

Resurrecting Cybele

By

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	vi
Resurrecting Cybele	1
Select Bibliography	120

Abstract

The following creative thesis is the first part of a projected and more extensive satiric narrative. The thesis follows the misadventures of a female protagonist, Cybele Moondragon, as she endeavours to resurrect a matriarchal cult in present-day Canadian society. This satire is steeped in the Horatian tradition as Cybele Moondragon is constructed as

an urbane, witty, and tolerant [wo]man of the world, who is moved more often to wry amusement than to indignation at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy, and who uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke from readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities – sometimes including h[er] own. (Abrams 188)

However, since the protagonist never directly addresses the reader, as the novel is written in the third person, technically, *Resurrecting Cybele* falls into the category of indirect satire in the tradition of Voltaire's *Candide*, Swift's *Travels*, and Johnson's *Rasselas*.

Although the heroic journey Cybele undertakes is contained within the wild and fantastical present-day city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, she nevertheless, undergoes all the necessary tests that every mythological hero must endure in order to fulfill her archetypal quest as set out in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. She answers a call to adventure, enters into a metaphorical kingdom of darkness, undergoes trials and tribulations, and returns to the light with a treasure of great benefit to herself, if not all of humankind (Campbell 245-6).

Of course, as this is a satire, the novel also explores the human condition itself (Hodgart 10). It explores the tendency of human beings to pretend that they are “always

motivated by the ideal, the moral, the good, [and] never by the actual, the immoral, [and] the evil,” as well as the dangerous inclination of human beings to believe what is consoling but more often than not untrue (Feinberg 23). This satire also examines the use and abuse of power and the function of language and imagination in shaping and reshaping one’s sense of self-identity. It engages with the research conducted at Stanford University in 1971, the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, to give legitimacy to the character development of the protagonist and the antagonist. As they become more immersed in the evolution of the cult and the roles, they first play in jest, then begin in increasingly unnerving ways to shape the reality of their experiences.

Although this satire attempts to capture the spirit of those mock-heroic quests which have come before, the fact that the protagonist is a woman adds an interesting twist to the narrative. Traditionally, the heroic life focussed on “the courage to struggle and achieve extraordinary goals, [a] quest for virtue, glory and fame, which contrast[ed] with the lesser everyday pursuit of wealth, property and earthly love” (Featherstone 58).

Usually, a male hero would leave behind the everyday world, which was considered to be “the sphere of women, reproduction and care,” for the heroic world typified by “danger, violence and the courting of risk” (Featherstone 59). This satire is an examination of what happens when these two worlds collide. The fact that the female protagonist will choose to immerse herself in the mundane even as she undergoes her archetypal quest of enlightenment will not hinder the successful completion of her quest. Rather, she will end up achieving success in both spheres of human existence.

This narrative also explores what happens when art is no longer a reflection of reality, but has become a substitution for reality. The play within the text is heavily

informed by Baudrillard's belief that the distinction between reality and art has disappeared and we are now in a hyper-real state "in which images breed incestuously with each other without reference to reality" (Appignanesi 54-5). This belief is reflected in the interplay between the characters and even within their own minds. They are literally unable to discuss or understand the reality of what they are experiencing without first connecting it back to a form of art, which for them, usually means either through television or the movies, the most dominant media of this time. The characters' sense of their own identity is almost continually in flux; as they move from one moment to the next in their lives, they are continually reconstructing themselves according to what their experiences have in common with their favourite television show or movie. They process their emotions and perceptions through this media in order to make sense of them, both for themselves, and in their explanations to others. Of course, the degree to which this process occurs, ultimately, depends upon the amount of exposure they have to this media. Those characters most captivated by the media live in the most constructed of realities, while others exist in states of lesser enthrallment and closer to the realities of everyday existence. However, it is this interplay between the characters and their dependence upon multiple, constructed identities, that gives this satire the overwhelming power to perform its time honoured role as a form of cultural criticism, an instrument used by writers to "challeng[e] cultural perceptions rather than affirming them" (Bohnert 154).

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Thanks also to Dennis Cooley for the help he gave me in making my characters come to life.

Last but never least, a special thanks to my best friend Robin Kemp for continuing to believe.

If Life is a Tale Told by an Idiot, Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing, then that

Idiot Goes by the Name of Culture.

- Cybele Moondragon

All Things Happen for the Best, in this, the Worst of All Possible Worlds.

- Cybele Moondragon

The stench of fear permeated the sulphurous air around her. She gasped for breath, inhaling oxygen. Perspiration dripped from her face. She quickly wiped it away with the back of her hand. She could glimpse a faint light at the end of the corridor. Bile rose in her throat. Was that the sound of merciless laughter? No. She had not come so far only to be defeated now. She would not go down without a struggle. She was the Word. Scheherazade. She would challenge the Fates and create her own story.

No. Wait. That's how the story ended. It had begun quite differently. I'd better try again.

Perhaps it was fitting that the month that began with the Day of Fools, ended with the Day of her Birth, for while Cybele Moondragon was no fool, she was no Tiresias, either.

Hmm. Perhaps, I have gone too far back in time. It's always so hard to determine beginnings. Endings are so much simpler.

Maybe I should open a little less melodramatically. Just the facts. Leave guilt and blame for the reader to decide.

All right. Once more, with a little less feeling.

Cybele Moondragon sat upon her as-yet-not-fully-paid-for bright purple leather sofa. Disgustedly, she opened her mail. From what she saw on the exterior of the envelopes, she already knew they were all bills. Visa. MasterCard. American Express. Zellers card. Sears card. Student Loan. Oh, wonderful. A letter from the University of Manitoba. It was time to meet with her advisor and go over her progress report for the year or—in her case—lack of progress. She just couldn't seem to get motivated to writing her Masters' thesis on Canadian poetry. Veiled Sexuality and the Romantic Excesses of

Isabella Valancy Crawford. It sounded a lot more exciting than it actually was. She sighed. Work just seemed so uninspiring and lacklustre, compared to everything else she wanted to do in her life, beginning with – having a life.

She reached over for the remote and turned towards her television. As always, just the sight of her television made her smile. Not too many people get a free television. Luckily for her, after first having charged her credit card for three televisions, although she had only purchased one, Sears then proceeded to refund her the price of all the televisions. She would have called to inform them of their accounting error, but they had given her such a hard time about whether or not she had really bought the three televisions, her only thought upon discovering their accounting error was: Good, the gods don't like when you screw with people or their credit.

Let's see what wonderful things are happening in the world, she thought. She turned the television on to CNN. Nice. Blood and broken rubble. I wonder which side is dropping the bombs or shooting the missiles today. No matter. Tomorrow the other side will strike back – the death and destruction will be the same – only the bodies will be different. Life's such a never-ending cycle of blood and violence. Why can't people just get along? Oh, too clichéd. Now, I'm quoting Rodney King. Poor sap. Took a licking and kept on ticking. She yawned. Gods, I hope dinner will be ready soon. I'm starving. Where the hell is Janus? Why can't he ever be on time?

There was a knock on her apartment door. She yelled, "It's not locked" and got off the couch to greet her guest. "How did you get in without buzzing?"

Janus walked in and hugged her hello: "It helps when you have an honest face. No one can fathom the depths of depravity that lurk beneath the mask of civility."

“True. That’s why all those idiots who live beside serial killers are always interviewed on television saying: ‘But, he was such a nice, quiet neighbour. Never made any noise at all.’ Meanwhile, Mr. Gentility is in the basement hack-sawing hitchhikers and torturing the neighbourhood pets.”

“You’re in a good mood tonight. Maybe I should have bought over a bigger bottle of wine.”

Cybele leaned towards him and sniffed affectedly. “Maybe you should have brought over some of that beer I smell on your breath. What did you do, stop off for some drinks with the guys and forget we were having dinner?”

“*Mea culpa*. I just wanted to be sociable – celebrate TGIF. Just making connections – wanting to get ahead at the Loaves and Fishes.”

“Ok, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be snide. It’s just these damn bills. I keep thinking there must be a better way to make a living than as a professional student.”

“Well, you could always do what I did. Inherit money. Then you could spend as long as you like working on your thesis. I know I am.” Janus raised one eyebrow archly. “Of course, your parents would have to die first.”

Cybele grabbed the bottle of wine from him and walked into the kitchen. “Very funny.” She turned and winked back at him. “Unlike you, I actually get along with my parents.”

“Touché.” He walked over to the slowcooker bubbling away on the countertop. “Mmmm. Something smells good. Looks like beef stew.”

“Yep. It is.” She looked pointedly at her watch. “It’s been ready for a while.” She handed him a glass of wine. “Let’s just sit down and eat. I’ll dish it out.” She

gently pushed him towards the living room. "You get the movie set up. May as well start the previews while we're not paying attention."

They began to watch *Star Wars*.

Janus reached over the coffee table to refill their glasses with wine. "God. I can't believe how many times we've seen this movie." He shook his head ruefully. "We must be the ultimate *Star Wars*' geeks." He looked over at Cybele and laughed. "How pathetic are we that we can recite all the characters' lines before they even say them?"

Cybele raised her glass in a mocking toast. "Touché." She laughed. "But how would we ever make sense of the abyss that is our lives, without George Lucas' bible? He makes life seem so simple." She took another sip of wine and absentmindedly patted Janus' hand. "Good and bad are so absolutely absolute in the *Star Wars*' universe."

"Well, maybe, until you start to get into the *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. Then things start to become less clear – morality becomes a lot more ambiguous." He began to pop his knuckles. "Hell. We even find out that Yoda lies."

Cybele stood up and began to pace back and forth. "I know. But." She stopped to take a gulp of wine. "That makes perfect sense. There are no eternal truths. Morality and Truth are just a matter of perspective. Just big staffs used by those in power to control the masses – the sheep." She looked down at Janus and snorted. "I'd rather be the shepherd than the sheep. Wouldn't you?"

"Well, duh." He gestured up at her with his fork. "No big surprise that religion is the opiate of the masses. As for me, I'd rather be the drug pusher than the drug user."

Cybele sat down and grabbed an uneaten carrot off her plate. "Speaking of religion, do you know that in the last Canadian census, according to CNN, many Canadians listed their religion as Jedi?"

"You're shitting me." Janus refilled his glass of wine. "Well, if CNN says it, then it must be true." He snorted derisively. "I mean, it's not like they're a laughably, transparent instrument of propaganda for the American government."

Cybele laughed and sang out a little unsteadily, "J-I-N-G-O-And Jingo was his name, oh." She reached over and patted Janus on his hand. "But, you're missing my point."

"You actually have a point?" Janus took a long sip of wine. "I thought you were just talking to hear the sound of your own voice." He looked over to see if she was even listening to him.

Cybele glared back at him. "Bastard." He's a fine one to talk. Narcissus to a tee. Of course, I guess that pretty well describes me too. Birds of a feather flock together. She relented and laughed. "My point is that people are unsatisfied with mainstream religion. But, they still need to organize their lives around stories and mythology to make sense of their lives and their fears of living and of dying." She thumped her glass dramatically on the table, startling Janus who had been drifting off to sleep. "That's why the Force is so seductive. It's because of the idea that everything is connected to everything else. Nothing ever dies. Death is just a transformation of energy."

Janus yawned and began to crack his knuckles again. "So, what are you suggesting? Should we dress up as Jedi Knights and run around quoting lines from *Star*

Wars?” He winked. “That does have a certain appeal. But there are conventions and asylums for that sort of thing.”

“No.” Cybele rolled her eyes disgustedly. “As Quark would say: ‘where’s the profit in that?’ If we joined someone else’s religion, we would be the sheep, and they would be our masters. However, if we pulled a L.Ron Hubbard and started our own religion, we would be the ones in control.” Cybele paused for dramatic effect. “And ultimately, WE, would be the ones making all the money.”

Janus fought off another yawn. “What did L. Ron Hubbard...?”

Gods. Cybele groaned inwardly. Sometimes, it’s like talking to a child. She forced herself to sound patient. “Hubbard founded Scientology. And look how many people believe in that crap. John Travolta does – that’s why he made *Battlefield Earth*.”

