips brushed Alex's in a whispery movement.

Before he knew what was happening, Alex was running his hands through Draco's hair and kissing him with a drowning man's passion for life. Draco didn't think anymore at that point, not for a while at least.

I sat there in the dank graveyard again. I've lost count of how many times I've been here now, listening, speaking, trying to twist things around. But I think he's starting to really hear what I'm saying. At least I hope he is. It isn't easy playing this part, having to hear things that turn my stomach with disgust and even pity, having to wear the guise I do.

I was right, though. We're a lot more alike than I ever imagined, except that I never gave into the dark, never followed the impulses of skewed remembrances into the cold unreality of his world. Why? I'm not really sure. In many respects I'm just like any other person, given to strong feelings, resentments, and hatred on some accounts. Maybe it was because I've always been propped up by the light, held by it, and comforted by it.

Having walked him through his life, I can see where it all started to go so horribly wrong. I just hope I'm strong enough to keep this up, and to try to lead him along a new path. A path like mine.

He awoke briefly to feel Draco's arms wrapped around him and Draco's warm breath on his neck. They had, perhaps, gotten a little overenthusiastic kissing earlier, but that was a different kind of heaven. The one right now was as pleasurable. Alex snuggled a little closer and fell back asleep.

Care of Magical Creatures was a trial. It was unfortunate, but good, in many ways that a number of Gryffindors shared this particular class. Potions was easier because Alex wasn't generally able to watch his friends as they worked, but here he could. It was doubly difficult because of Hagrid. One can't win for losing sometimes.

It was also unfortunate that it was Draco's normal behavior in public to be especially nasty to Ron and Hermione, since that meant Alex was obliged to join in and Pansy and Blaise were always willing henchmen. It should come as no surprise to anyone that a scuffle broke out, Alex thought, nursing a black eye given him by Ron. Even he had to laugh, though, when Draco retaliated by hexing Ron into a babbling idiot. Ron was suffering badly under a forced verbal stream of consciousness, desperately trying to keep his mouth shut, and losing the battle handily.

Draco's seemingly permanent smirk didn't even falter when all three of them were slapped with detention and loss of points. It had been fun, after all, and nobody got away with hurting his Alex. He simply wouldn't allow it. He wasn't about to get all sappy about it in public, though, and fuss over his beloved. It would ruin his reputation and make him look like a total git.

Hagrid held them back to let them know to meet him at nine that evening for their detention, right outside his hut, while Ron had both hands tightly over his mouth and shot glares of pure venom at Draco and Alex as they smirked right back.

It was getting close to Halloween when Dumbledore announced they'd be having a party that year, and that costumes were preferred though not required. Students across the hall broke out into excited chatter. A Hogsmeade weekend started on the morrow, which gave most of them a real reason to go and shop aside from the normal routine of 'Let's get away from this damn castle and relax for a bit'.

Therefore it was surprising to no one that Hogsmeade bustled with youthful faces the next day. Draco and Alex were taking their time perusing the clothing shops, examining every article they could find with the utmost care. Neither of them planned on actually wearing a costume, per se. They did plan on dressing with an eye toward making most of the student population take notice, though.

When Halloween Eve rolled around, they would be more than ready.

"So, young Alex. How are you getting on?" asked Dumbledore in a vague sort of way.

"Fine, sir. I believe my *studies* are progressing nicely."

"Good, good. Off you go, then, and enjoy the ball."

3: OMEGA

They waited for a slight lull in the noise level of the Great Hall, then swept through the door side by side and into the light-filled room. Eyes all across the room went hazy as they watched the pair enter wearing black leather trousers that skimmed over each of them like a second skin and long-sleeved silk shirts in silver and sapphire that were casually open at the neck. Alex wondered how many people were bright enough to realize that they'd chosen the colour of each other's eyes.

For once Draco didn't scowl at all the doe-eyed looks. He simply smirked like a fallen angel at the effect they were having. All offers to dance were firmly but politely refused and they spent the evening cruising the room, stopping to talk to various Slytherins, and eavesdropping on people from other houses. They both heard the worried undertones that laced some of the comments and paid particular attention to the indications that Gryffindors were 'up to something', though neither of them could quite figure out what they could be doing that sounded so serious.

