LES MASQUES

By Jennifer Giacalone

Three rows of incomplete faces stared at Alexandrie Besson. Some were nothing more than a jawline, or a cheekbone and half of a nose. One was the entire left side of a face, with one very real-looking glass eye gazing out at her, rimmed with eyelashes and an eyebrow made of real hair. Some were still in their raw copper state, and the flesh-toned paint on some of them was still drying.

They sat neatly on shelves that lined a small part of the smoke-yellowed plaster walls of a vast, high-ceilinged loft studio full of magnificent sculptures in the classical Greek style; portraits of Victory, Liberty, Resistance. The arched windows looked out onto the teeming cobblestone blocks of the 19th Arrondissement.

“I’m glad to find you in your studio, Mademoiselle Besson.”

Coffee in one hand, lit cigarette in the other, Alexandrie turned around to find a dark-coated man coming out of the stairs into the loft. “Monsieur le Secretaire.”

He looked at the cup. “Is that your lunch, Mademoiselle?”

“Breakfast. You keep me too busy too to shop.” He was probably the same age as her, nearly thirty, and too young to be Secretary of anything. Someone’s nephew, she imagined.

He surveyed the rows of masks in their various stages of incompletion, unconsciously fiddling at the corners of his pencil-thin moustache. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Her father’s death fighting in the resistance had left her with little. But the French government, such as it was, was paying the bills for these masks of hers. And so, while the heads of Vichy traitors rolled in the streets, Alexandrie was rebuilding the faces of French soldiers who had been disfigured in the war. The new government was referring people to her studio. In truth, she had more than she could handle.

“Of course not.” She noticed a figure with impeccable posture lingering behind him, face wrapped almost completely in thick layers of white bandages. “And it seems you’ve brought me more?”

“She is need of your excellent skills.”

A woman, then. Her first, in fact. Alexandrie took a pull from her cigarette and let the smoke curl into the air in front of her. Two intense, blue-green eyes gazed out from the mass of bandages.

 “Mademoiselle Besson, this is Oberst Aster Insel.”

Alexandrie’s eyebrows shot up. She looked for a moment at the woman, who was standing with stiffly in the entrance alcove. “One moment please,” she said to the woman. “Monsieur le Secretaire, a word?”

She led him to the other side of the spacious studio and stepped behind a paper screen. “Why,” she demanded in hushed tones, “is the government asking me to fix a German?”

The Secretary smiled patiently. “She was a high-level Abwehr spy who turned and assisted the Resistance, at some great cost to herself, as you can see. Surely you’re not going to be difficult about this?”

Alexandrie pouted for a moment. Modern Art was all the rage in Europe, and her beautiful Greek classical style sculptures tended to sell slowly, when they sold at all. This business of making masks and facial prosthetics had made her the most prosperous she’d been in quite some time. She paid her bills and drank good wine and worked at her preferred trade while most of her friends knocked around in three or four different jobs. “Of course not.”

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The German came the next day, wearing black trousers and a French army jacket, her face swathed in cotton as it had been the day before. A dark brown plait peeked out the back.

Alexandrie brought her over to a large leather chair, similar to ones that were used in barber shops. She sat down on a wooden stool in front of the German. “Alright, so. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

The German’s eyes widened. “Just like that?”

Alexandrie sighed but softened her tone a little. “Whatever is missing or damaged, I promise you that I’ve seen just as bad if not worse. You won’t scare me.”

The German still hesitated, sitting perfectly erect in the chair, eyes wide enough to show the whites.

Alexandrie walked around behind the chair and began to tug off the little metal fasteners along the places where the bandages held together.

“Wait,” the German said, and reached up, placing a hand over Alexandrie’s. “I’ll do it. Please.”

There was such desperation in her voice, Alexandrie stopped and slowly removed her hands from beneath the German’s sweaty one. “Alright. I’m sorry. Take your time.”

“It isn’t that I’m afraid of scaring you,” the woman said after a moment of sitting frozen in the chair. “I simply feel that I’m not myself. I don’t want anyone to see me like this.” Her French was very good, actually; her accent was recognizably German, but faint.

“Did they show you what I’ve done for the other soldiers?”

She shook her head.

Alexandrie retrieved an album of black and white photographs from the other side of the loft. Then she pulled a stool up next to the German’s chair and showed her. The first one was a soldier whose entire jaw was gone. She showed the photo of him wearing the jaw she had built for him. He looked entirely whole.

The German gasped. “You can hardly even see where the mask begins!”

“That’s right,” Alexandrie answered proudly. “Because I’m the best. I match the paint of the mask exactly to your skin.” She flipped through a few more photographs. “Do you see?”

“Yes,” the German murmured in amazement.

“But I must see what I’m working with.”

The German hesitated for another moment. Those blue-green eyes stared at her, glassy. Then suddenly, she asked, “What’s my name?”

Alexandrie halted. “The German,” she admitted, embarrassed that, in her surprise, she had not retained it.

They both chuckled silently for a moment. “Aster,” the German said finally, and offered her hand.

“Alexandrie.” She clasped the German’s hand.

“Do your friends call you Lexie?”

“Yes.”

“May I?”