“That’s right. I’d forgotten.” He laughed. “So, Obi-wan, what kind of religion do you want to start?”

Jackass. I’m trying to be serious and he’s cracking jokes. Cybele took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Must remain calm. She took another gulp of wine. “Well, obviously, it would have to be something that would fulfill people’s deepest desires and have no unpleasant rules.” She waved her now-empty glass in the air. “No one likes being told what not to do. And doesn’t it suck that all the funnest things in life always turn out to be sins. Sex, drugs, rock and roll.” She sighed deeply. “You get the picture.”

Wow. She’s really on a roll tonight. She’s like one of those toys you just wind-up and watch them go. Janus leaned over and refilled both their glasses with the last dregs of wine. “So, you want to create a religion without rules? Interesting approach.”

Cybele shook her head. Doofus. “That wouldn’t work because people are basically stupid. They need rules and structure in their life.” She stood up a little unsteadily and began to pace. “The trick is to make people enjoy following your rules. Bread and circuses – religion for the masses.”

God. Stop circling the airport and bring the plane in for a landing, Cybele. Janus yawned and stood up to stretch. “Well, what did you have in mind? Frolicking around nude, performing pagan rites, and smoking pot to get in the mood?”

Aargh. I’m a giant in a land of midgets. Cybele took a quick sip of wine. “Yeah, I don’t think that would go over well in Winnipeg’s climate. Although, I guess the pot and the spirits would help dull the pain of the frostbite and the resulting amputations.” She stood up unsteadily. “Actually, I was thinking of something a little Wiccan but with our own spin.”

“Our spin?”

“Of course.” Cybele closed both eyes in a drunken attempt at a wink. “You can’t seriously think I would start a cult without my best friend as my partner.”

“I’m touched.”

“In the head, which is why you’d be perfect as my ritual partner.” She leaned towards him. “Come on – be Attis to my Cybele.”

“So, you’re thinking of a fertility cult – mmmm...orgies.”

“Trust me, I’d be the perfect reincarnation of Cybele – I could definitely get used to being worshipped by a bunch of Galli.”

Janus looked puzzled. “What the hell are Galli?”

Gods. Doesn't he ever remember anything I say? "The Galli were her priests." Cybele giggled. "Although, they were eunuchs and I'm not sure that would go over well - at least in the beginning - with our first members."

Janus laughed incredulously. "You're kidding, right. Someone would have to be a real dingdong to castrate himself for the sake of religion."

"No, they would have to lose their dingdongs." She sang off-key, "Ding Dong the witch is dead. The evil witch is dead."

I can't believe she wants to be a god. I wonder if it's just the wine talking. Janus shook his head. "I think you might be losing your always tenuous grip on reality."

"By the gods, Janus, of course, I'm kidding. In fact, the last thing in the world I would want is to start a cult which inspires that kind of religious fervour. I don't want to end up as the Canadian poster child for David Koresh or Jim Jones." She sang off-key again, "Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be Cybele Moondragon."

"No Kool-Aid parties then." Janus looked sadly at his empty glass of wine. If she's going to keep talking, I'm definitely going to need something else to drink.

"I'm serious." She waved her hand wildly in the air. "The premise of my cult." She paused to take a deep breath. "Which I have decided to name The Mysteries of Cybele and her Lesser Consort Attis, will offer peace and salvation to the masses, interspersed with some less than sparing use of hallucinogenic herbs and alcohol." She sighed regretfully. "As much fun as marijuana is, it should probably have no prominently significant place within our rituals of worship because we don't want to get busted for illegal drugs. We don't want to do anything that will draw the eye of the establishment too closely to us."

Cybele began to pace a bit unsteadily and gestured wildly with her wine glass. Wine spilt upon the mauve carpet. "Oops. Where was I?"

"No establishment." Janus stood up and stumbled over to the kitchen cupboards to look for snacks.

"Right. Our cult will be a force for moral good." Cybele took another sip of wine. "We will be a matriarchal cult and I will be in charge." She gestured towards herself. "After all, I certainly have the figure to play the role of a fertility goddess."

"Well, not quite." Janus carefully looked her over. "If you were a true reincarnation of a fertility goddess, you'd probably not be able to walk without falling flat on your face. Top-heavy and all that." He ripped open a bag of chips and walked over towards Cybele. "However, I always imagined Mother Goddesses with flowing black hair and dark brown eyes. You look like that. Well, except your hair has purple streaks."

Cybele gave an exasperated huff. "If I may continue." She grabbed a chip and began to munch. "We will have no sexual abuse of our flock. No pedophilia." She paused thoughtfully. "In fact, only adults will be eligible to join. We will have no doomsday ending. We will simply be a group of free-spirited people who want to have fun, reconnect with Mother Nature, and throw off the chains of patriarchal prosecution."

"Persecution?"

"That's what I said. No patriarchy... And that's not all. We will start a website to advertise our new religion and sell trinkets, amulets, potions, etc. They'll all be certified as blessed by the Goddess Cybele under the light of the full moon." She nodded

seriously. "You know, there's a very big market for new age religious artefacts. We'll be doing a public service."

"And making money."

"It's the American way."

"Yeah, but we're Canadian."

"We'll pay lots of taxes." Cybele yawned. "In fact, to avoid religious prosecution, we should probably not register as a religion but as an entertainment business. Revenue Canada won't bother us if we pay taxes. The bastards." She yawned again. "Gods. I'm feeling a bit tired. Must be all the fresh air I got this morning."

Or maybe all the wine you just drank. Janus yawned. Well, the wine we drank. "Me too. I spent a lot of time in the sun today."

Yeah. It couldn't be the beers you had before you came over. She smiled inwardly. Guess you didn't follow the Golden Rule today, eh Janus? Never mix your poisons. You'll pay for that tomorrow. She weaved her way towards the kitchen. "Hey, I've got some instant cappuccino mix in the fridge. The caffeine should wake us right up. Why don't you open the window? Get us some more of that fresh air."

They laughed. Janus opened the windows. Cybele returned with the cappuccino. They curled up on opposite sides of the couch.

Janus picked up the bills still lying on the coffee table, now spotted with beef stew and wine stains. "Seriously, Cyb, if you need money, I've got lots. I could give it to you or you could work for me. I could always use some help with my thesis. You know how much I hate reading all those boring articles on outdated psych theories. You could help me sort through the crap."

“Separate the wheat from the chaff, eh?” Cybele looked over at him mockingly. “I guess your thesis is coming along as well as mine.”

Janus glared half-heartedly at her. “You, at least, don’t have to fight continually with the Human Ethics Committee about whether or not your tactics might traumatize those poor, helpless street kids, who while not panhandling or squeegeeing your cars, are casing you out for the next home invasion.”

Cybele groaned. “Tell me you didn’t say that to the Committee.”

“Duh. I’m not an idiot.” He laughed cynically. “I know how to survive.” He shook his head. “I just pretend I’m deeply concerned about the possible ramifications of my interactions with the little darlings.”

Cybele bit the bottom of her lip worriedly. “Janus.” She sighed. “Just because your parents were psychologists, doesn’t mean you have to be one.”

Great. I’m getting advice from a would-be fertility goddess. He shrugged. “I might as well. That’s where the big bucks are, you know.”

“I’m just saying you don’t have to follow someone else’s blueprint for your life.” She leaned over and patted his hand half-mockingly. “Remember, there’s no Fate but what we make for ourselves.”

“That’s deep.” Bullshit. “Words of wisdom from *Terminator II: Judgement Day*?”

“What’s wrong with the Gospel of James Cameron?”

“Well, James Cameron is the King of the World. I guess that makes him a god. Hey, a Canadian, ex-truck-driver god. Who would have thought?”

Cybele grabbed a potato chip and slowly began to lick off the salt. "Try to focus, Janus. Wouldn't you like to do something that is pure fun and pure profit?"

Yuck. I wish she'd just eat the damn thing. Janus forced himself to look as if he was paying attention. Must focus. He blinked his eyes several times to keep awake.

Cybele put the uneaten chip down beside her on the table and reached for another one. "You know, Janus, there's a lot of money to be made in religion – especially, if you're in it from the beginning." She jumped up and restlessly began to pace back and forth. "We would be the top of the pyramid. We would be an awesome cult. We wouldn't abuse our power. We would just give people salvation – who would want to turn that down?"

Janus began to massage his forehead. Whoa. Energizer bunny, slow down. You're making me nauseous. "I had no idea you were so power hungry – maybe you can be Canadian god number two."

Cybele stopped and sniffed. "That would be James T. Kirk also known as William Shatner. And anyway, it's not about having NEGATIVE power, Janus. It's about having POSITIVE power."

God. I wish her voice wasn't so shrill. He forced himself to follow her reasoning. "You'd be a benevolent deity, of course."

Cybele thumped the television with her hand. "Wouldn't our lives be morally simpler if we lived in a *Star Wars* universe? Or a *Star Trek* one where people lived in peace and harmony with their friends and environment?"

What the hell has she been smoking? Janus looked at her oddly. "What series are you talking about? Didn't Captain Kirk go around shooting people and blowing up a lot of things?"

Aargh. Why do I have to always explain everything in one syllable words? "All right, a *Next Generation/Voyager/Deep Space Nine/Enterprise* universe. I'm not saying they always did the right thing but they usually tried to. That's what I want to create – an environment where people try to do the right thing. How could anything go wrong with that?"

"It seemed to go wrong an awful lot in the series."

Cybele sighed tiredly. "That's because that was fiction and this is real life."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?"

No. Dumbass. I'm talking just to hear the sound of my own voice. "Look. I really think this would be a good idea. As long as we keep it legal, don't break any drug laws or contribute to the delinquency of minors, I think this could be a great business opportunity. We just can't give the authorities any excuse to impose their misguided sense of morality upon us. We just pay our taxes, get the proper business licenses etc, and we'll be home free. We can just sit back and count our money."

Janus considered the idea carefully for a second and then admitted, "Properly handled, we could make piles of money. It really is impossible to have too much money, now, isn't it?"

"Yep." Cybele reached for another chip and began to lick off the salt. "And you're forgetting the best part. We get to dress up like goddesses and gods, play loud music, burn incense, and drink spirits – enhanced with certain special herbs, of course."

We get to make up our own religious rituals – heck, we can put them together in a Book of Shadows and sell them on our website too. And people will flock to us as if we were manna from heaven.”

“Didn’t manna have an expiry date?”

“Yes, but properly manna-ged, we don’t have to.” She shrugged nonchalantly.

“Or if we get tired of playing gods, which is hard to imagine, we can always sell the business – maybe open franchises around the world. We could be bigger than Scientology. Eat our dust, L. Ron Hubbard.”

Janus staggered off in the general direction of the bathroom. “Speaking of making tracks, I think I better drain the lizard and then hit the road. It’s getting very late.”

Cybele groaned. “I don’t know what Achates sees in you. I hope he’s not at your house waiting up for you.” She moved closer to the bathroom door which was slightly ajar and yelled, “Don’t forget to flush. I don’t need to see your lizard’s excretions the next time I go in. And wash your hands. Cleanliness is next to godliness.”

Janus came out of the bathroom. “Achates won’t be waiting up for me. He’s supposedly on a business trip in Toronto.”

“Why, supposedly?”

Janus looked annoyed. “I don’t know. He’s been a little distant lately, but he says he’s just tired from working hard.” He shook his head dismissively. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“O-kaaay. Whatever.” Cybele looked closely at him. “But are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Hey, I may be gay but I’m not a woman.”

“Funny.” Jerk. “Everyone knows that men are the worst gossips of all. Hey, seriously, we’ve had a lot to drink tonight. Are you sure you don’t want to sack out on the couch?”

“No. I don’t want to wake up thinking I’ve been swallowed up by Barney, the Dinosaur.” Then, he sung, in perfect pitch, “I love you. You love me. We’re a twisted family.” He stopped singing and grimaced. “Besides, I’m as sober as a judge.”