After exchanging a few puzzled glances between them, the pair continued cruising the room, pausing now and again to grab tidbits to snack on, being careful not to mar their outfits. The evening was well underway when Draco dragged Alex back off to the dungeons, having had enough of keeping his hands to himself, and having made enough conquests for the night among the student population.

"You know, I wish there was a way we could figure out what they're up to," Draco said with a thoughtful look on his face once they were back in their bedroom.

Alex nodded and considered this for a little while, wondering if he should reveal one of his secrets. After a time he looked up at Draco and smiled mysteriously.

Draco blinked. "Is there something I should know?"

Alex continued to smile at him and then abruptly turned and went to his trunk and opened it. He sorted through the contents until his questing fingers latched onto a silky cloak and pulled it out, then turned back to face Draco, giving the object in his hand a little shake.

"Is that what I think it is?" asked Draco with narrowed eyes.

A swirl of fabric later and Alex had vanished. "Mm. Something my mother gave me when I'd been especially naughty one day," came the faintly accented response.

Draco laughed. There was no other appropriate response. Alex was an archetypical Slytherin in that moment.

Alex appeared again before his eyes and dropped the cloak on his bed. A few steps brought him to Draco's side, and Draco's neck. "We could," he murmured against the soft skin, "have a little fun with it," then placed a few soft kisses before continuing. "Maybe lie in wait for a few Gryffindors and follow them to their common room. Listen in to see what they're up to." He nipped a few times, enjoying the soft moan that escaped Draco's lips.

Alex drew his head back and looked into Draco's eyes, noting with satisfaction the slightly glazed look of them, then flicked his tongue over the blond's lips teasingly. "Hm?"

Alex got what he deserved, silenced by a rough kiss as Draco responded with alacrity. Alex chuckled into Draco's mouth and willingly gave himself over to the sensation of Draco's tongue sliding against his own, then laughed when Draco pushed him away and called him a bastard.

Draco ran one hand through his hair and glared at Alex, who kept right on laughing at him. "Maybe some other time," Draco said in a ragged voice. "I have *much* better things to do than spy on people at present, like kissing you until you can't think straight and start begging for my mercy."

Alex had time to widen his eyes innocently before he was attacked.

After another hard night of slogging through homework and contributing to the ongoing work on the Dark Mark Detector (or DMD as they'd taken to calling it), Alex was ready to call it a night. Not that it was over for him yet. It would be another one of 'those' nights, draining and exhausting, even as he did it in his sleep. Ironic really, that in these instances, sleep was anything but.

Draco kept trying to pry information out of him in that concerned manner he only revealed when they were alone, but Alex continued to keep passing it off as the burden of having to wear the Slytherin mask in public. Alex might have a number of Slytherin qualities as part of his nature, but that didn't mean he wanted to make a life of it, so Draco had to be content with that explanation. In a way it encouraged Draco to share Alex's bed every night, keeping his arms wrapped around him as though to ward off the dark.

I'm getting so very tired of this damn graveyard, but I continue to be heartened by the progress I'm making. It isn't easy listening to the ravings of a madman on a regular basis, but I'm starting to see the light of sanity touch the depths of his eyes. He's even starting to look more human in this dream state, which is encouraging.

I never thought I'd end up being a pseudo-psychologist. There is something to be said about being as patient, understanding, and yes, even forgiving as I've been and will continue to be. After all, if I don't work things out this way, I will have to confront him bodily, and I tremble

at the idea of having to do so. I know I've often been brave. Even this is a kind of bravery. But the idea of physically confronting him makes me want to hide in the darkest, deepest cave.

I find it interesting that along with the small changes I've wrought in him that the graveyard is also changing. The sky is less grey and the growths have become smaller and less tenacious. Perhaps it is a reflection of his inner struggle. I continue to wear the guise of his younger, unchanged self. Sometimes I think that is all that allows him to open up to me.

Alex signed his name to the list with neat strokes of his quill, pleased to note that Draco had already done so. A Hogsmeade weekend was just coming up, so he should have some time to pick out a present for Draco. He smiled to himself, unwittingly sending several nearby students into a swoon, then walked off toward the Slytherin common room whistling, completely oblivious to the adoring stares he was getting.

