

The Buoyancy of Thoughts

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First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2017 Young Writers' Contest

Phoenix, MD—Friends School of Baltimore

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It's the right-hand man of...! the cab driver thought frantically, swallowing his gasp as the client opened the car door. He turned his head slightly to see the traveler place the large wooden box on the backseat. Dovetailed corners, jingling brass handles, and endless compartments. One side was curved to fit its carrier's figure. The driver had heard of the Pandora's box filled with foul demons carried by Auraspectres, but had never seen one with his own eyes. A bead of sweat began to form on the cab driver's brow. In the rear-view mirror, he caught a glimpse of the traveler's face as he settled into the backseat. A cool colorless gaze reflecting confused light peered back at the driver. The driver shivered as his client shut the car door, trapping the two in a void soon filled with turbulent thought and the scent of cedar.

"Just head east." The client pointed to the calloused ridge in the distance, the great backbone of the land blushing mauve against the deepening ultramarine-violet sky.

"I can only take you part of the way up the mountain," the nervous driver said quickly.

"That's fine," the traveler replied, as if he'd expected as much.

The car hit a pothole while pulling back onto the road, ferociously rattling the wooden box in the back seat. The traveler dampened the noise of the wooden box with a steady hand, as if trying to hush the contents lurking inside. Brilliant streaks of red crackled against his pallid skin; the color burrowed deep into the creases of his knuckles and held strong to the cuticles of each finger. The cab driver softly hummed a tired tune, hoping to drown his thoughts with noise over the soft hum of the electric motor. He stepped harder on the accelerator, anxious to escape the stranger in the back seat.

As the smooth hills and dipping valleys gave way to a steep rise, the traveler did not speak further. Like a hound tracking a trail of blood, he kept an eye out for the town hidden in the billows and whispers of the crisp mountain air. The footfalls of winter were upon the mountainside, carrying the scent of pine from its summit down to the fleeting villages flickering past the car window. Looking back, he could see the outline of the centuries-old massive crater, a remnant from the Great Cyber War that reshaped the world's terrain.

"This is as far as I can take you," the cab driver said finally as the unkempt roads began to narrow at a dangerous rate. "You'll have to walk the rest of the way."

The client opened the door, grabbed the wooden box and strapped it to his back, its glass contents clinking in their many compartments. He thrust his payment-filled hand over the front seat, startling the cab driver who had carefully fixed his eyes ahead.

"Ah— thanks," the driver stammered. "You can just leave that there." He pointed to the pocket in the open car door, clearly not wanting to touch the client. The car turned around in the jagged driveway of a stray mountain home as the traveler set off on foot up the road.

The traveler pretended not to notice the wide-eyed boy hiding in the barren treetops above. The child, cloaked in the silhouette of settling darkness, flattened himself out across a thick limb. The curious tree-dweller tried to hold his breath to silence the slight whistle that accompanied each exhaled cloud, making his lungs burn and vision spin. The traveler yawned and sat beneath the great birch, wondering how long the child would keep up this standoff. He closed his eyes and waited for the boy's patience to run thin...

"Hey, mister? You asleep?"

“Yep,” the traveler smiled slightly. Ten minutes had crept by. He sensed that the boy had been waiting for him in the forest much longer than that. Though they were both wearing electrothermal coats, the temperature was dropping below comfort level.

“No, you’re not.” The simian child swung down from the limb, the dead twigs on the ground snapping with his landing. The traveler didn’t need to see the boy’s face to know a thousand questions were bubbling up inside him.

“Are you the guy that...” the boy’s voice faded away as he sheepishly pointed to the wooden box dipped in the pool of moonlight escaping between the branches.

“Yes,” the traveler almost smiled. “I paint dead people.”

The boy’s eyes widened as he took in the enormity of the box. “So, that’s the box of...”

“It’s not magic,” the traveler replied. “It’s just paint.”

The boy began to reach for the box, curiosity trembling through his outstretched hand.

“It’s getting cold, we should go,” the traveler cut him off. “You were sent to meet me, so I’m following you.”

“How did you know I was...” the boy trailed off, then shrugged. “We can take a shortcut to town, but I’m warning you, it’s steep,” the boy said as he grabbed the traveler’s sleeve. “Follow me.”