“Or a Canadian politician in the Land of the Lotus-Eaters?”

“Only if I’m from one of the provinces or territories.”

“In vino veritas.”

“God Save the Queen.”

They laughed together a bit unsteadily and hugged goodbye. Janus walked down the stairs with the greatest of delicacy in a precision that came from extreme drunkenness. Cybele shut the door after him, cleaned up the mess they made, and then headed off for bed where she immediately passed out.

Cybele awoke the next morning with a painful groan. The sharp rays of the sunlight pierced through her eyelids and created a beautiful prismatic effect that, had she not been so hung-over, she would have enjoyed. As it was, all she felt was nausea and a deep irritation that she had forgotten to close her blinds the night before. She groaned, drew the blanket over her head, and fell back asleep for the rest of the morning. *In vino veritas*, my ass.

She awoke to a giant crash. Oh no, Cassie must be up, cooking in the kitchen. I should probably drag myself out of bed and go talk to her. Humming "Onward pagan soldier," she got out of bed, dressed, and went off to talk to her roommate.

Cassie looked at Cybele's face and shook her head in mock commiseration. "Wow, Cyb, you look like something the cat had too many standards to drag in."

"I'll have you know that I feel much worse than I look," groaned Cybele. "I'm just waiting for these seven little men with pickaxes to stop mining in my head. Heigh-ho, Heigh-ho, to the aspirin I go."

Cassie handed Cybele four aspirin and a glass of water. "You and Janus must have had fun last night. Sorry I had to work late and miss the party."

"You missed quite an event." Cybele leaned against the kitchen counter and swallowed the aspirin. "I heard some major gossip last night."

"Really?" Cassie looked intrigued. "What?"

"Janus thinks Achates might be sleeping around when he goes on all those." Cybele paused and made quotation marks in the air with her fingers. "BUSINESS TRIPS."

Cassie took a sip of coffee and shook her head. "I find that hard to believe. Achates doesn't seem like the type to cheat. He just seems too uptight and conservative."

Cybele snorted. "Please. The most conservative ones are always the biggest sinners." Gods. Doesn't she ever watch the news? "But, it's just kind of ironic that Janus is afraid of Achates cheating when..." Cybele stopped and gave Cassie a half-guilty look.

"Oh my gods. Spill those beans, Cyb."

At first, Cybele felt torn, but the urge to gossip quickly overcame her desire to keep Janus' secrets. She leaned towards Cassie confidingly. "Well, it's just that, Janus goes barhopping when Achates is out of town, and sometimes I wonder if Janus always ends up in bed alone." She looked knowingly towards Cassie. "Janus seems to have such a desperate need to be loved and accepted that I think he looks for it wherever he can. And it's not like Achates is the most openly affectionate mate I've ever seen. I just don't think Janus has been completely faithful, which is why it's so funny that..."

"That he's afraid Achates is the unfaithful one." Cassie shook her head. "You know, I'm actually not surprised to find out Janus might be a bed-hopper. With that brown hair and hazel eyes, he's always reminded me a little of the guy who played Daniel Jackson on *Stargate* – the *SG1* series, not the motion picture. Pretty cute in an intellectual kind of way. Although James Spader's no dog either. What's his name?"

"Oh, I think you mean Michael Shanks. He does look like him. Strange. I never noticed it before. What's funny is that I always thought you looked a little like Teryl Rothery. Remember her? Dr. Janet Fraiser on *Stargate-SG1*?" Cybele paused thoughtfully. "That's probably because you both have dark brown hair, cut in a short pixie style with bangs, and dark brown eyes, and you're both kind of buttoned-up on the outside. Private but hiding deep emotions. Of course, you're much chubbier than she is but," she looked over at Cassie, whose mouth hung open in disbelief, "but I digress. What were you saying?"

Cassie carefully closed her mouth. That's textbook Cybele. Open mouth and insert foot. "Anyways. Have you ever thought about telling Achates what Janus might be

up to? He deserves to know, if even just for health reasons. You can't tell me that Janus always wears condoms?"

"I've thought about it." Cybele looked guilty. "I really like Achates but...Janus and I have known each other since Kindergarten. We became best friends from the moment we made the discovery that we both loved grape Kool-Aid and peanut butter cookies. How can I stab him in the back by telling Achates that Janus might be fooling around? I don't think Janus would ever forgive that kind of betrayal."

Crap. It's too early in the morning to debate morality. Cassie slowly rubbed the back of her neck. "Don't you think he would realize you were only trying to do the right thing and forgive you for it?"

"Oh, of course." Idiot. Cybele shrugged. "I mean if you were cheating on some guy, and I told him, and you found out—why, you'd forgive me in a heartbeat, right?"

"Touché." Cassie took a quick gulp of coffee. Gods. I really need the caffeine right now. "I'd think you were a meddling trouble-maker and we'd have to stop being roommates."

"I know. So, you can't talk about this to either Achates or Janus. We shouldn't try and run other people's lives. Only egomaniacs think their lives are so perfect that they can tell others what to do." She held the cold glass against her forehead and sighed. Gods. My head is killing me. She shrugged. "Everyone else knows enough just to leave well enough alone. Partly self-preservation maybe, and partly because we can't look into the future and know what's going to happen."

"You're so deep," Cassie mocked gently.

“At least six feet under. Just to be on the safe side. Anyways, enough about Janus and Achates’ soap opera. Back to the important stuff – me and my life.”

“Ah, humility. You fairly reek of it.”

“That’s the carpet. I spilled some of the wine last night.” Cybele chuckled and immediately regretted it as the inside of her head exploded in pain. Damn it. Must have been something off with the wine last night. She forced herself to focus on what she was saying. “Anyway, are you going to mock me or listen to how I discovered the meaning of my life?”

“Meaning of life stuff? Way cool. Okaaay. What life-changing decision did you make? Have you switched your primary allegiance from *Deep Space Nine* to *Stargate*? Will we be spending Saturday afternoons watching the adventures of Captain Sisko or the misadventures of Colonel O’Neill?”

“You know, I do have an existence outside of television. And, just for the record, that kind of switch would happen only when Hell froze over.”

“So, that would be Winnipeg in the winter?”

“Funny.” Cybele reached past Cassie and poured herself a cup of coffee. Ahh. The nectar of the gods. She carefully took a sip. Blissful.

Cassie rolled her eyes. Gods. Maybe when she’s done having a private moment with her coffee, she’ll get back to her point.

Cybele bit the bottom of her lip and carefully avoided looking at Cassie.

“Actually, I’ve decided that I don’t want to do a thesis anymore.” She raised her cup in a mocking toast. “Goodbye Master’s. Hello Life.”

Cassie half-spit out her mouthful of coffee. She grabbed a napkin and began to dab at her mouth. "You're joking. You've spent so much time and effort on it. How could you quit now?"

Cybele shrugged. Well. She took that well. Klutz. "I want to do something different – something fun and exciting. You know, take a road less travelled."

"Which is?"

Cybele waved her cup in a grand gesture. "Listen and learn, my young Jedi apprentice. I have decided to start a web business." She took a quick sip of coffee and watched Cassie's face to gauge her level of acceptance. "You know, set up a pagan website that sells magical amulets, charms, potions, and other assorted trinkets to those in need of spiritual enlightenment." Damn. Cassie looks a bit unsure about the whole thing. Aargh. Why are geniuses so unappreciated by their friends? Cybele sighed. Guess I'll have to reassure her. She patted Cassie on her hand. "It'll be only pure, light stuff, no dark magic."

Cassie began to look intrigued. "That's actually an interesting idea. You do have an extensive background in herbs and the gods know, you have dabbled in a lot of the new age religions, especially Wicca." She began to rub the back of her neck. Gods. Cyb wants to start a magic business. Yeah. Like that's not insane. Why me? She shook her head. "But are you sure there's really enough support there for you to make enough of a profit?"

Cybele looked slightly defiant. Now comes the harder part. Trying to convince her that starting a cult is a good idea. Must sound rational not emotional. She calmly took a sip of coffee. "Well, there's the rub. To make a really good profit, I need to have

a base of worshippers established. I don't want to horn in on someone else's religious interpretations. They would be too much competition for me. Plus, I'd probably have to follow their rules." She took a deep breath. Must speak slowly and sound completely logical. "So, I have decided the only solution is to start my own religion. You know, peddle a little spirituality. Make a lot of money."

Cassie choked on her toast. "You're not going to go all whacko Waco or Ruby Ridge on me, are you?"

"Well, I do have a little bit of lumbago, but I promise not to go all Wounded Knee on you either."

"You're not kidding, are you?"

"Why does everyone ask me that? What's so irrational about wanting to start a cult?" Cybele began to pace back and forth. "You know, someone has to – these things don't just come out of nowhere, you know." She put her cup down with a heavy thump. "And, I'll have you know that ALL of the major religions in the world started out as cults." She began to tap her fingers on the rim of her cup. "Perhaps, in two thousand years, my cult will be the dominant religion in the world. A force for good – for tolerance in a world far from the Federation so envisioned by Gene Roddenberry."

I really hope she's not serious about this. Cassie rolled her eyes. Better humour her. She's probably still a little drunk. "Well, it would be nice to live in a *Star Trek* universe. Holosuites and replicators would be cool to have."

"Not to mention space travel and transporters."

"Absolutely." Cassie reached over for another slice of toast. "You've convinced me. So, tell me all about this cult that you want to start."

Cybele took a sip of her coffee. "Well, I would be the Alpha and Omega of it, of course."

Cassie calmly began to eat her toast. "Yep. Seems logical to me."

"It is." Cybele nodded happily. Finally. She's beginning to come over to my side. "And it would be matriarchal and not exploitative or manipulative of its followers at all." She shook her head emphatically. "There would be none of that bad stuff that caused the downfall of other cults, which, of course, were all patriarchal, anyway."

Cassie snickered, "But, of course, yours would be a bright Manitoba crocus surrounded by the excrement of those which came before you."

Why can't she be serious? Doesn't she know how important this is to me?

Cybele looked over at Cassie and shook her head. Must not react. Must behave like the sober adult that I am. She forced herself to speak calmly and deliberately. "A more apt comparison than you could know, Cassie. I have decided to base my cult on the mystery rites of Cybele."

Cassie began to rub her eyes. It's too early in the morning for this level of pomposity. "Which you'll make up, of course?"

"Sort of. There was a real Cybele, you know. She was a Mother Goddess figure of Phrygia, in ancient Asia Minor. Nobody knows much about her rites. Well, except that they were pretty orgiastic – full of cymbals, drums, horns." Cybele grabbed a slice of bacon off Cassie's plate and casually waved it in the air as she continued. "Sometimes even self-mutilations – although my rites won't go that far of course."

"I hope not." Cassie tried hard not to laugh out loud. She is entertaining. I'll give her that. "I'm pretty sure lawsuits would become an unpleasant reality, if your

cultists started mutilating themselves, probably while under the influence of hallucinogenics.”

“Yep.” Cybele began to eat her bacon. “We’ll definitely stay away from anything that could bring the authorities down on us.”

Cassie bit the inside of her cheek and tried hard to sound sincere. “Was that the royal we, or have you convinced Janus to join up with you?”

“I tried but it’s hard to know if Janus will go for it. He’s a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, jammed into an enigma. A tough nut to crack.”

Cassie nodded thoughtfully. “What role do you want him to play? Besides provide the start-up money?”

“Well, money would be a definite help, but Cybele does have a consort, Attis. Janus could have a lot of fun playing his role.”

“What does Attis do?”

Cybele laughed. “Well, it’s kind of a twisted story. You see, Cybele was born from the earth as a bisexual god. However, her penis fell off and an almond tree grew where it landed. Then a flower from the tree somehow managed to impregnate Nana, the daughter of a river god and she gave birth to Attis.”

You’ve got to be kidding me. Cassie poured herself another cup of coffee. “So far, it sounds absolutely charming.”

Cybele frowned slightly. She doesn’t have to sound so snarky. No. I won’t rise to the bait. I’ll just ignore her. “Anyways, Nana didn’t want Attis so she left him outside to die, but he was raised by a billy-goat. When Attis grew up, Cybele fell in love with him and...”