“No.” She looked at Aster. “I will call you Oberst. And you may call me Mademoiselle.” She stared at the eyes that peered out from the bandages. “Do you have any photographs of your face before you were injured?”

The Oberst nodded and took a small photograph from her pocket and showed it. It was two women who looked identical, and a little blonde girl. The women both had the same intense eyes. “You’re a twin?”

“Yes.”

“The little girl? Is she your daughter?”

“My niece. I couldn’t have a child even if I wanted to.” Aster’s voice was tight as she said this.

She had been a beauty, this Aster. She’d had a face like one of Alexandrie’s Greek figures; Love, perhaps, or Truth. Cheekbones that looked like carved marble and a jawline that would cut glass.

And the eyes, intense, but full of warmth and affection. “I can make you look like this again. Will you show me the damage?”

Aster slowly reached a hand up and began to liberate her matted hair and damaged face, a layer of cotton at a time.

It could have been worse. The bandages unwound, first revealing the right cheekbone. It was shattered, collapsed inward, a pit filled with criss-crossing, overlapping folds of scar tissue. The cheek itself looked as if it was perforated inwards. Alexandrie had seen this before. They’d done their best to seal it up but there hadn’t really been enough tissue to work with. The mouth, however, was more or less intact except for light scarring around the right corner.

The worst of it seemed to be what used to be her nose. Now it was mainly a knot of shiny scar tissue flattened against her face. Alexandrie felt a phantom pain in her chest looking at it.

Aster sat, reams of gauze in hand, not looking up, as if she feared accidentally catching her own reflection somewhere.

 “I can easily work with this,” she said briskly. “Does it hurt to be touched anywhere on your injuries?”

“No. I feel very little on those areas of my face.”

Alexandrie nodded once. “Then next, we take a plaster casting of your face.”

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Aster sat in the chair, unbandaged, eyes closed, wearing a painter’s smock around her shoulders. Several strips of plaster sat in a small pile of white dust beside a small bowl of water on the wooden work surface in front of the chair. Alexandrie mixed the alginate, stirring with a wooden spoon until the mixture became thick. “So, how were you injured?”

“Bomb in Blockhaus d'Éperlecques.”

“But I thought it was never used for storing German bombs.”

“That’s right. Because I gave Allied forces information about their plans and they bombed it.”

Alexandrie snorted. “So the Germans were trying to make a bomb depot, and you got bombed helping us bomb it.”

“Someone had to direct the aircraft from on site.”

Alexandrie came over and adjusted the smock around Aster’s shoulders. She had not noticed until now the wooden prosthetic hand on Aster’s left side. “What does it take for a German to turn traitor on her own people?” she mused aloud, picking up the bowl of alginate and a thick, flat brush.

“It takes seeing your people commit worse horrors than you could possibly imagine.”

Alexandrie gestured to the wall of incomplete faces. “I can imagine quite a lot.” She set the bowl down, and then pulled the ribbon from Aster’s hair. She raked her fingers through the loose hair, pulling it back to avoid stray hairs getting into the adhesive or the plaster. “My father came home in a box, thanks to the Germans.” She paused, smoothed the hair with one hand, and then re-tied it tightly with the blue ribbon. “And those faces on the wall all needed to be made, thanks to the Germans.”

Aster was silent for a moment. “I’m sorry for your father.”

“Are you ashamed to be German?” Alexandrie demanded.

“I’m ashamed of our war.”

“Is that all, then?”

*“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest*

*To children ardent for some desperate glory,*

*The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est*

*Pro patria mori.”*

Alexandrie picked up her steel bowl full of alginate. “What is that?”

“A poem protesting war. ‘It is sweet and proper to die for one’s country.’” She shook her head. “Sometimes I wish I had.”

Alexandrie frowned. “No more talking, you’ll disturb the plaster,” she said, but it sounded less firm coming out of her mouth than it had in her head. She began to brush the mixture onto Aster’s face, being careful to avoid bubbling, to fill every little crease and pit, especially in those places where the knotted scars made this challenging.

After this, Alexandrie began taking the plaster strips, dunking them in the bowl of water, squeezing them out, and then laying them over the contours of Aster’s damaged face. She was quick and precise at this. She had done so many of these over the last few months.

“So,” she asked, anxious to fill the silence, “it was about the Jews, then? Is that why you quit?”

A pause, and then Aster bobbed her head once. Alexandrie continued laying the plaster strips against her face.

“Yes, I’d heard about that. So conquest wasn’t really enough,” Alexandrie went on as she worked. “It needed to be genocide before you turned traitor.”

Aster shuddered in the chair, saying nothing. Alexandrie supposed it was a bit unfair of her to challenge the Oberst this way when she couldn’t respond.

“Then again,” Alexandrie mused with a little irony, “we French had a conqueror too, once. Napoleon. Maybe you’ve heard of him?”

Aster sat shaking for a few moments more, and Alexandrie read the question in her eyes: *Are you being funny?*

“Yes, Oberst, it is humor.”

After laying a few more plaster strips on Aster’s face, Alexandrie looked at the woman in the chair. She had probably taken French lives, but she had also saved how many by her sacrifice at Blockhaus d'Éperlecques? Who could even know?