The traveler glanced down at the small fist curled around his sleeve. It had been a long time since a child had not shied away from his presence. With the weight on his back that was so familiar it was practically part of him, he followed the boy to his home for the night.

The morning sky smiled lavender, the clouds strung out like pulled cotton and dip-dyed in the early sun. The silhouette of the morgue stood regal against its saturated backdrop, its grandeur and towering doors a remnant of the old days of churches and widespread religion. The gothic work of architecture was clearly built centuries before the war, and had withstood the centuries since.

The traveler glanced back at the boy softly padding a couple of steps behind him. Even without his transparent expressions, his nervous excitement was easy to read. The boy’s thoughts were pure and translucent, the shallowest ones fluttering away.

Just as they reached the morgue, looming doors suddenly creaked open, and a frail musty man stepped out. “She’s down the hall to your left,” he told the traveler tersely.

“Wait out here,” the traveler told to the boy.

“But I-”

“Only professionals are allowed inside,” the mortician rasped before turning away and heading down a great hall. The boy’s shoulders slumped. The traveler quickly bent down and whispered low enough so that the mortician couldn’t hear “I’ll get you in, so just stay here.”

The boy nodded, curiosity brightening his face.

The windowless octagonal room was cold and cavernous, the slightest sound amplified by the mosaic tile floor and stone walls. The traveler had snuck the boy in after the mortician left him to his business. “You have to stay back there,” he told the boy and pointed to one of the eight large columns lining the room.

“Where is she?” the boy asked a little too loudly.

“Shhh. She’s in there,” the traveler murmured, pointing to a rectangular glass in the center of the floor large enough to cover an adult body. Below it was a clear chamber filled with argon gas, temporarily slowing down the decay process. The traveler quickly stepped in front of the child who started to rush over to see his acquaintance.

“What are you doing?!” the boy whispered with wild eyes.

"I didn't bring you here to examine a corpse."

"But I want to see her," the boy muttered.

"She won't... look like you remember her."

A perplexed expression hung tight to the boy's face.

"The body's just a shell. In three days, they repurpose it, anyway. It's my job to collect its memories before it decays and they float away," the traveler said bluntly.

"How do you do that?" the boy questioned, the thought of magic and witchcraft pushing aside his grief for the moment.

"Just sit over there and watch," the traveler said, making sure the corpse would be safely out of the boy's sight.

The boy sat cross legged and watched the traveler kneel and unlatch his wooden box of supplies, set up an easel with canvas, and lay out his paints. After mixing the appropriate colors, the traveler's hand hovered above the chamber in the floor, scanning his brush back and forth. He got up and walked back to the child, paintbrush in hand, and knelt next to him.

"Look closely," he told the boy. "Do you see anything unusual?"

The boy peered intently at the brush. "It's just a mix of colors..."

"It's a precise mix," the traveler corrected him. "I paint various colors in one stroke... it's more efficient. At the very tip of the brush is one of her memories."

"I don't see it," the boy frowned, his brow furrowed childishly.

"Think of it this way. What does the number 13 look like?"

"Orange and rigid with sharp edges," the boy replied automatically.

"What does it feel like?"

"Like... like cold metal and riveted plastic."

"Do you know what I see when I think of the number 13?" The painter smiled slightly at the curiosity brimming in the boy's eyes. "A vertical line and two backward c's stacked on top of one another. I was never taught to cross my senses to visualize a number."

"Why? I thought they made everyone learn visual mathematics..."

"Well, almost everyone. Most kids around the world are trained to quickly calculate."

The boy knew this fact well, for he and all the kids he knew were set on this track at a very young age. As human computers, they would attend mass computations three days a week until they were 18 years old. Then some of them would go on to be data analysts, while others would merely use these computer networks in their own day-to-day lives. With a global connection of rapidly calculating minds, the computing process was many times more effective, and safer, than the pre-war method using binary code-based computers.

"However, there are exceptions," the painter shrugged.

"What do you mean?" the boy asked him.

"Well, I was apprenticed to an Auraspectre before I could learn visual math, and I've been painting ever since."

"What does this have to do with memories?"

"Oh, everything. Just like you were taught from a young age to cross senses in order to visualize number calculations, I was trained to cross senses in order to visualize waves of thought."