“Nothing like a little incest to spice things up.”

Cybele determinedly ignored the interruption. “Anyways, Attis fell in love with a mortal woman, which pissed off Cybele. She drives him mad and he ends up castrating himself. “Violets.” She looked sharply at Cassie. “Not, unfortunately, your beloved Manitoba croci, blossomed from his blood, and Cybele repented and resurrected him. So, all’s well that ends well.”

Cassie started laughing. “Are you aware of how much castration there is in that little story of yours. Freud would have a field day with you on his couch.”

“Not necessarily.” Cybele winked forgivingly at Cassie. “Sometimes a castration is just a castration. Besides Freud was a patriarch and I’m a matriarch. A matriarch would interpret the story as Cybele being born with an extraneous part, a useless appendage of a less evolved time, like why we still have tailbones for vestigial tails. She simply shed it and moved up the great evolutionary chain of being.”

Cassie decided to enter in the spirit of fun. “And you think Janus would be happy playing Attis to your Cybele, Major Kira to your Captain Sisko?

“Absolutely. Why wouldn’t he? Performing religious rituals would be a blast and I’m sure that I can convince Janus to play along. If not, well Cybele is a great goddess. She can have many consorts – all beneath her, if you know what I mean.”

They laughed.

Cassie sobered up. “Your idea is very interesting,” she said, “but I think, no matter how good your intentions may be, starting a cult might be a little more dangerous and unpredictable than you bargained for.”

Cybele shook her head dismissively. "It'll be fine. I'll offer people an opportunity to break loose of social conventions and participate in a spontaneously, structured environment. What could go wrong?" She saw the dubious look on Cassie's face and inwardly groaned. Please don't answer that. It was a rhetorical question. She began to rub her forehead. "Gods. My head is killing me. How about we stop talking for now and instead do some major league imitations of couch potatoes."

"Good idea." I certainly can't think about anything after that cult bombshell. "What did you have in mind?"

Cybele walked into the living room. "Well, Space Channel is running the 8 hour *Dune* mini-series right now. How about we crash on the couch for the rest of the day and watch it?"

"8 hours? Sure you won't overdose on patriarchal mythology?"

Cybele started to sing, "I will survive, just as long as I have," but Cassie cut her off. "You have a bucket of ice water," she said in a voice that Cybele thought was slightly condescending.

"Funny." Cybele plopped herself down on the couch. "Say, how about we order Chinese food in a couple of hours when I start to feel human again?"

"Good idea, O Mother Goddess."

Cassie sat down and they spent the rest of the day watching *Dune*.

Waking up the next morning to the piercing peal of church bells, Cybele cursed softly and groaned. "Morning has broken like the first damn morning. Who the hell thinks it is a good idea to get up before Helios is at least half-way across the sky?" She

struggled out of bed and went to her window to look out at all the people walking in the parking lot of the neighbouring church. There you are, all dressed up in your best, eagerly waiting for your weekly dose of salvation. Wonder if my dear old ex is down there? She peered more closely into the crowd. Nope. I don't see any signs of sulphur and brimstone. Must be pulling a Homer Simpson, although the gods know that he's not the Ned Flanders he pretends to be. Go ahead mindless minions. Participate in the charade that you actually believe what you hear as if you practiced those tenets the rest of the week. Hypocrites. For most of you, the Ten Commandments are just a stick you can use to beat others over the head with. Wonder how these Hatfields and McCoys would react if they knew they were under pagan surveillance? Guess I'd be lucky not to be burnt at the stake.

She moved slowly away from the window. Another time. Another place perhaps. Right now it's time to do a little shopping and then go tackle Janus at the Loaves and Fishes. Get him to be the Robin to my Batman.

Gods, Portage Place is so deserted on Sundays. I should come downtown to do my shopping more often. Then again, maybe not, she thought as she saw two very dishevelled young men approach her outside the Salisbury House on Portage. When they neared Cybele, she was unsurprised to discover they were two very pungent panhandlers. She spoke firmly to them. "Sorry. I don't have any money to give you. Actually, I'm quite broke myself. But, if you truly want to get help, go to the Loaves and Fishes. It's a soup kitchen and youth shelter. For the price of listening to one of their sermons, they'll help you out."

The two politely declined her offer and Cybele continued on her way. Wonderful, now I feel slightly guilty. I did, after all, just buy a purple leather jacket. Granted, it was deeply discounted, but maybe it would have been the charitably pagan thing to do to give them something. Well, I offered to take them somewhere they could receive food and shelter. I think that fulfilled my moral responsibility to them as fellow members of the human race.

Cybele walked down Main Street towards the Loaves and Fishes. She smiled as the murals on the shelter's walls came into her view. She may not have been the most artistic of painters, but she had enjoyed donating her time that summer to help paint the sides of the building with the other volunteers. She was not a big fan of organized religions as she always felt they were more interested in rules and bureaucracies than in truly helping people, but Matthew Cain, the director of the shelter was definitely one of the good guys. It was always a miracle to see someone who practiced what he preached.

She walked into the foyer of the shelter and looked around for Janus. Matthew noticed her.

"Cybele, good to see you. Are you here to help us make dinner for the evening crowd?"

"Not today, Matthew. I'm looking for Janus. Have you seen him?"

"I think he's in the rec room talking to some of our residents."

"Thanks. I'll see if I can catch him." As she turned to leave, she pulled a ten dollar bill out of her wallet and gave it to him. "For the food bank," she said and went off in search of Janus. Good. Now, I've made up for not giving money to those two panhandlers.

She walked into the rec room and stopped as she noticed a very nicely shaped butt backing down off a wobbling stepladder. She rushed over to stabilize the ladder.

"Thanks. It was a bit awkward coming down with this pesky broken light bulb..." With an expression of surprise on his face, the man trailed off as he turned fully to look at her. "Are you a new resident?"

Oh good gods. Do I look like someone who lives on the street? I knew I should have stopped to brush my hair when I passed the bathroom. "No. I'm a visitor. I'm here to meet a friend for dinner. Not here of course. Not that there's anything wrong with the dinners here. But I just don't need to eat at a soup kitchen. Not that I think there's wrong with people who have to. I'm sorry. I'm babbling. It's a bad habit I have and sometimes the only way to stop is..." She quickly placed both hands firmly over her mouth.

"Help."

She smiled up at him. Boy. He is definitely yummy. Tall. Wiry. Beautiful, deep green eyes. Reddish brown hair. Looks just like James Spader when he played Daniel Jackson in the *Stargate* movie. Mmmm. Even the freckles look adorable. Gods. I'm staring. He probably thinks I'm a maniac who's wandered in off the street.

He laughed. She is definitely cute. A splash of colour and life in an otherwise dreary room. A bit of a Chatty Cathy but nothing wrong with that. "Who are you?" he asked, shaking his head in bemusement.

"I'm Cybele Moondragon," she said as she deliberately dropped her head slightly and then looked up at him from under her eyelashes. Gods, I would have to pick today to be dressed so conservatively. Nothing low-cut or high-cut on me today. Damn. Oh well, probably a good thing. He might be a little conservative too.

“Cybele. Isn’t that the name of a Greek goddess?”

“Sort of.” Cybele hesitated. She knew she had a tendency to overwhelm people with too much information and the last thing she wanted was to see him start to edge away. “She’s actually a Phrygian goddess from Asia Minor.” She beamed up at him. “But, unlike you, most people have never even heard of her.”

They stood there looking at each other and smiling. Cybele wound her finger around one of the curls in her hair, pulling it out and letting it spring back.

“This is where you’re supposed to give me your name.”

“Ahhh. Of course. My name is Gabriel Anderson but my friends call me Gabe.”

“Gabe. After the archangel.” She moved a step closer to him. “Say, did you ever see the movie *The Prophecy* starring your namesake? It’s all about the angels fighting the war that began in heaven with the fall of Lucifer, only this time the fighting has come down to earth.”

“I did. It’s one of my favourite movies. Christopher Walken does a great job playing me.”

“Funny.” She arched her back ever so slightly. “It’s actually one of my favourite movies too. I love the way biblical mythology becomes such a literal presence in contemporary human society.” Oh yeah. He’s definitely interested. Think I’ve almost hooked him. “I thought the special effects were great – although seeing the battlefields in heaven were deeply disturbing.”

“Me too.” Gabriel moved a step closer towards Cybele. “It actually reminded me of *Paradise Lost* when Milton describes the inventions of war that the good and bad angels came up with during their war in heaven.”

“Wow. I love *Paradise Lost* too.”

“Oh, I think the sequel is called *Paradise Regained*.”

Laughing, Cybele said, “I know. I meant...”

“I know. I was just playing with you,” he laughed back.

Okay. Time to close the deal. Look available but not needy. “So, Gabe, what do you do here?”

“I work as one of the support staff. I’m actually trying to gain experience in this area before I go back to school this fall to get a degree in Recreational Studies. And what do you do?”

Oh shit. I set myself up for that one all right. He might be scared off if I mention the cult. I’ll just gloss over it. “Oh, I’m in-between jobs right now, but I definitely see myself starting a small business soon and then who knows?” Her voice trailed off as she saw Janus approaching.

“Cybele, what are you doing here?”

Okay. Act innocent. He’ll forget we didn’t have plans. “Oh, I thought we were supposed to have dinner together tonight. Didn’t we decide that Friday?”

“Oh. I guess I forgot. Let’s go then.” He turned and nodded firmly to Gabe. “Gabriel.”

Gabe nodded back equally as firmly, “Janus.” Then he turned to Cybele, “It was nice meeting you. Perhaps I’ll see you the next time you come in.”

“That would be nice.” Cybele regretfully turned away and walked off with Janus. Damn. So close and yet so far. Oh well, the flirtation was off to a very promising start. Too bad Janus seemed to have such a stick up his ass around Gabriel.

Cybele sniffed exasperatedly at Janus. "So, what's up with you? Why the cold shoulder to Gabe? He seemed nice enough."

"Well, he's not." Janus stopped in his tracks and frowned at her. "He's definitely someone who doesn't know his place. He's always hanging around the soup kitchen and always asking the street kids questions. I don't like him snooping. He's after something."

Yeah. Cybele rolled her eyes. Clearly, he's after the Crown Jewels so cleverly concealed in a homeless shelter. "He says he's planning on going into recreational studies. He's probably just doing research."

"That's not his job," Janus said flatly. "You didn't tell him anything about me, did you?"

"No, O Supreme Overlord. Hard as it may be to imagine, your name did not come up in our conversation."

God. Doesn't she take anything seriously. "Cybele," Janus whispered angrily, "I shouldn't have to remind you that I don't advertise the fact that I'm gay here. I don't want to be tarred with the same brush as all those damn perverted priests and counsellors who molest children. You know, those pedophiles are usually mislabelled gay by the media and the other jackasses of the world."

Cybele reached out and touched his hand, "Hey, chill. I know that child molesters are not gays. They're pedophiles."

"YOU know that but most people don't bother to make the distinction." He began to walk away. "I just don't want trouble here."

Cybele scurried behind him to catch up. "You can't possibly think that Gabe is spying on you because he's trying to out you and get you fired?"

"Maybe." Janus slowed his steps to match hers. "Just watch what you say around him, okay."

"Okay." Cybele gently bumped against him. "I won't do anything that might hurt you. You know that." She clapped her hands together. "Now to more immediately pressing concerns. If I'm going to make you dinner, we'll probably have to go grocery shopping. Superstore's the closest, so tin man, into the lion's den, we shall go."

"Let's make this as quick as possible," said Cybele.

"A straight in and out."

"Does that line work for you when you're picking up dates?"

Janus smirked. "You'd be surprised."

"Lecher."

Forty-five minutes later as they walked into Janus' house, Cybele was still fuming. "Can you believe that lady who held up the whole line while she dithered around trying to decide what chocolate bar to buy? Gods. Just pick one and move along. It's all chocolate. Aargh. I'm never going to Superstore again on a Sunday."