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Alexandrie spent some time finishing a few other soldiers’ masks before returning to the task of Aster’s a few days later. Her pencil scratched across the large, thin sheets of sketch paper, as she sketched the front view, the right-hand view, the view from just below the chin, looking upwards, reconstructing the face of the German. She spent a long time needlessly duplicating the intensity of the eyes.

When Aster came again, she had bandaged herself less completely; instead of the giant ball of gauze that she’d been the first time, she had wrapped the middle of her head only. Her mouth and lightly damaged jaw were visible. She had bothered to style her hair in neat, careful waves.

Alexandrie drained a cup of coffee and lit a cigarette. She handed her sketches to Aster.

Aster glanced at the coffee cup. “Is that your lunch, Mademoiselle?”

Alexandrie shrugged. “Too busy to buy groceries.” She gestured at the drawings. “So what do you think?”

Aster stared at the sketches for several minutes without saying anything.

“Well? Is it you?”

“Yes. It’s me.”

“Good. Then I can start sculpting.” She stood up with an air of finality.

But Aster seemed not to take this sign, lingering in front of her. “It wasn’t only Jews, you know.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t only Jews. It was gypsies, too. And the crippled. And…” She floundered. “I don’t know the French word. *Schwul?*”

“Homosexuals,” Alexandrie supplied.

Aster nodded. “Yes. I didn’t want my niece to learn such things. My sister disowned me for it. Though I had no direct part in it, Mademoiselle, I grieve the loss of your father nonetheless. As for me, I have lost the closest thing to a daughter that I will ever have.”

Alexandrie wondered what it would have been like if, instead of Henri Besson’s body coming home in the back of a milk truck driven by a friend of the resistance, her father had simply cast her aside for being on the wrong side of the war.

Aster lifted her chin, looking Alexandrie in the eye. “It may be easy for you to judge me, but you cannot imagine how quickly the horrifying becomes normal, only because your little part of it is so small that you can tell yourself that you had nothing to do with it.”

“Just doing your job?” Alexandrie asked, more weary than sardonic.

“Exactly.” Her eyes welled up. “I was never supposed to survive that bombing.”

Alexandrie understood. Aster had expected the bombing to be a suicide mission. “Dying is not a sweet and proper atonement for one’s sins. Decent living is, *mais non*?”

Aster anxiously shook her head.

“You’re paying for your sins now, no?” Alexandrie pressed.

Aster’s brow creased, and her shoulders pulled inward. Clenching her jaw, she drew coat closed. “I thank you for your time, Mademoiselle.” She hurried from the studio before Alexandrie could say more.

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The next week flew by. Alexandrie had three new consultations, delivered two finished masks, and finally cleared the space to sculpt Aster’s mask out of thin copper according to her sketches.

When Aster arrived to see it, Alexandrie sat her in the chair and showed her the remarkable disembodied half of a face. It would fit closely against her head, covering her shattered cheek and nose, damaged jaw, and the light scars around the corner of her mouth. It would be affixed to her head with a pair of false spectacles.

Aster turned it over in her hands, saying nothing.

“Let’s put it on you,” Alexandrie said, and carefully placed it against her face, adjusting the wire spectacles so that the mask sat flush against her face.

The thin copper of the mask was painted with a layer of white undercoating. It was so accurately sculpted, it looked as if part of Aster’s natural face had been painted white. She had strong cheekbones again, a flawless jawline, a straight, perfect nose. Alexandrie handed her a mirror. Aster’s lip quivered as she looked at the reflection that stared back at her.

“Mademoiselle,” she whispered. “I cannot believe…”

“Don’t thank me yet! We’re not done. We need to paint it.” Alexandrie paused. She found a smock, and then wrapped it around Aster’s shoulders. “Please, Oberst, sit down.”

Aster sat.

Alexandrie pulled her paints out and began to mix a skin tone; a little pink, a little more brown, a little yellow, a little more white. Aster watched her mixing the paints for a few minutes without comment. “Mademoiselle,” she finally began, her voice hesitant, “I could not help noticing... you are very busy and seem to need an assistant.”

Alexandrie stopped. “I do.” She resumed mixing.

“If … you would not be too opposed, I would like to do the job.”

Alexandrie stopped again. She stared at her in confusion. “Do you have any experience with art?”

“No. But I can learn.”

“I can’t afford to pay you what you would probably want.”

“I have government cheques, I don’t care about the money. You don’t need to pay me at all.”

Alexandrie’s brow creased. “But why?”

“Because… your work is important. And I must pay for my sins, no?”

Alexandrie smiled faintly. “I’m not sure you would enjoy it.”

But Aster was humbly unwavering. “If I must learn to mix adhesives, I can learn to mix adhesives. I can clean your work space. I can fetch your groceries. Mademoiselle… please. There is no point no point to your repairing me, and no point to my living at all, if I do anything less than this.”

Alexandrie gazed at her earnest eyes behind the false spectacles. Perhaps it was fitting, she thought. Perhaps this was what would be sweet and proper.

“Let’s see,” she said, taking up her brush, “if this color is a close enough match.”