"So, what do you see?" the boy whispered excitedly.

"Her thoughts are stretched with time and move like dust in the air. Kind of like... short strands of hair," the traveler replied as he headed back to the easel. "Thoughts are either attached to a person, a place they had been, or another person they were around; it all depends on their density, so to speak. Most kids have surface thoughts, so they shed them easily," he continued, looking back at the boy with a raised eyebrow.

"Hey!" the boy exclaimed indignantly as he watched the painter begin applying paint to the corners of the canvas, working from the outside to the center. Each stroke contained multiple colors, every hue falling in

the right place from years of practice. What started out as lines without form became shadows and hair, and eventually skin and eyes.

After every stroke, the kneeling painter waved his brush over the body, collecting memories bubbling up from the fading mind. With careful eyes, he sifted through his findings, reading each scene frame by frame. He glanced through the life of the elderly woman who enjoyed sitting beneath the Japanese Maple at the outskirts of town. Occasionally, he saw an orphan child sitting by her side. The childless old woman and the motherless child continued meeting at the purple-leaved tree to address an emptiness that could only be filled by each other. They were a family stronger than blood ties, and the traveler could see that she was the only one to ever show the orphan boy true kindness.

“Give me your hand,” the traveler said as he walked back to the boy.

“What are you doing?” the boy asked as the traveler examined his palm.

“Extracting the memories you have been gripping for too long.”

The boy jerked his hand back. “Won’t I forget them if you take them out?” he asked worriedly.

“Yes, but you will no longer have to worry about them being altered with time.”

The boy blinked, trying to process all of the information being thrown at him.

“It’s the Japanese Maple, right? It was chopped down last year and you’re afraid your memories that were connected to it will fade.”

The boy nodded in surprise.

“As long as you keep trying to desperately hold onto your memories that took place there, you will never be able to move on. But if I put it in the painting, you can visit it in the catacombs whenever you want.”

“Alright,” the boy agreed softly.

The traveler hovered the brush just above the boy’s palm before returning to the painting, giving it its final strokes. He unclipped the canvas from the easel and took it to the boy. There on the canvas, the old woman was still alive. Her eyes crinkled at the edges like they always did when she smiled, and her skin glowed golden-brown like it did under the afternoon sun. When the boy looked into her eyes, he could smell her raspberry-cinnamon tea, and feel the cool breeze under the purple umbrella of the tree. He heard her thoughts and felt her joy.

“How—”

The painter watched the orphan’s eyes glaze over. The young boy turned away, embarrassed that his emotions got the better of him.

“You’re not so scary,” the boy mumbled.

“Why would you think I’m scary?” the traveler asked him, holding back a smile. When people saw the traveler and his box, their minds created a monster. To frightened onlookers, the dried paint snaking up his fingers gripped his skin like old blood, and his reflective eyes searched their souls for decaying thoughts and ill-wishes. But the boy could see he was simply a man with an average face, wearing a kind smile no one ever took the time to notice.

“You’re an Auraspectre, everyone knows that’s the same thing as the boogeyman. Be good or the boogeyman will show everyone your bad thoughts. That’s what I’ve always heard,” the boy said in his toughest voice, puffing out his chest a bit.

The traveler chuckled. “I already knew that you weren’t scared of me. Your thoughts... they throw the light like mica in a receding wave on the beach. Normally, when people see an Auraspectre, they try to hide their thoughts out of fear. To them, I am Judgement, exposing every sin. But you... you have no fear. Your thoughts will only shine brighter in the worst of times.”

The Auraspectre smiled at the boy and sea of thoughts. The child finally gained the courage to let his tears overflow.

Apocalypse Radio

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Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2017 Young Writers' Contest

Silver Spring, MD—Montgomery Blair High School

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Across the ruined nation, a thousand clocks awaken. A thousand buzzes, dings, a thousand diodes flashing. The sound of a thousand cans being opened and the smell of syrupy fruits and thick vegetable broths. The clatter of metal spoons against tin. The splash of water in canteens. The scrape of furniture against the floor. In some blessed places, the shushing of children or the quiet cooing of an infant. In most, nothing but a single heartbeat. But in all places, an adjustment of dials, a straightening of antennas, the expectant static of airwaves. And then a voice.