Janus looked pseudo-solemnly at her. "That might be wise. I thought you were going to come to blows. For future reference, the next time you mutter under your breath that 'a Rom by any other form is still a Rom,' you might want to be a little quieter just in case the person you're insulting is a *Deep Space Nine* fan and knows you're calling her an idiot."

“Point taken. Now, pour me some wine and let’s get dinner started.”

“Your will be done.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

They chopped up vegetables to make a stir-fry and boiled a pot of rice. They sat down to eat dinner in front of the television and began to watch a TNN marathon of *Deep Space Nine*.

“Oh, wonderful,” said Cybele. “This is one of my favourite episodes. It’s the one where Major Kira goes through the Orb of Time to find out whether her mother really died in a labour camp or was Gul Dukat’s mistress and a collaborator. She ends up having to decide whether to forgive her mother for her betrayal or to kill her.”

Janus snorted. “Great. Nothing like learning from TV about how to live my life.” He bowed mockingly towards the screen. “Tell me, oh glowing box of mysterious lights and shadows, should I forgive Achates for sleeping around or cut him from my life?”

Cybele waved her fork at him admonishingly. “Gods, you can’t still be thinking that Achates was ever unfaithful. He’s as loyal to you as Spock is to Kirk or Robin is to Batman.” She calmly swallowed another forkful of food. “Not that they were ever having an affair – but, you know what I mean.”

“I don’t think so.” Janus leaned back and continued eating. “He keeps finding excuses not to spend the night and when we’re together he never says anything.” Janus put down his fork and slowly pushed the plate away. “I think he’s found someone else and he just doesn’t have the guts to tell me.”

“Maybe.” Cybele passed him a napkin and indicated that he should wipe a spot on his face. “Have you thought that: maybe...”

“What?” Janus asked warily.

Cybele looked away from him a little guiltily. “Maybe he thinks that you’re the one having the affair.”

Janus balled up his napkin and threw it down on the table. “You didn’t tell him about that time I was drunk and...?”

“No.” Cybele shook her head vehemently. “Of course not.” She gnawed her lower lip. I’m sure I never let anything slip. Gossip just gets around. This is Winnipeg not Toronto. There are no secrets here. Yep. “But he’s not an idiot. He might be sensing it or someone else might have seen you at Ganymede’s, buying drinks for other guys, and told him.”

“Maybe.” Janus frowned. She’s not looking me in the face. She better not have...Damn. She’s such a gossip.

“Look.” Cybele looked up from contemplating her plate and started slightly when she realized how intently Janus was staring at her. Damnit. I didn’t let anything slip. Why does no one ever believe me? She coolly continued. “Why don’t you just talk to him and find out what’s going on. If it’s over, put a period to the relationship, and move on.”

“Thanks, Judge Judy.” God. She’s lucky she’s my best friend or I might really be pissed at her.

“And next time, practice monogamy.” Cybele winked. “It’s really not a dirty word.”

“Yes, mother.” Yep. She’s damn lucky I don’t hold grudges.

“Not to change the subject, Janus,” Cybele said hesitantly, “but, have you given any more thought to the web business and cult?”

“Were you really serious about that? I thought you were just blowing smoke.”

“Nope. Just burning incense.” She pushed her plate away and began to dab at her face with a napkin. “But I am serious about getting into the magic and religion business. It’s a growing market.” She stood up and began to pace in front of the television. “You see, people want spirituality, but they don’t want the bureaucracy that comes with most organized religions. So starting a cult that doesn’t require members to follow any strict rules or give up anything they don’t want to, is just a brilliant idea.” She thumped her hand on the television. “We’ll seduce them with the thrill of freedom.”

Janus cracked his knuckles. “No Lent, eh. Everything would be just one big Carnival.”

Cybele put her hands on her hips. “Well, which one would you rather be a part of?”

“Touché.” He leaned forward and began to listen more intently. This crazy idea actually seems to have some possibility. “So, how would this business of yours work?”

Good. I think I might have hooked him. He’s starting to take me seriously. “Look. You already have a sideline business growing herbs in your greenhouse and selling them to Winnipeg restaurants, right? Well, all you have to do is expand that and start growing things like damiana, coltsfoot, and angelica. We can use them in amulets, sachets, poppets, and as ingredients for our ritual fires.”

“I do have a lot of experience,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ve helped Achates design websites for his business in my spare time. And we could always order other herbs we

might need over the net until we can start growing them in sufficient quantities.” He began to drum his fingers on the table. “You know, this really could work.”

Cybele plopped down in front of him. “Yes. It will work.” She leaned forward eagerly. “We both understand how people tick. How hard could it be to create rituals that satisfy their innermost wants and desires?”

Wow. I can’t believe Cybele is making this insane idea actually sound sane. Janus placed his hands behind his head and lounged back against the couch. “This could be a lot of fun. You know, I’ve always wanted to be God.”

“Hey.” Cybele slapped him gently on the knee. “Don’t forget this is a partnership. Gods, PLURAL.” She paused. “I’m thinking in terms of a *hieros gamos*, never consummated for the obvious reasons.”

“Yeah, the gay thing. There’s always the option of bi.” He laughed. “But I would have to be drunker than I’ve ever been and maybe a little high too.”

She smirked. “Although I’m clearly flattered at the thought of how drunk you’d have to be, I don’t think so. Let’s just say that you’ve dipped your wick into too many places for my tastes.”

They sang together to the tune of Frère Jacques. “Wear a condom. Wear a condom. It protects. It protects. Johnny didn’t wear one. Now he’s got a sore one. Ding Dang Dong. Ding Dang Dong.”

“Gods, Janus, I can’t believe we still remember that. Everything seemed so much simpler in elementary school.”

“I know.” He stood up and began to crack his back.

Gods. Cybele shuddered. I hate when he does that. It’s such a revolting sound.

Janus looked down affectionately at her. "Look, your idea really does sound great. I just need some time to think about it. Selling magical charms and potions on the internet is not such a big deal – with the mark-up, we could make a killing. But, being associated with a cult could damage my professional reputation if I ever finish my Master's. And then there's Achates. You know how strait-laced he is. He might not be too happy about it. He already thinks you're a bad influence on me."

"What! You're kidding." Cybele jumped up. "Why does he think that?"

"He thinks I spend too much time with you, that I value your opinion more than his. And he thinks you're a bit of a whacko." Janus paused for effect. "I believe his exact words were 'damn tree-hugging hippie.'"

Cybele snorted incredulously. "That bastard. How dare he quote *South Park* and Cartman against me?" She began to tap her foot angrily. "I AM Cartman. You know, the regular evil one. Not the goody two-shoes who comes through from the alternative universe with the facial hair. You know." She gestured towards Janus. "In the episode that's a parody of the *Star Trek* one where we meet the evil Spock and Kirk."

"Yep. I remember." Janus nodded solemnly. She's such a firecracker. "You definitely want to be the evil Cartman without the facial hair. Or the evil Kira that Major Kira meets when she and Dr. Bashir have that wormhole accident." He sighed pseudo-wistfully. "She was seriously hot in that bathtub scene."

"Funny. You're gay remember." Cybele grimaced. "I'm seriously pissed now and F.Y.I., I'm not a hippie either, I'm a pagan. There's a huge difference."

"Really." Janus shook his head in mocking encouragement. "Do tell."

Cybele looked sharply at him. "Hippies." She paused deliberately. "Believe in peace and love." She took a deep breath and expelled it in a furious rush of air. "Flower power and all that crap. Probably because THAT movement sprouted in California. Land of the Eternal Childhood. But PAGANS understand that everything comes with a price." She looked over at Janus to see if he was still paying attention. He seemed to be focussed on cracking his knuckles again, but she continued anyway. "If you want power, you take it." She shook her finger warningly at him. "Just don't be a whiner when it comes to paying the piper."

Janus looked up once he heard her stop talking. "No tree-hugging, eh?"

"Oh, I've hugged my share of trees." Remembering the experience calmed her down and she smiled. "It was actually a very restorative experience. There is a certain sense of freedom and peace that comes with wrapping your arms around the trunk of a tree and just pressing your body against it as hard as you can."

Janus' head shot up and he began to pay attention to what she was saying. "Wow, Cyb, sounds pretty sexual to me. Getting all hot and bothered by a tree, were we?"

Jackass. Cybele pointedly ignored him and continued on with her reminiscing. "A blissful melding of two into one." Then she returned back to the present with a vengeance. "But hippies always forget that old Gaea can be one heartless bitch. Spend a little time wandering lost in the woods as she attacks you and tries to reduce you to fertilizer." She snorted. "You won't be singing kumbayas very long." She paused to make sure Janus would get the point. "In this world, Gaea's the predator and we're the prey."

Janus looked puzzled. "I thought we were the ones destroying nature. Sort of makes Gaea our bitch then, doesn't it."

Aargh. It's like talking to a brick wall. "No!" she shouted. "If we're stupid enough to destroy what gives us life, we're only killing ourselves. She can go on without us – we can't go on without her."

Janus walked over and patted her on the shoulder. "Wow. That's really deep."

"Knee-deep in bullshit, eh?"

"Oh, we're definitely talking over our heads." He began to walk towards the kitchen. "In fact, I think we'll need some fruit of the vine to wash it down."

Cybele followed him. "Just as long as it wasn't strained through your fruit of the loom."

"Funny." Janus poured out two glasses of wine and handed her one.

Cybele took a long sip. "Ah. The nectar of the gods." She ran her finger aimlessly over the rim of her glass. "Seriously though, I'm a little upset that Achates has such a low opinion of me. I guess I'm not as good a judge of character as I thought."

Janus raised his glass in a toast to her. "It doesn't matter what he thinks. I like you and I would choose you over him any day. That's probably why he never made me choose."

She gently tapped her glass against his. "That's sweet but maybe that's why you're having problems."

Janus took another long sip. "Oh, it will work out. He'll come to his senses."

"Yep. Everything happens for the best, in this, the best of all possible worlds."

"Comedian. Hey, it's getting late. We better call it a night."

“Yeah.” Cybele tossed back the rest of her wine. “I should probably get up bright and early tomorrow and not work on my thesis.”

Janus put his glass down. “Come on,” he said, “I’ll drive you home.”

“Great.” Cybele yawned. “Time to put the genie back into her bottle.”

Gabe Anderson looked carefully around the foyer of the Loaves and Fishes. Good. It was completely deserted. Everyone must have gone over to the residential area in the back. Lights out would begin in five minutes, at eleven p.m. Maybe he should wait until then just to be on the safe side. He stood in the shadows watching the minutes pass on the clock on the wall. It was so quiet he could hear the sound of his own heavy breathing. He smiled wryly to himself. What could he possibly be afraid of? Employees had better things to do with their life than come to work this late on a Monday evening.

Yes. It was exactly eleven p.m. Time to begin. He moved down the dark hallway, carefully moving his little penlight. Don’t want to attract the attention of the police or anyone in the residential house. Have them think I’m a burglar. He chuckled softly. Especially, since I am about to do a little break and entering. Thank God for the talents that come from a misspent youth. He paused. I wonder if that Cybele Moondragon had a misspent youth. She looked like quite the character. Cute. Smart. Funny. Purple hair. Someone he definitely wanted to get to know better. Too bad she was a friend of Janus’. Doesn’t know how to pick her friends, I guess. Ahh. Here we are.

Gabe stopped in front of the locked door to Janus’ office where he held his counselling sessions for the street kids. He held the penlight using his lips as he bent

over the door with two metal skewers he had slipped in his pocket earlier when he was in the kitchen. He placed the skewers in the lock and started to jiggle them. Let's see if I still got the touch. Slowly, he felt a little give. Yes. Still got the magic touch. He pushed the door open and removed the skewers from the lock. He slipped them in his pocket as he carefully walked into the office. Good. The streetlight from outside shone brightly enough that he didn't have to worry about stumbling into anything.

