

Love, War and Macarons

The *Venus de Milo* stood apart from the other many Greek and Roman statues in gallery sixteen of the Louvre museum, perched on a black plinth and cordoned off by a low metal rail. Her blank stare looked out into the distance above the heads of the visitors, a proud goddess oblivious to her devoted worshippers. Among these twenty-first century pilgrims pausing momentarily before Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, were two teenage English girls.

Polly grabbed Alice's hand and pushed in front of the crowd of tourists taking pictures of the statue, to a chorus of tutting and disapproving looks.

'She's bigger than I expected,' said Alice, studiously munching on one of the pink macarons they had bought earlier. From pictures online Alice had expected the statue to be life size, but she was far taller and larger.

'Of course she's big. She's a goddess,' said Polly.

'That's right, Polly.' The girls looked round to find the source of these words from a woman in the crowd. They found that the crowd was gone. Only Alice and Polly were looking into the marble face of the goddess. And the goddess was now looking down at them. They watched as her two missing arms grew back. Once she had hands she pulled up the material swathed around her waist, so that it became a dress made of the finest golden gauze, enveloping her flawless golden skin.

'I'm not ashamed of my nakedness, but a goddess can get tired of mortals staring at her breasts all day,' she laughed. Her laugh was the tinkling of a tiny bell. 'And I like nice clothes.' The goddess surveyed their tee shirts and faded denim shorts with a frown that made Alice wish they had dressed up. 'If there was time I would treat you both to a makeover, but we have more pressing business. Now help me down, will you.' She put her hand out to Polly, as she stepped down from the plinth. 'That's better. My legs are a bit stiff after all that standing around being adored.' She shook her toes, and her movement was accompanied by more tinkling of bells. The soundtrack of the goddess of love.

'How do you know Polly's name, and why are you speaking English?' asked Alice, who was the more sceptical and less romantic of the two girls. 'Shouldn't you be talking in ancient Greek?'

'I'm a goddess. All mortals understand my words.' Aphrodite lifted Polly's chin so that she was looking up into the goddess' eyes. 'We are old friends aren't we, Polly?' The goddess took the girl's hand in her own, tracing a golden finger over Polly's antique cameo ring, that had belonged to her gran. Alice had always admired the tiny white picture of a woman carved into the pink shell. She hadn't known it was a picture of Aphrodite.

'And Alice, I know you too. Have you forgotten the white dove that ate corn from your hand when you were just a little girl?' Aphrodite took Alice's hand and instead of the sensation of cold marble Alice was almost sure that she could feel the gentle pecking she hadn't experienced since she had visited the zoo with her dad.

'I have been waiting for you both,' said the goddess, still holding the girls' hands. 'You must come with me. I have a job for you.'

'Where are we going?' asked Alice.

'We are going to room 652 of the museum. Yes there are so many rooms. And from there we are going to war.'

Her heels barely touching the ground, Aphrodite led the girls through the strangely deserted museum to the floor above, until they reached a case containing Greek vases, red terracotta painted with black images. Aphrodite pointed to a large cup behind the glass.

'What do you see?' asked the goddess.

'There's a young girl with an old man. Maybe he's her father or her grandfather,' said Alice. This was the picture on the inside of the cup.

'Look again,' said Aphrodite. 'Polly, what do you see? You spend more time reading than your friend. You might recollect something from the *Iliad*.'

After watching the film *Troy* on television Alice and Polly had both decided to read the book. But Alice hadn't got very far. All those hard to pronounce names and boring lists. Alice wished now she had persevered, as her friend had done.

‘The girl is pouring something from a jug. She might be a slave, said Polly. ‘And there is a sword hanging on the wall. Maybe she is a war captive. Like Briseis.’

The silence of the museum gallery was broken by a faint rumbling in the distance. Was that the cracking of fire? It surely was, and now Alice could almost smell the smoke in her nostrils. And she could hear screaming.

‘That’s right, Polly, but this isn’t the girl you are here to save. There are so many girls like her. Take a closer look.’ Aphrodite reached her hand through the glass of the case, which melted to her touch, and pulled out the cup. She held it in her palm and it rose up so that it was spinning very slowly in the air. The girls could now see all the decoration around the outside of the pottery vessel. If you could call it decoration. It is a scene of war. A scene of horror. A helmeted warrior is slitting the throat of a man lying on the ground, as a woman looks on in despair. Another woman holds a club, trying to protect a child. An old man stretches out his arms as if to try to stop a warrior from hitting him with the body of a small child, which the warrior is using as a weapon. And a girl looks behind as she is led away by another warrior. Or is she looking over at the old man as he is about to be killed?

‘Polyxena,’ said Polly. ‘The girl is Polyxena. Daughter of King Priam. This is the end of the Trojan War.’

‘That’s right, Polly. You and Alice are going to save the youngest princess of Troy.’

‘You’re a goddess, Aphrodite. Can’t you save her? Why do you need us?’ asked Alice.

‘I’ve promised Zeus I won’t interfere personally.’

The shiny glass cases of the museum melted into darkness and flames. Now they were among the screaming and the burning. Bodies of men littered the floor. A woman was running away from the blaze, an infant in her arms.

‘Keep close,’ said Aphrodite. ‘See, in front of us is the great palace of King Priam.’ Men were laughing and setting fire to the building with flaming torches, and a bearded, helmeted warrior dragged a dark-haired girl out through the palace doors.

‘Now Polly, you know what to do.’

Polly took off her ring, lifted the cameo above her head and threw it into the face of Polyxena's captor. It landed between his eyes. He let go of the girl.

'Help me. I've been blinded.'

'Come Polyxena. We are your friends.' Aphrodite held out her arms to Polyxena. The frightened girl ran from the Greek warrior into the arms of the goddess.

'My father. My brothers....'

'We know what happens to them, Polyxena. But their fate will not be yours. Find my son, Aeneas. He is taking his little boy and his old father through the tunnels and away from Troy. Join them and live.'

'My Lady Aphrodite?' Polyxena looked up into the face of the goddess, the mother of her cousin Aeneas. 'And who are these goddesses?'

'We are just girls, like you,' said Polly.

'Then tell me your names, so I can remember you in my prayers.'

'My name is Polly

'And I'm Alice.' Alice reached into her bag. 'Take these,' she said, 'for your journey.' Alice handed Polyxena the remaining macarons. Polly had done the hard work, but sweet treats are always welcome.

'Thank you Polly and Alice. I won't forget you.' Polyxena turned to the goddess. 'My Lady, I will remember you to your son.' Polyxena bowed her head respectfully, then ran away from the burning palace, and towards the secret tunnels that led outside the city walls.

Aphrodite took the girls' hands once more, as the flames and the smoke started to swirl around them. The heat was intense, and Alice could hardly breathe. She felt Aphrodite let go of her hand and began to feel dizzy and then....

Alice and Polly were at the front of a crowd of people staring up at the expressionless marble eyes of the *Venus de Milo*.

Alice took out her phone and posted a photo of the statue on Instagram. 'Shall we go and get some more macarons?'

'Yes. I wonder...' said Polly, 'Did you notice the name of the cake shop?'

'No.' Alice had only seen the rows of brightly coloured cakes tempting them inside.

'It was *Pâtisserie Venus!*'