“Hello everybody, and welcome back to Apocalypse Radio!”

The deep, calm voice of a young man.

“It is just now 6 pm Volcanic Standard Time. Today marks a very special episode: this is the 500th broadcast I have transmitted to all of you. Although it is impossible to know for sure, this would suggest that it has been over two years since the cataclysm. It is most likely the middle of October, according to my correspondents. The Geiger readings for today are...”

He pauses and there is a second of dead air.

“...around 800 millisieverts. Not instantly deadly, but far from levels that would allow surface inhabitation. As always, I strongly recommend against leaving your bunkers in any circumstance unless you are lucky enough to possess a full-body protective suit. I have it from correspondents near the Ancient Gorge that their surveillance cameras and motion detectors have picked up images of what we believe to be the nomadic gang that calls themselves the Red Tigers. If you see any trace of these individuals, I implore you to avoid contact at all costs. They are dangerous and have no concern for the well-being of any fellow humans. They only want your supplies. Again, please stay away from surface nomads if at all possible. Even the most innocuous-seeming may be scouts or spies for roving gangs.”

There is the sound of pages being flipped.

“Now, for human events. Yesterday at approximately 3 am VST, Mr. Harrold of the Frozen River area sent out a distress signal. Unfortunately, by the time our renowned Dr. Patrick was able to suit up and take her vehicle over to his bunker, he had died of a heart attack. Mr. Harrold was a long-time contributor to this show, and we shall miss him dearly. Dr. Patrick has begun collecting the supplies from his bunker for redistribution. In lighter news, the Young family of the Charred Forest have just given birth to their third child—a healthy female. We send them our best hopes for her future. Remember, if anyone out there is pregnant and needs assistance, please call me when I am not doing the show and I can direct you to the closest doctor. We want to do the best job possible of raising the next generation. On that note, we now go to the esteemed Dr. Kassis, who has a message for parents of small children.”

There is a crackle, the flicker of static. Another voice comes on the line, a higher voice but still discernibly male. There is an uncertainty, but whether it is the voice itself or the quality of the transmission is not clear. It has a slight accent, but the country it is ascribed to has long been forgotten.

“Hello listeners. This message is for any parents out there with young children. I am Dr. Omar Kassis, and I used to be a professor of English literature. In my bunker, I have stored many classic tales, including books suitable for children, and in order to better the coming world, I would like to begin sharing these texts with

anyone willing to listen. Every third day, starting in 12 hours, I will be transmitting a reading of one of these books aloud from my home station, which the proprietor of this radio station has kindly helped me set up over the past few weeks. For those who wish to tune in, I am transmitting around 90 megaHertz. Thank you for your time.”

There is a soft snap, and a change in the static. The voice of the young man returns.

“Thank you for that message, Dr. Kassis. Again, for those who wish to tune in to his station, he will be transmitting every third day, starting in 12 hours, around 90 megaHertz. Now we go to our musical expert, Ms. Lane, who has chosen for us from her collection of over one thousand vinyl records one song to play today. I hope you enjoy it, and I will join you afterwards for our call-in session with Dr. Horowitz, who, as long-time listeners will know, was a botanist, and will be answering questions related to sustenance farming and animal raising in a bunker for one half-hour. I hope that anyone with questions will call in to the show, and I will screen your calls and direct them to her if possible. Now to Ms. Lane.”

There is another snap, and a soft, female voice comes on the line.

“Today I have selected for you a song I used to love to listen to, and hopefully some of you will remember it too. It is titled ‘Yesterday’.”

A soft melody starts playing, and eyes of those who remember the tune begin to fill with tears. Some even know the words. Couples sway in time for three minutes, then the song ends and the reality of damp concrete returns. The young man’s voice comes back on, accompanied by a sharp crackle, and he re-introduces the next guest.

For a half hour, people across the country adjust their rickety setups to transmit sound, most referring to instructions that they scrawled down during the several hour long special that the station put out in order to help people call in. In fact, most of their radio stations had at one time been fixed or improved by the young man’s voice transmitted through their backup set or their emergency communications devices. He had united the nation as best he could. People call in with questions about veterinary advice, crop yields, use of hydroponics, and soil rotations. The young man sits and tirelessly screens calls, trying his best to get important questions to the expert.