Let's find out if you're as aboveboard as you seem, Janus. He walked over to the file cabinet and tried it. It slid open easily. Forgot to lock it, did you? He sat down on the floor and began to flip through a stack of files that had been held together with a rubber band. Hmmm. Tan Talus' file. That's strange. Janus doesn't seem to keep his files in alphabetical order. Wonder why? Gabe skimmed the comments: *braggart, very easy to manipulate for a twenty-two year old, quite stupid – probably lost too many brain cells sniffing glue and smoking dope*. Gabe shook his head. Aaah. The compassionate counsellor. Next, we have Ardiaeus Peters. *Nineteen years old*. Nice. *An easily manipulated bully who likes to play with matches*. Ixion Smith, come on down. *Twenty-one years old*. Hmmm. *Most definitely a mindless follower who will do whatever he is told*. Wow. Janus, the caring healer, an oxymoron. Why do you even come here to offer your services? Your contempt for these kids fairly jumps off the page. What's driving you? You're a man who walks around like he's hiding something big. Something illegal, maybe? He looked down at the next file in his hand: Ajax Lister. *Twenty years old*. *Whiner*. *Completely malleable*. *Will always go to the winning...*

Gabe's head snapped up. What's that? It sounds like someone is coming into the building. Damn.

He quickly gathered up the files and jammed them back into the filing cabinet. He slipped the penlight into his pocket and made it to the door just as the hallway light switch went on and framed him inside the doorway.

“What the hell are you doing in my office?” demanded Janus and headed straight for Gabe.

Gabe’s mind raced as he tried to think of a plausible excuse. Calmly, he replied, “Chill, Janus. I’m just doing my job and making sure everything is secured before I leave the building.”

“Really? And that includes breaking into my office.” Janus deliberately moved to block Gabriel from leaving the room. “If you were looking for drugs, I’m not that kind of doctor.”

Annoyed, Gabriel deliberately spoke to Janus as if he was an idiot. “It’s actually quite simple, Janus. I was working late when I thought I heard a noise. I thought some of the kids had snuck back in.” He paused. “I wanted to CATCH them so I came down the hallway without turning on the light. I couldn’t see anyone, but as I was about to leave, I noticed your door wasn’t completely closed.”

Janus shook his head dismissively. “I always shut it before I leave.”

“Well, I guess this time you didn’t. I was just double checking your office hadn’t been broken into when I heard a noise and came out to find you here.”

Janus rocked back and forth on his heels. “And I’m supposed to believe that?”

Gabriel moved closer to Janus and stood directly in front of him. “I really don’t give a damn whether you believe me or not. It’s the truth. Something, even you, in your clearly PARANOID state should understand. Maybe NEXT time you should double

check that you've shut your door before you leave. So, I don't have to do your job for you."

Janus snarled. "Who the hell do you think you are, talking to me like that?"

"Look. I've been up since 6 a.m. working here and I'm too tired to put up with the third degree. Take a pill or get laid. Just leave me the hell alone. That's the last time I'll do you a favour." Gabe moved closer towards Janus who reluctantly moved out of the way to let him pass.

Janus stalked into his office and flipped on the light switch. He quickly looked around but could not find anything that seemed out of place. He walked over to the filing cabinet and tried it. Damn. I must have left it unlocked unless. He turned his head toward the doorway. Could Gabriel have broken into his office hoping to find something to out him? Was he trying to threaten him with the comment about getting laid? Not that Matthew would fire him if he found out but things would change. He might have more trouble getting the kids to trust him. Too many incidents with priests and altar boys had poisoned the environment. Damn pedophiles. Put them in jail and throw away the key. They were the one group that never seemed to benefit from therapy. Habitual offenders. Bastards.

God. Was he being paranoid? Had he not shut his door tightly enough when he left? Damn that Gabriel. Always snooping around. What was he up to?

Damn. Gabe closed the front door firmly and leaned up against it. He couldn't believe he had been caught by Janus. Why the hell had he come back anyway? Just his luck. Now getting the inside 411 on what might be going on at the shelter would be

much harder to find. Matthew Cain couldn't possibly be as perfect as he seemed. Not in this day and age. Not if he hired someone as cold hearted as Janus to be a counsellor. No. He just had to keep digging. The public had a right to know how and where their tax money was going.

"Janus, is everything okay? I thought I saw a light on in here. You're working very late tonight."

Janus looked up, startled. "Matthew, I didn't hear you come in. I guess I was just thinking about something else."

Matthew leaned against the doorway. "Anything I can help you with? You're not having problems with one of the kids, are you?"

"Oh, no. They're fine." Janus pushed himself up from the filing cabinet and walked towards his desk. "It's just that when I came back to get my wallet, which I had forgotten in my desk drawer, all the lights were out, and I saw Gabriel coming out of my office."

Matthew moved further into the room. "Oh. That's kind of strange. What did he say?"

Janus began to drum his fingers on his desk. "He claimed he had heard a noise and was just trying to sneak up on whoever was making it."

Matthew frowned. "That's a pretty reckless thing to do – to try and surprise a potential burglar."

"He said he thought it was just kids messing around."

"Well, don't you always lock your door when you leave?"

Janus shrugged. "I thought I had but Gabriel said the lock hadn't caught and the door was ajar."

"Is anything missing?"

"No. It's just that I didn't like Gabriel's attitude when I asked him what he was doing. He seemed a little too defensive and hostile."

Matthew sighed. "Well, I'll speak to him about the proper procedures he should follow if he thinks there might be intruders in the building. And I'll speak to him about his attitude. You had every right to be concerned when you saw him in your office. But, Janus, try to cut him some slack. He's new here but he's a hard worker. He just doesn't know all the rules yet."

Janus stood up. "You're right. It's been a long day and I guess I'm just a little tired."

Matthew flipped him a quick salute. "Go home counsellor and get some sleep. I'm sure we'll see you soon enough tomorrow."

"Good idea." Janus took one last look around the office, grabbed his wallet, and followed Matthew out the door.

"You know, maybe Achates had a SMALL point when he said we spend too much time together," Cybele said as she chopped vegetables up for the side dish.

Janus tried to hide the concern in his voice. "What do you mean? Would you rather be doing something else?" God. Is she hanging out with me because she thinks Achates is about to dump me? Have I become her pity friend?

Gods. What's up with Janus tonight? He looks like he's about to jump out of his skin. Patiently, she explained. "Well, it's Tuesday evening and instead of going out on a date, I'm here having dinner with you."

Janus took a quick gulp of his wine. "Well, your last boyfriend was such an idiot, you're better off here with me anyway. I can't believe you dated someone with such a pathetic sense of humour." He snorted. "And, it's not like Achates is here for me to spend time with. He's still in Toronto."

Cybele raised her glass in acknowledgement. "Good point." She took a quick sip of wine. "Besides, I'm still mad at him about the hippie comment."

Janus tossed a tomato at her. "But, it's not like you're holding a grudge or anything."

Cybele caught it and neatly chopped it into eighths. "No, of course not." She popped a piece in her mouth. "If I was holding a grudge, I'd probably say something like, Achates is so cheap, he'd pry Christ off the cross to get the nails. But since I'm not holding a grudge, I won't say that."

Janus laughed. "Vanderhaeghe, right?"

"Yep."

Janus reached over and grabbed a piece of tomato from her. "Achates doesn't have much of a sense of humour either, so don't say that in front of him." He squirted the tomato at her.

Cybele bobbed away and then threw a kitchen towel at him. "I know. That's why it is so funny."

Janus ducked and the towel fell on the floor.

Cybele placed her elbows on the counter and leaned forward. "So, Janus, are you going to tell me what's bothering you or are we just going to pretend nothing's wrong?"

Nonchalantly, Janus picked up the towel and tossed it into the sink. "What makes you think something's bothering me?"

"Besides the fact that you've pulverized the hell out of the chicken that you're supposed to be cutting into cubes, oh nothing."

Janus looked down at the flattened chicken breasts. "Oops." He paused and took a sip of wine. "I think Gabriel might have broken into my office and searched it yesterday evening."

Gabriel? Gods. I thought he was still obsessing over Achates. "Okay." Mr. Paranoid. "What makes you think that?"

Janus moved away from Cybele and began to wash the chicken off his hands. "Well, I went back to my office to get my wallet and saw him coming out of it. He had no right to be in there."

Cybele straightened up and crossed her arms. "What did he say when you confronted him about it?"

"Oh, some nonsense about hearing a noise, coming down the hallway, and seeing my door open. He said he was just checking there was no one inside."

"Well, was anything missing?"

Janus looked around for a clean towel to dry his hands. "No."

Cybele pulled open the drawer full of towels and tossed one to him. "Then couldn't he have been telling the truth? Maybe the door just hadn't shut properly. He could have been just playing the Good Samaritan. He doesn't have to be the villain of

this piece.” She slammed the drawer shut. “Or he could just be a snoop. Remember on *Seinfeld* when Jerry searched his date’s medicine cabinet and found that antibiotic cream that was for some kind of weird rash?”

Janus laughed. “Oh, yeah. He was so freaked out he ran away before he could sleep with her.”

“And then later he finds out it was for her cat only now she’s too pissed off to sleep with him.”

“Yep. Poor Jerry. He should have made sure what pussy it was for before he confronted her.”

“Stop!” Cybele giggled. “Those jokes only work if you’re a brassy haired Mrs. Slocum and we’re in *Are You Being Served?*”

“God. I love the British.” Janus took another sip of wine. “But back to Gabriel, the wolf in sheep’s clothing. I don’t trust him and I want to know what he’s up to.”

“Okay.” Cybele began to tap her finger on the rim of her glass. “Say he did search your office. So what? What could he possibly have expected to find? Love letters? A male blow-up doll? A Gay Pride button?”

“Very funny.”

She took a quick sip from her glass. “Look. I’m not saying you shouldn’t be upset he was in your office but what’s the worst that can happen? He’ll find out you’re gay and blab it to everyone? So what. You’ve worked at the Loaves and Fishes for five years, first as a youth volunteer, then as a counsellor. You think Matthew doesn’t suspect you might be gay? Do you really think he would care?”

Janus began to drum his fingers on the counter. "I just don't want to be gossiped about."

"Duh. No one does." She took another sip of wine. "Remember Hermia."

"Vaguely. Wasn't she that girl in your department who was such a terrible gossip and snoop?"

"Oh, yeah." She gossiped about everybody and what she didn't know, she made up."

"Charming individual." Janus picked up the chicken and threw it into the wok.

"A true joy to be around." Cybele took another sip of wine. "But, actually, she was just a very insecure person who used gossip as a weapon to gain power and prestige over others."

"Whatever happened to her?"

Cybele casually leaned across him and tossed some basil in the wok. "Oh, it took several months, but she pretty much alienated everyone. No one could trust that she wouldn't be gossiping about them too. So, they basically shut her out. She was too dangerous to know. A viper always ready to strike."

"Sounds like she'd be fun at parties."

"Actually, she was QUITE the party animal." Cybele took another sip of wine. "Hermia would drink like a fish and then tell everyone what she really thought of them."

Janus tossed in the vegetables and quickly flipped them. "That actually sounds quite funny."

"It was a hoot." Cybele sat down with a tired sigh. "What was even funnier is that despite being such a gossip herself, she was absolutely paranoid that everyone was

gossiping about her. She clearly never watched the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode where Jonathan is in the school tower with a rifle about to kill himself.”

“I remember.” Janus turned to face Cybele. “He’s upset because no one wants to be friends with him. And Buffy tells him that people aren’t deliberately snubbing him. They’re just too consumed with their own pain to notice his.”

“Right. People are really too obsessed with their own lives to care about the lives of others.” She got up to refill her wine glass. “So, while it’s never pleasant to be gossiped about, people know the real you. Your true friends won’t believe what they hear and what do you care what strangers think?”

He smiled at her. “You’re right. My reputation will do my talking for me.”

“Plus, you really don’t know for sure that Gabe is like Hermia. He might not be a gossip. Be on your guard but don’t make a pre-emptive strike against him. That’s what I think. Gotta give him a chance to prove himself.”

“It is the Canadian way.” Janus held out his glass for Cybele to top it off.