Someone *did* notice though. Draco, who had been wondering what his angel was up to, had watched Alex sign up for staying on over the holiday and then send a dozen or so students into rose-filled bliss by smiling. He scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. Had these people no pride? Had these people nothing better to do but stand around mooning after *his* property? Granted, nobody actually knew what was between them, but still. . . . He growled and people scattered to the four winds. Satisfied, he followed Alex to the dungeons, a sardonic smile twisting his lips.

Hogsmeade was picture perfect in its covering of snow and with icicles hanging from every roof line. It was also bitterly cold, the chill seeping through layers of warm clothing. Draco and Alex had been there for most of the morning, wandering through the shops looking for small gifts for their housemates. They thawed out in a corner table at the Three Broomsticks over glasses of butterbeer, twitting each other about bright red noses and cheeks.

Now came the hard part. Since they had yet to purchase gifts for each other it was necessary to take turns. This was settled easily enough, in the end, by the simple expedient means of flipping a coin. So, Draco was to continue to warm up in the pub and read a book while Alex was shopping, and then it would be his turn. After they were both done, they'd have lunch.

Alex left after the matter was settled and made a beeline for Scrivenshaft's to purchase something he thought Hermione would like. Directly after he headed to the quidditch shop for Ron's gift. Both of those he had wrapped at the shops themselves. He attached cards he'd made out prior to the trip and hurried to the owl post office to send them immediately.

His friends would get their gifts early, but at least they'd know he was still alive, and Dumbledore had already agreed that this plan was perfectly acceptable. If anyone had seen him and asked, he'd lie like a champion and say he'd sent gifts to his mother. With those tasks

accomplished he shot off to get the gift he'd already chosen for Draco, having wasted enough time already. A half hour later he was back at the Three Broomsticks to face a rather impatient Draco, who was tapping his foot steadily on the floor.

"Am I that hard to shop for, Alex?" he drawled, a look of annoyance marring his face.

"Absolutely, Draco. How do you shop for the man who has everything?" he shot back with a smirk.

Draco rolled his eyes and shut his book. "You're a git sometimes, you know that?"

Alex flashed one of his angelic smiles at Draco and sat down, ready to take his turn at guarding the things they'd bought earlier.

With a long suffering sigh he didn't mean in the least, Draco placed his book on the table and stood up. "If you would, order the usual for me. I'll be back right about the time it's ready." He sent a smoldering gaze at Alex and huffed off to do his own private shopping.



Tapping at the window made several heads shoot up in the Gryffindor common room. It was quick work to open it long enough to allow two owls to swoop in and deliver packages to Ron and Hermione before flying back out. They glanced at each other and immediately went upstairs to Ron's room and sat down on his bed, pulling the curtains shut.

Each of them opened the cards first, to read the same inscription.

This is the only exception I've been allowed to make. Please know that you two will always be my friends and I could not let this Christmas go by without letting you both know I am alive and well, and am thinking of you frequently. Please try be happy. I won't say not to worry about me, because I know you will.

Happy Christmas.

All my love,
Harry

They gazed up at each other and smiled, a bit teary eyed to be sure, but comforted nonetheless, even if they couldn't actually see him. Then they opened their packages.



"What do you think, are we ready?" asked Alex, his forehead wrinkled with doubt.

Draco passed his gaze slowly over Alex, taking in the silver-trimmed midnight blue silk dress robes, a waterfall of glossy dark hair, and a nervous smile. Draco took so long that Alex began to fidget and fuss at his robes, casting a soulful gaze at his beloved.

Draco smirked, at which point Alex snorted and cuffed him lightly, calling him a prat for stringing him along.

“I’ll never understand why you do this,” drawled Draco. “Isn’t it bloody obvious that you are one of *the* two best looking fellows in this school, me being the other one?”

Alex shrugged and looked uncomfortable. Draco closed the distance between them and slipped one hand into the hair at the nape of Alex’s neck, stroking softly with his fingers. He liked it when Alex shivered and closed his eyes in response, so he kissed him, flicking his tongue inside when Alex moaned quietly.

Draco wrapped his other arm around Alex possessively, stroking his hand hard downward and then squeezing, eliciting another, louder moan. If it weren’t for the fact that they had a ball to attend, and that neither of them had made a declaration of love, Draco would have stripped him right then and shown Alex exactly what he thought of his looks, never mind what he thought about the person inside the body.