At the end of the half hour, Dr. Horowitz leaves and the young man comes back online.

“A big thank you to Dr. Horowitz for helping us out. If anyone has emergency questions, please send out a distress signal and ask me for her. If she is available, I will do my best to put you in touch with her. Now, it is nearing 7 pm VST, and I would like to send out a message to everyone who has listened to me, whether this is your first time or if you have been here for all 500 episodes. I would like to thank you for listening and for talking, and I would like to tell you all that we will get through this. We have healthy children being born all the time, and we have good enough records that we can arrange marriages that will improve the gene pool. But for now, we have this station. I would encourage anyone who is alone to call in and talk to me. I will do my best to help. I will continue to do my screenings of transmitter stations to see if there is anyone else out there. And this station will continue to transmit every day at this time, as long as I can keep it going. But for now, keep heart, and keep listening. This is Apocalypse Radio, signing off.”

A thousand diodes go still, a thousand chairs are pushed back. And a thousand people stand up to look into the eyes of their companions or into the eyes of a mirror, reassuring themselves that there is something to live for, as long as there’s someone to listen to.

Archaic Smile

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Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2017 Young Writers' Contest

Rockville, MD—Richard Montgomery High School

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Jacob shook his leg under the desk, anxiously peering around the room. Sure, he was confident in his chances for the internship, but he wished that they'd just announce the winner already. There was only one person here, besides him. Jacob assumed that she was the only one who hadn't checked her email since last night. He had spent the evening typing out a message to send to the other competitors, changing the time and location of the meeting. It hadn't been very hard to hack the email server, their security code was just "password1." Jacob and the girl made eye contact for a split second, but he quickly pivoted back to the front of the room, resolved in his goal.

After the officials realized that no one else would be coming, the actual meeting only lasted a few minutes. With a pitying glance at the girl, they awarded the internship to Jacob, of course. He sat through the endless talking about "respecting museum rules" and "artistic privileges that can be revoked." It didn't matter anymore, he had made it in. From here on out, Jacob had a plan. Do research, spend as much time in the museum as possible, come out of it with experience for his resume. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. What did it matter if his methods weren't entirely fair, hadn't his professors always told him to make his own luck?

Jacob sat down on a bench in the Egyptian wing. He gathered up his notebook and his bag, looking at the map on the wall. According to this plan, the museum was arranged in chronological order. He wasn't the only one here, but the museum director had said that he could stay until the rest of the staff had left, at around midnight. Of course, if he wanted to, he could just stay. The museum needed him, needed any promotion they could get given that all the students these days bypassed these research internships for full-paying office jobs. Jacob checked his watch; it was only 10:00. There was still time to make his way through a few more exhibitions. Onto the Greeks, then.

Jacob walked through the ornate entryway into the Greek sculpture room. All around him were cold, marble figures. There were gods, kings, and peasants, all standing still together. Jacob stopped in his tracks. Maybe it was the chill in the air, maybe he was tired, but Jacob wanted to stay here, in this one room, and examine every piece. The statues all were smiling. Jacob remembered something his art history teacher had said once about the smile's symbolism, but he couldn't be bothered to read all of the signs in the hall. He never made it to another section of the museum, having spent the two hours he had left looking at the sculptures.

"Mr. Henderson?" Some unidentified worker appeared at the door, probably a secretary or something equally meaningless. "Are you on your way out?"

Jacob looked away from the sculpture of Aphrodite he had been gazing at for the past 20 minutes. "Yeah, sure, coming," he replied, preparing to leave. He followed the secretary to the exit, but he found it hard to leave. He looked back at Aphrodite, and met her eyes. Was she smiling at him? Turning his back, Jacob said nothing else as he left the museum and drove home, awaiting the next day with longing.

The next few weeks passed Jacob by quickly. He always meant to get to the Romans, the Etruscans, anything else, but he found himself back in the same room, with the same sculpture. How could he leave, when they always greeted him with a smile? One day, he met with the supervisor of the internship.