“Yep.” Cybele sat back down. “We’re the Federation of the twenty-first century.”

“Then who’s the Dominion?”

“Oh. Too easy.” Cybele snickered. “Our neighbours to the south. The ones who live in perpetual fear that someone smaller and less powerful than them will attack them. Talk about paranoia.”

Janus turned off the stove and began to dish out the stir-fry. “Strange, how in all those apocalyptic movies, when their society breaks down into lawlessness and anarchy, Canada is always the haven of safety, the place people want to escape to.”

"I know." Cybele got up to grab a plate. "Remember *Barb Wire* and *Red Dawn*." She shook her head in disbelief. "Yep, they're odd ducks. Love'em or leave'em, I guess."

They sat down and began to eat.

Janus waved his fork at her. "So, have you convinced any others to join your coalition of the willing?"

"Oh, you mean the blind leading the blind?" She paused. "Well, as a matter of fact, Cassie HAS agreed to support me in my crusade to bring a new religion to the world that will usher in a new era of peace and salvation." She sighed dramatically.

"Although, you know her..."

"Yep. Always the voice prophesying gloom and doom. Too bad no one ever listens to her."

"I know." Cybele rolled her eyes. "Especially as she has this uncanny ability of always being right." She shook her head. "Well, she's got to be wrong sometimes and that time is now."

Janus put down his fork and turned towards her. "You know, Cyb, I've been thinking."

Cybele winked. "Be careful you don't pull a muscle."

"Funny." Janus stood up and began to stretch. "You know, I really think we could make a good business out of selling magical stuff on the net. As long as we make it clear, they're only for entertainment, don't guarantee results, and don't sell to minors, we should be able to make a profit and avoid getting sued."

“Well, that’s great.” Cybele pushed her plate away and gently patted her stomach. Good stuff. She stood up. “We definitely don’t want to be like poor Madame Rio who ran that psychic hotline on television and ended up getting indicted for fraud. So unfair. She always ran that disclaimer about it being entertainment, but I guess she screwed herself by always insisting she was a real psychic.”

“Yeah.” Janus turned towards her. “Speaking of indictments, I’m still not sure about starting the whole religion thing. Despite L. Ron Hubbard’s success, I’m still a little dubious. I think I need to run that one by Achates before I commit to anything.”

“But, you’re okay with the web business, right?”

“Oh yeah, I’m in for the magic show. It should be a wild ride.” Just hope that Achates doesn’t throw a fit about it. Oh, screw him, if he doesn’t. That unfaithful bastard. I’ll show him that I can get by just fine without him. He took another gulp of wine. “We can do it fifty-fifty. We’ll pool our resources and come up with the money for that.”

Cybele jumped up and down. “Yippee! I knew you’d agree. It’s going to be such a blast.”

Janus smiled wryly. “Hopefully, not literally,” he said.

Cybele gave him a fast hug. “Oh, don’t be such a party pooper.”

Janus hugged her back and then exaggeratedly wiggled his finger at her. “Just don’t let it get around that I’m associated with something as off-the-wall as this. I don’t really want to be linked with something this pagan.” He moved slightly away from her. “I’m not quite the free spirit that you are.”

Cybele grabbed his finger and lightly shook it. "That's okay. We'll take baby steps. I have faith in you. One day, you'll be able to express the inner pagan that your ego keeps suppressing."

"That will be a good day." Even if hell might have to freeze over first.

"Hey, isn't that what Colonel O'Neill says after SG-1 has made an alliance with the Tok'ra, and the Tok'ra leader says one day, by working together, they will be able to defeat the Goa'uld?"

"You're right." He raised his glass. "We need to toast the new alliance we've just formed."

Cybele clinked her glass against his. "To the chagrin of fundamentalists of every stripe."

He solemnly looked over at her. "A new day has come."

"Oh my God!" Cybele swatted his head. "Don't start quoting Celine Dion now."

"My heart will go on..."

Cybele clapped her hand over his mouth. "That's my cue to leave. You can sing the show-tunes without me." She walked towards the door and paused. "I'm glad you're going to be part of my adventure. It wouldn't be the same without you."

Janus blew her a kiss and watched her through the window until she drove away.

Janus shook his head in frustration. God. Why does everyone try to duck out of work early on Friday afternoons? We all get stuck in the same traffic jam. And now I have to watch this stupid train keep moving backwards and forwards, one centimetre at a time. We definitely need an overpass here. Hurry up. I need to get home to get Achates'

welcome-back dinner ready. Let's see. Candles. Wine. Anything else from the grocery? No. Good. It's finally moving. Crossing rails are coming up. The car ahead of me is starting to move. Yes. We're going. Now I just need to get home and everything will be fine.

Janus took a last look around. Okay. The table was set. Everything was in its place. The wine was chilling in the fridge. Perfect. He heard a knock on the door. Strange. Why didn't Achates just use his key? Janus walked to the door and opened it. Achates stood there looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Hey, why didn't you use your key?"

"Guess I wasn't thinking. It's been a long week and I'm pretty tired."

"Well, I'm glad you're back. I missed you." Janus leaned towards Achates to kiss him. Achates stiffened ever-so-slightly and moved his head back so that Janus ended up kissing him on the cheeks instead of the lips.

Janus pulled back and looked questioningly at Achates. What the hell is going on? Am I some stranger to get a damn kiss on the cheek? Curtly, he said, "Why don't you come in? We may as well have dinner before it gets cold."

Achates pretended nothing was wrong. "Great. I'm starving." He brushed past Janus and walked inside. "So, what have you been up to while I've been gone?"

Janus followed behind him. "Working hard. Trying to get my thesis proposal to meet all those ethical hoops the Committee is making me jump through." He reached for his glass of wine. "But hey, it's always darkest before the dawn. Can't drag on much longer, right?"

Achates pointedly reached for the bottle and filled his own glass. "So, that's all you've been doing, slaving away on your thesis?"

"Well, I did see Cyb a few times this week, of course."

"Of course." Achates crossed his arms and leaned against the table. "So, what's the hapless adventurer up to now?"

Janus leaned against the counter and took another sip of wine. "She actually has a wonderful business idea that she wants me to go in on."

"Which is?"

Janus shrugged defiantly. "To set up an internet business that sells pagan supplies. You know - potions, oils, incense, and poppets. The usual."

Achates sneered. "How charming. But why stop there? Why not brooms and cauldrons, pointy noses and warts?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Janus straightened up. "Listen, we could actually make a good profit in pagan sales. It's a rapidly expanding market."

"Of course it is. The world is full of lunatics like your friend Cybele." Achates sniffed angrily. "I go away for a few days and you lose your mind. I can't believe you would ever consider going into business with her."

"Oh. My. God." Janus slammed his hand down on the counter. "This is not about Cybele. It's about trusting me and my judgement of what a good business investment this would be."

Achates growled. "Of course, it's about her. She has way too much influence over you."

Damnit. I can't believe he's picking a fight after everything I've done for him today. How ungrateful can one man be? Janus took a deep breath. "I know what I'm doing," he said coldly.

"Right." Achates began to pace back and forth angrily. "She's flighty, and when you're around her, you're flighty too. This week it's a magic shop. Next week she could decide to join the French Foreign Legion." He paused. "Oh wait. She doesn't like getting up early so that's out. How about joining Greenpeace so she can throw herself in front of French fishing boats and get sunk by the French navy." He took a gulp of wine. "Or even better, why doesn't she join Save Our Seas and ram Spanish trawlers that overfish in Canadian waters?"

"That's enough." Janus threw his hands up in the air. "Stop talking about her like that. What's your problem? I spend a lot of time and effort to make a nice meal for you and all you can do is criticize my best friend."

"Maybe." Achates paused for emphasis. "That's the problem in a nutshell."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe I'm tired of always feeling like the third wheel." Achates gestured into the air with his glass. "You clearly care more about her feelings than mine."

"That's ridiculous. Look, let's not fight. We've both had a long day. Let's just have a nice dinner and go to bed. We can talk about this in the morning."

Achates put his glass down and turned away from Janus. "I think we should talk about it now."

"Fine," Janus said flatly. "Talk."

“Damnit! I should be your best friend not her. Cybele should be the one feeling like a third wheel. Not me.”

Janus put his glass down and walked towards Achates. “So, what do you want me to do?”

Achates turned back towards Janus. “Stop spending so much time with her. Start spending more time with me and my friends.”

Janus stopped and sighed. “When? You’re always out of town on business. Do you think I should stay home waiting for you to come back and for my life to begin again?”

“Hey, I didn’t inherit money from my parents. I actually have to work for a living.”

“And I’m just some shiftless loafer who doesn’t? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

Achates glared. “You just refuse to see my point, don’t you?”

“You haven’t made a point. All you’ve done is complain that I don’t spend time with you and your friends.” Janus turned away from Achates and reached again for his glass of wine.

Achates roughly pulled out the kitchen chair and straddled it. “You spend more time with her than with me.”

“That’s not true.”

“When was the last time we went out with my friends?”

Janus gestured wildly with his glass. "Your friends are boring. All they do is talk about their work. They have no sense of adventure. No sense of embracing the unexpected."

Achates rocked his chair back and forth. "You've got to be shitting me. Have you lost your mind? Grow up, Janus. Lunacy is charming only in the very young."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You lose your mind when you're around her. Jesus, Janus, it's like she brainwashes you."

"What the hell do you mean – she brainwashes me? Do you think I'm some kind of moron?"

"Not a moron." Achates shook his head angrily. "You become a jackass. You act irreverently towards all the things which make our society work. You act like one of those damn anarchists who have no respect for anything or anyone." He paused. "You EMBARASS me."

"I EMBARASS you?" Janus paused and looked at Achates. "Why do you care so much about what people think of you? Don't you know that people are far more concerned with their own lives to concern themselves with yours? People live their lives so full of pain and self-doubt, they don't have time to be anything other than self-centred. Remember the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode when..."

"Damnit. Can't you see? This is exactly what I'm talking about. Life is not a damn television show. That's fantasy and this is reality. You act like you can't tell the difference."

“You’re so wrong.” Janus sank into a chair beside Achates. “Don’t delude yourself. Life is as much of a constructed reality as anything shown on TV.” He picked up the bottle of wine on the table and took a gulp. Yep. The shit’s finally going to hit the fan tonight. He sighed glumly. “Whether we are men dreaming we are butterflies or butterflies dreaming we are men, the one truth is that all life is an illusion. We are all wandering shades.” He patted Achates on the back and offered him the bottle.

Achates pushed it away without looking up.

Janus shrugged and took another swig. “I’ve just broken my shackles and left the cave and you’re still inside - shocked and awed by the smoke and shadows.”

Achates rubbed his forehead. “I can’t talk to you when you get like this, Janus. It’s like talking to a child.”

Janus carefully put the bottle back on the table. “This has nothing to do with Cyb. You’ve been using her as a scapegoat. You’ve had a bug up your ass ever since you walked through the door. Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on?”

Achates sighed heavily and ran his hand through his hair. “I didn’t want to get into this tonight but maybe it’s for the best. I’ve been thinking that I would like to run for political office one day and I need a partner I can count on not to do anything that would embarrass me or draw me into a scandal. As long as you’re hanging around Cybele, that’s not you.”

“What does that mean? If I stop seeing her, all will be well in the world again?” Janus reached for Achates and then pulled back. “Just be honest. Damnit. You’re having an affair.”

Achates stood up. "No. I'm not. But I just think our relationship has run its natural course. If you're honest with yourself, you'll know it's true."

"Bullshit." Janus stood up and angrily booted his chair across the floor. "You're having a goddamn affair. Someone you met on one of your so-called business trips."

"It's over. For God's sake, don't make this harder than it has to be. Let's just say our good-byes and walk away. We're both adults." Achates turned his back on Janus and walked towards the door.

"Wait. Don't go," Janus said tiredly.

Achates paused with his hand on the door knob. His body stiffened and then relaxed. He turned the handle and walked out.