With some difficulty Draco disengaged himself from his dark-haired angel and adjusted his own dress robes, fashioned from heavy, forest green silk. The dreamy look in Alex’s eyes almost made him rethink his plans for the evening. It truly did continue to surprise him that someone who looked like Alex had so much trouble seeing the effect he had on others. On the other hand, it meant Alex was generally oblivious to the lustful stares of other students, which was a huge bonus in Draco’s eyes.

“Right, let us be off, then. We’ll go break some hearts,” said Draco with a cocky little grin as Alex came back from his dreamy state.

As before, they waited for a slight lull in the noise level of the hall before they entered side by side. Heads all over swiveled to see what they’d taken to calling the Seraphs sweep in looking like they owned the place. And, as before, they refused any and all offers for dance partners and spent their time nibbling on tidbits and cruising the room, listening in where they could and wearing their nearly identical masks of cool disdain, before sweeping back out a few hours later, well before anyone else even considered leaving the festivities.

Back in their room Draco magically locked the door, then they both changed into far more casual clothing before making stealthy grabs for the presents they’d purchased earlier. Alex cleared his throat and looked at Draco, wordlessly holding out a small black box. As Draco took it, Alex stepped back and sat down on his bed saying, “Maybe it’s a little cliché, but. . . .”

Draco cocked one eyebrow and opened the box, eyes widening in surprise at what was inside. Nestled in a bed of black velvet was a platinum band. The ring itself was a play on Alex’s own

last name, that of a snake biting its own tail, and had sparkling diamonds for eyes. Draco took the ring out, set the box aside, and handed the ring to Alex, leaving his hand out palm down.

Alex nibbled his lip and stood, then smiled nervously and slipped the ring onto Draco's finger, watching as it adjusted itself to fit. "I love you, Draco," he said softly, a blush staining his cheeks.

Draco stared at his hand wonderingly. Then, reaching up, he cupped Alex's face with that same hand and rubbed his thumb along Alex's jaw line, then leaned in for a sweetly chaste kiss before stepping back.

Draco stared into Alex's eyes as he lifted up the present he'd bought for him, but opened it himself, removing a ring identical to the one on his finger except that it had sapphires for eyes. A funny little smile quirked his mouth as he tossed the box over his shoulder and held up the ring, then slipped it onto Alex's finger. "I love you, Alex."

As they lay twined together in bed in the afterglow quite some time later, Alex had only one real thought before slipping into the darkness of sleep. He was going to stay Alex for the rest of his life.

In a quiet, private place, Alex and Dumbledore met.

"Sir, there's a couple of things I need to tell you," said Alex, looking earnestly at the older man.

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes twinkling merrily at the ring gracing Alex's finger.

"First, I think I've been making real progress on the one matter. I really think I'm getting through to him. I honestly don't think it'll be all that much longer."

"Good, good. You know I have every confidence in you, and if I suspect what you're about to tell me next, I think it will be a valuable asset, now that certain anxieties you might have had are relieved."

Alex flushed a little at that. Dumbledore always seemed to know everything. "Er, yes, sir. That exactly," he said, glancing down at his hand. "But it worries me a little, too, just as it did before. I'm not sure what will happen afterward. Are you able to guarantee that he can't be pulled from school?"

"Oh, I think I can come up with something should the situation arise. Do not worry, young Alex."

"Thank you, sir. You have no id—well, perhaps you do know how much that relieves me. At any rate, I think I should tell you that I've decided not to go back. I am who I am now."

Dumbledore nodded again, smiling gently. “If that is your wish, I shall make the necessary preparations as soon as things are settled. Please remember, young Alex, your credentials are impeccable. Quite as good as those of another young man. And if I may say so myself, quite safe from exposure.”

I think I shall have nightmares about this graveyard in the years to come, even though it's starting to show signs of life. Perhaps I can get that taken care of? He's starting to see the light now. His eyes are confused rather than venomous, even speculative. Cause and effect is a vicious thing at times, but he's starting to realize that things didn't have to be this way.

He's starting to realize that he had a choice, simply by my showing him the path he could have taken. It helps that he's talking to himself, in more ways than one. I don't think he'd take this from anyone else. Somewhere in there is a lost and lonely child crying in pain, begging for release, understanding, and comfort. I still may have to confront him in person, and the idea still scares me into the shakes. But like so many other people, I will do what must be done.