"I trust you're finding the museum to your liking?" The supervisor had asked, clearly not too concerned

for Jacob's sake. Jacob responded enthusiastically, and the supervisor's mind was put at ease, knowing that he didn't have to bother himself with some student-outreach project far below his position. However, as more time went on without anything to show for it, the supervisor checked in on Jacob more frequently. Jacob began to spend the small hours of the morning researching other works in the museum from the comfort of his home, motivated by the prospect of spending more time with Aphrodite. Seeing sufficient evidence of work, the supervisor didn't question him about his research again.

Jacob began to bring little trinkets to the museum with him. One day, he'd bring flowers for Aphrodite, lilies from the over-priced floral boutique down the street. Sometimes, he'd ignore the warnings and touch the statue's marble with both of his bare palms. She never changed, never tried to be better than him, just stood there, watching. The other statues may have objected to this special treatment, but Jacob never paid them mind. Aphrodite was too perfect for Zeus, too perfect for anyone but Jacob. He plastered his bedroom wall with pictures of Greek sculptures off of Google Images, just to tide him over until the next day.

The next week, Jacob was called to the main office. He daydreamed of the coming night, as usual, but he was brought back by the words "...looking into a possible hacking crime." The supervisor looked at him expectantly, and Jacob sputtered a response.

"Sorry, I don't know anything about that."

The supervisor suddenly looked less supportive. "Here's the thing, Mr. Henderson, we didn't send that email changing the time of the introductory meeting, but it was sent, so why were you able to come on time?"

Jacob's face turned a bright shade of crimson. "Um, what about that other girl who was there? Why don't you ask her why she came?" He shifted around in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable.

"We were going to, but we tracked the IP address of the computer it was sent from. It's really just a quick search, if you have the right program. Funny thing was, the computer was registered as being at the home address you supplied us with, Jacob." Now glaring, the supervisor looked at Jacob with contempt. Jacob couldn't think of anything to say.

"That's what I thought. Now, your internship will be terminated as of tonight, we do not tolerate sabotage, and you will sustain a year-long ban from the museum. Suffice to say that we are disappointed in you." The supervisor turned away from him, and Jacob stood up, dazed. No more long nights in the Greek room, no more Aphrodite, no more anything. He had failed her.

That night, hoping word hadn't spread about his imminent eviction, Jacob walked into the Greek room with a heavy heart. He supposed that it was too late to learn anything from another wing of the building, so he thought that he might as well just enjoy his last chance to spend time with the sculptures. There were so many ideas he hadn't yet imagined, Aphrodite deserved so much more. It almost seemed like the statues were angry, tonight. Jacob sat down on his familiar bench, and pulled out his phone, a question suddenly pressing his mind.

"Why do Greek sculptures have smiles?" He typed slowly into the search bar, clicking on the first answer that came up and reading it aloud.

"Archaic sculpture uses the technique of giving figures smiles not to show that they are happy, but rather simply that they are living. However, many statues that have been discovered in the past century have not worn the signature smile, and the archaic smile itself is now a rarity that should be seen as cautionary. There are cases of strange circumstances surrounding the discovery of smiling figures, although nothing has been proven, and no evidence has been found of any foul play."

Jacob looked up from his phone. He stared around the room, the endless hall of people who lived thousands of years ago, but all ended up in the same place. He looked for that smile he relied on every night. No, no, they were frowning at him. He shifted his line of sight towards his Aphrodite, looking for reassurance. Was

she scowling too? He blinked, rubbing his eyes. Aphrodite's grin became unabashed, not the smile of a child with candy, but more of a lion locking eyes with a gazelle. He pleaded with himself to leave, but he couldn't see the door from this end of the hall, and he was just so tired. The marble creaked from the chill in the air, and Jacob couldn't tear his eyes away. His Aphrodite, why wouldn't she say anything? Why wouldn't she stop looking at him like that? Was that really her, stretching her hand out to him, for the first time?

Aphrodite's face sank into a smirk as she watched Jacob crumple to the ground. Her stony fist pulled itself back into its theatrical positioning, and she winked at the statue across the way from her. She had never bothered learning his name, but he had worshipped her. Like all of the others. Aphrodite watched as Jacob seemed to fade into the intricate ionic carvings on the wall. She looked forward to the inevitable confusion, then indifference, that always came the next day when someone found his things.

Aphrodite watched, Aphrodite listened, and again, Aphrodite smiled.