I wonder what it takes to make a man grow up?

Things were getting pretty hectic for the Gryffindors. Two of the three years mainly responsible for their secret work were having to fit things in around studying for OWLs and NEWTs. The Room of Requirement was pretty popular for meetings and practices, and a number of especially trustworthy Ravenclaw students had been pulled into help.

In some ways it was an extension of the original DA meetings, though that wasn't something Alex could explain to Draco. But in reality it was much more serious. The pair had slipped in behind some other students under the invisibility cloak, taking a huge risk of getting caught. Seeing the people before them not only continue the DA, but expand it to work on ways of repelling or negating the Unforgivables, was both heartwarming and worrisome.

Alex wondered just what it had taken for Dumbledore to approve of this, and what it had taken to get Severus to agree to assist them. It seemed as though, as always, Severus was wearing a multitude of masks and playing a number of roles.

Winter had begun to let loose its grip on Hogsmeade and the town was no longer quite so charmingly picturesque. Still, it was a weekend away from the castle and most students who could took advantage of the fact. The Seraphs were out shopping again, Draco having decided that his Alex needed a better wardrobe than what he currently possessed.

Not, he thought on reflection, that it was anything to be ashamed of, but it did need a bit of sprucing up. Of course, Draco was having a great deal of fun picking out clothing for his beloved and watching Alex's embarrassment at having to model every last stitch. Finally satisfied that he'd done his good deed for the year, not untainted by selfish ulterior motives, Draco called it a day and dragged Alex off for lunch at the Three Broomsticks.

Alex was heartily glad that Draco's current obsession had been exhausted, and equally glad to see Ron and Hermione also having lunch. It was a bonus, to both boys, that they were sitting close enough to overhear them, though they had separate motives for feeling that way.

One of the more interesting things they overheard was a puzzled discussion over the day's *Daily Prophet*, which led with an article on the confusing lack of general mayhem being caused by certain dark witches and wizards, something that nobody seemed to understand. Well, perhaps two did. The general tone of the piece vacillated between cautious relief and rising fear that it was only a matter of time before something truly heinous occurred.

Draco noted that Alex had a peculiar look on his face, and then he was noticed. Alex flashed him a sultry smile, and Draco responded.

"It is time," was all he said, and all he received was a nod.

Easter midnight, the Feast of the Resurrection. Tom Riddle stood in the middle of a graveyard blooming with life, the tilting time-weathered stones barely visible in the dark of night.

"Don't you think it's time we let go? Haven't we suffered enough pain for a thousand men?"

A hissing sound shivered through the night.

"Isn't it time to move on? Face what hurt us and lay blame where it truly belongs?"

Pebbles rattled against stone, skittering across the surface of an overturned tombstone.

"Can we not move on, you and I?"

Blades of grass were bent under heavy footsteps, whispering against the heavy folds of a cloak.

Tom Riddle smiled, gazing into slit-pupiled eyes, reaching up with one hand to lovingly caress skin that was pale and dull from lack of sunlight. "I forgive you for what you've done to me, to yourself. Can you not forgive yourself? Can you forgive me?" Tom smiled up into Voldemort's eyes with heart stopping innocence. "For us?"

And lo, in what had to be the most anti-climactic moment known to wizarding history, the being known as Lord Voldemort relaxed his grip on the magics that surrounded and sustained his form and slowly, but irrevocably, slumped to the ground dead.

The Death Eaters surrounding the graveyard could only stare in horror as a gentle breeze swept through the graveyard and Tom Riddle knelt to gather the lifeless form in his arms, crystalline tears trickling down his face. As he stood, turned, and walked away, his features slowly melted and changed. Just before he disappeared, the figure looked back with emerald eyes and a shock of messy dark hair, and was never seen again.

Some simply stood there in shock, easily overtaken by the forces that had lain in hiding for this moment. Others fled for what remained of their lives. But nobody followed the two figures, one alive, one dead, into the darkness.

In a quiet, private place, Alex and Dumbledore met. Draco was there as well.

“Mr Malfoy, I’m sure you must be wondering what this is all about,” said Dumbledore quietly.

“Yes, professor, I do admit I am quite curious at this turn of events,” came the lazy drawl.

Dumbledore merely smiled for a moment before saying, “I have some things of yours I think you would prefer to get back, and a present for the both of you.” He held up a pair of small devices in his hand, one of which was green and the other gold. The green he handed to Draco and the gold to Alex.

“Alex, please remember not to deal with yours until after I’ve had a chance to speak on certain matters. You’ll know when the time is right.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“Good night, then.” And Dumbledore left with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

As soon as the two young men returned to their room he rounded on Alex. “What the bloody hell is all this about? What’s he on about?”

Alex gave him a loving smile before answering. “It’s very simple, Draco. I asked you once, in another life, if you trusted me with my life and yours. And you said yes.” He paused long enough to magically lock the door and silence the room.

Draco narrowed his eyes, wondering what nasty curse had addled the brains of his angel.

“I know you think I’m crazy, but please trust me and tap that”—he indicated the device—“with your wand.”

Draco’s face pulled into a scowl as he considered for several minutes, keeping his eyes locked with those of Alex. Finally, slowly, he tapped his wand to the green device and waited for something to happen. Seconds later both objects toppled from his grasp and his eyes widened in shock.

Every thought in his head was screaming at him like banshees. How in Merlin’s name could he have fallen in love with someone other than Harry!? What in bloody hell was he going to do? He looked up at Alex with haunted eyes and could feel his insides icing over in agony.

His eyes widened again as Alex just looked at him with a loving smile on his face then leaned in to whisper, “Draco, serpents don’t always poison lions.” Alex leaned back and waited, waited for the key phrase to trigger an elusive memory Draco’s mind.

“Harry?”

“Yes, love. But that’s not my name any longer. You can’t use it ever again.”

Draco nodded, remembering, then did a double-take. “Are you trying to tell me it’s over? He’s gone?”

It took as long as the first *Daily Prophet* to arrive that next morning at breakfast for the Great Hall to begin an explosion of sound that started small, but gathered in force to sweep the entire population.

Dumbledore rose, bringing silence to the students as they expectantly looked up at him.

“Yes, yes. You can rest assured that what you have seen in the *Prophet* is indeed true. I would like to make a few noteworthy mentions. Please all give thanks to the efforts of members of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw in researching and finding ways for the Ministry and other . . . interested . . . parties to resist any efforts of any malicious spells on the part of fleeing Death Eaters. I raise my glass to you.”

After a pause he continued. “And, though this will no doubt come as a shock to many of you, please also all give thanks to a large number from Slytherin, who successfully devised a method of tracking every single Death Eater so that they can be brought to justice. To you also I raise my glass.”

Another pause ensued as people made silent toasts, though many of the students were looking at Dumbledore in surprised confusion.

“Next, I would like to inform everyone that classes are canceled for the next week and any who wish may go home to visit their families.”

Raucous cheering and wild hooting broke out over that announcement, people having gathered their scattered wits.

“And last, I must raise my glass in a very special toast to the Boy Who Lived, Savior of the wizarding world, one Harry Potter, without whom none of this would have been possible.”

It was not until much later that Ron and Hermione, and a number of other students, recalled that not once had Dumbledore ever said anything about Harry returning or where he had gone. But they did note that he *was* mentioned as having been present at the defeat of the Dark Lord.

A graceful hand, covered by another, dropped a small golden device into a cauldron of bubbling acid.

The remainder of the school year passed in a blur of celebration, hard slogging (because they still had exams), and intermittent news of Death Eaters being tracked down and dealt with. Inter-house rivalries, while not gone, had considerably cooled down, especially given that it was Slytherin House ultimately responsible for these little rays of sunshine in the form of news bytes.

Just before the NEWT exams were scheduled for the seventh years, two people received one more note from a friend and were able to carry on with lighter hearts, despite having come to the conclusion that they would very likely never see that friend again.

Two people had to keep silencing their room to keep the listeners away over certain salacious activities. Blaise Zabini finally won the bet.

At the seventh years leaving ball, two young men stood quietly in the corner as one proposed to the other, fulfilling the promise of the rings, and they finally shared a dance in public.

Dumbledore was sorting through the papers on his desk one day and came across the list of positions he needed to fill. Yes, yes, he just the right people in mind. New graduates in fact. He rather thought that young Mr Ouroboros would make a fine Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. And perhaps young Mr Malfoy would do equally well as the new flying instructor. Yes, yes. He must have a word with them before the train.

— The End —