Janus walked up behind him and closed the door very softly. He walked back into the kitchen and sat down. He looked at the perfectly set table full of food. He filled his plate and very coolly began to eat his dinner. He drank his glass of wine and then finished off Achates' glass. He stood up and blew out the candle centerpiece. He carried the dishes to the sink and scraped the uneaten food into the garbage. He threw the rest of the food into the garbage and put all the dishes into the dishwasher. He grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge, opened it, and walked out the sliding doors onto his deck. He sat down in the utter darkness of the evening and began to drink his beer.

He raised his beer bottle in a toast. Thank-you God. Who says you don't have a sense of humour? You have Achates break up with me. With me. He shook his head. And you put my best friend – the one person I trust and care for most in the world, in the body of a woman. Cheers. He sighed. I did love Achates. I just couldn't be the person he wanted me to be. Bastard.

He looked up at the starry sky and laughed. Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. How I wonder... what? Do you know your light is just a shadow of the giant you once were? Do you know that by the time we see your light, you are already dead? How's that for the meaning of life? We only become visible in death. Life's a bitch and then we die. Oh God. Now, I'm thinking in clichés. *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Time to go back inside and get very drunk. Why am I always left behind? Why couldn't he love me forever?

Those damn bells. Gods. I hate Sundays. Why doesn't everyone else understand the importance of sleeping in? Cybele dragged herself out of bed and got dressed. As she walked into the kitchen to make breakfast, her buzzer went off. Without first asking who it was, she pressed the button to let the visitor in. Wonder if it's for me or someone else? Could be a Jehovah's Witness. Other cities go by robins or bluebirds, but Winnipeg's first sign of summer is when we first start seeing Witnesses sprouting everywhere. Oh well. At least the *Watchtower* is something to read when I have a few minutes to kill. Better a watchtower than a clock or bell tower in a public square, I guess. Less semi-automatic fire. She laughed. Amazing how no one bothers me when I read religious propaganda on the bus. Maybe the next time someone wants to chat when I'm busy, I'll just pick a religion and start proselytizing. Could be fun.

There was a loud knock on the door.

Damn. They're at my door. Now listen, Cybele, she said firmly to herself. You can talk politely to them at the door, but whatever you do, don't let them cross the threshold or you'll never get rid of them. Remember what happened the last time. She

shuddered as memories of her last proselytizing experience washed over her.

Reluctantly, she went to open the door.

“Janus? What are you doing here? It’s not quite noon yet.”

“Oh, I couldn’t sleep very well, so I thought I’d come over bright and early to see what you were up to. I brought you a mochaccino from The Second Cup.”

“Normally,” she spoke through a yawn. “I’d say, beware Greeks bearing gifts, or is it gifts bearing Greeks? But I would love that mochaccino, so come right in.”

Janus came inside and sat down on her living room sofa. Cybele followed him and sat down on the opposite end.

Cybele saluted Janus with her cup. “So, what’s up, doc?”

Janus cracked his knuckles. “Well, good news, actually.”

“Great!”

“Yep.” Janus leaned forward and looked off into space. “I’ve decided that there’s nothing more in the world I’d rather do than start a cult with you.” He sighed. “You know, play Attis to your Cybele.”

“That’s.” Cybele paused uncertainly. “Wonderful.” Gods. He looks like someone shot his dog. Or would look if he had a dog. She looked dubiously at Janus.

“But what about Achates?”

Janus stood up and cracked his back. “Oh, I don’t think he would want to be your Attis. He really doesn’t like you, remember?”

“That’s not what I…” she stopped suddenly. “Okay, did you and Achates have a fight?”

"Not quite. We did break up but it was all scripted by Achates. I was there just as a member of the audience. I don't really want to talk about it now though, okay."

"Okay."

"That bastard. Do you know what he said to me?"

"Not yet. No."

Janus stood up and paced back and forth across the room. "He says that I don't know the difference between television and reality. He says that I embarrass him in front of all his big-shot friends because I continually see the world in terms of *Star Trek*." He stopped and fell back onto the couch. "Guess I should be more like him. Some humourless sour-face, severely lacking in *joie de vie*."

Cybele slid across the couch and put her arm around Janus. "Don't listen to him. The man's an idiot. Don't you remember what Tyr Anasazi once said on *Andromeda* to Dylan about that very thing?"

"No." Janus sunk his head into his hands. "What?"

Cybele patted him on the back. "He said that when you wake up one morning and the universe has gone totally insane, you can either accept the madness as your new reality, or you can exert your will upon the universe and remake it into the image you want. All you're doing is reinterpreting the world to make sense to you."

Janus looked up. "I'm just Socrates leaving the cave and Achates is the Athenian government trying to pull me back in."

"Right." Cybele jumped up and grabbed her coffee. "And the last thing you want is to let him because you can't survive in there. He'll make you drink hemlock." She raised her cup and toasted him.

Janus jumped up. "Damn good point."

"Yep. I'm just a fount of wisdom after drinking this much caffeine and chocolate so early in the morning."

"Just don't turn into a geyser. Remember the time I cracked you up in the car and when you started laughing, the Orange Crush you were drinking came out of your nose?"

"Shhh. That was never supposed to be mentioned again. All those damn bubbles actually hurt. How embarrassing." She yawned. "Hey, as long as you're here, why don't we start working on a pseudo Bible for our cult's beliefs?"

"Sure. I don't have anything better to do today." He sat down cross-legged on the floor. "So, Yoda, what should we have to believe in to belong to our little cult?"

Cybele looked slightly disconcerted as she tapped her coffee cup. Oops. Cardboard. Not too environmentally friendly. "Hmmm. Definitely a do-no-harm philosophy towards nature." She took a sip of coffee. "This won't mean not interacting with the environment but just not doing damage to it."

Janus looked up at her. "So, starting ritual fires will be okay..."

Cybele swatted him on the head. "Right, but burning down the forest will not be."

"Okay. But what about the great divide – carnivore or herbivore?" He stood up and thumped his chest. "Me-Tarzan. Me eat meat."

Cybele gave him a reproving look. "We can eat meat or we can choose not to. No rules – remember?" She pinched him. "This won't be a peace and love hippie cult. Remember, Cybele was an embodiment of Nature and we all know that Nature can be one scary bitch."

Janus threw his hands up in the air. "I surrender. No more hippie versus pagan diatribes, okay?" He nudged her. "Too bad we're not going to be hippies. It would have been fun to have Casper the Friendly Ghost in our rituals."

"No." Cybele pinched Janus a little harder than before. "Think Aeneas filling a pit with blood so he can talk to the ghosts from the Underworld."

"Gotcha."

Cybele took another sip of coffee and leaned back on her television. "I was also thinking about using some of what Yoda says to Luke on Dagobah in *Empire Strikes Back*."

"You mean about how the Force is around us everywhere and it's only how we use it that determines whether we stay in the light or go over to the dark side."

"Yep. If we substitute "energy" for "The Force," I think it would be more relevant and meaningful to our followers, don't you think?"

Janus drummed his fingers on top of the television. "Okay. But what about *Star Trek*?"

Cybele walked towards the window and looked out. She shook her head at the sight of the church. "Well, I was definitely thinking about using some of *Star Trek*'s beliefs about the principle of non-interference."

Janus walked towards her. "Good point. The last thing we want is a cult full of self-righteous meddlers. Then we'd be like most organized religions in the world already."

"It's not just that." She took a quick sip of her coffee. "Although I do hate meddlers." She turned her back to the window. "But the last thing we want is for some

of our followers to commit illegal acts in our name and then have the authorities come after us legally. We'll try to weed the whackos out. But you never know with people."

Janus smirked. "Well, I guess we'll know our cult's made it when we start splintering off in different factions and each one goes off to start a new interpretation of our basic message."

Cybele rolled her eyes. "Yep. That will be a good day. My ultimate spiritual progenitor will have achieved immortality again."

Janus yawned. "What about *Stargate*? Any ideas from that?"

Cybele sat down on the couch and leaned back with a sigh. "I'm not sure. *Stargate* relies pretty heavily on Egyptian mythology."

Janus curled up beside her. "Well, *Stargate Sg-1* uses Norse Mythology. It has the Asgard who turn out to be the Roswell aliens. They're the good guys."

"I know, but the only message the more advanced aliens seem to give is that knowledge is dangerous if it is given to a species that is not yet advanced enough to use it wisely. It's basically the Prime Directive rewritten."

"Yep." Janus grabbed a cushion and shoved it behind his back. "*Stargate Sg-1* is more a work in progress. A blueprint of where we are as a human race and our attempts to advance." He stretched out with a contented sigh. "We need a model for Shangri-La."

Becoming more interested in what he was saying, Cybele crossed her legs and leaned forward. "I WAS impressed with the episode when Apophis is badly injured and they capture him and they give him medical treatment instead of just torturing him for information and killing him."

"Colonel O'Neill wanted to."

Cybele poked Janus in the ribs. "But General Hammond said no. He said that Apophis had to be treated with all the rights of any other prisoner of war."

"True." Janus arched one eyebrow. "I guess if they had written that episode now, they would have declared him an unlawful combatant and done God knows what to him. And no one would have said a thing in protest. Cowed by American tactics of shock and awe. The genocide of political conscience."

Cybele crossed her arms and shook her head. "Kind of sad to think that within such a short time we've already regressed from that small ray of hope *Stargate SG-1* offered."

Janus groaned. "Great. Now I'm feeling depressed again. Got any strong coffee."

"Yeah." She stood up. "I'll go make some instant cappuccino."

Cybele made coffee and they sat on the couch drinking it.

Janus broke the silence. "So, what else have you come up with?"

"Well, I was thinking about the *Batman* movies. But with the exception of Poison Ivy, the personification of Nature's Wrath, I couldn't find any really strong matriarchal messages."

"Hey, what about Catwoman?" Janus gave an exaggerated leer. "She sure looked hot in that black leather."

Cybele kicked him. "Well, she was an example of female empowerment, but a little too much on the dark side, don't you think?"

Janus sighed. "You're right. *Batman* really is just a patriarchal reinterpretation of Judaeo-Christian mythology."

Slightly exasperated, Cybele tapped the rim of her cup. "I know. The Penguin being put into a cradle and floating into the sewers – clearly meant to represent Moses. And the kidnapping of all the first-born sons of Gotham. Puh-lease. I'm surprised they didn't have a literal Angel walking around Gotham. And Poison Ivy was also a rip-off of Lilith – the hard-assed feminist who MUST be cast out of the ironic Eden that is Gotham."

Janus leaned forward. "You know Catwoman also makes a neat Jezebel figure."

Cybele rolled her eyes. "Most sexually powerful women who are also cast as villains could probably be interpreted that way." She rolled her cup between her palms. "But that's not helpful to us because I want a matriarchy where strong women are not villains."

Janus patted her knee comfortingly. "Good point. No villains, male or female, in our cult."

"Yeah." Cybele bit her lip. "We really don't want another Heaven's Gate or whatever the name was of that weird cult where they all committed suicide because they wanted to go off somewhere in a spaceship."

"You're right." Janus rubbed the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. Although intellectually, I'm a little curious about how all the players interacted to produce the kind of atmosphere where that idea seemed reasonable."

"I know." Cybele rubbed her forehead. "I guess they just gave up their sense of individuality and became absorbed into something larger than themselves. You know, like what Jung believes." She leaned forward. "Or like on *Deep Space Nine* when Dukat

took over the cult of the Pah Wraiths and then started sleeping with that Bajoran woman who had a Cardassian baby.”

“Yeah. At first he said it was a miracle of the Prophets and then when it looked like she might tell the truth to her husband, Dukat tried to kill her.”

“Exactly.” Cybele jumped up and began to pace back and forth. “And to prevent the truth coming out, Dukat tried to convince the whole cult to commit suicide.”

“Yep. But Kira stopped them before they could.”

“I know.” Cybele tapped her foot worriedly. “But they were ready to die. And that Vedek took the poison and died anyway.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “That’s why it is so important not to have those kinds of elements in our cult. I don’t want those kinds of deaths on my conscience. This is all about fun and profit. Not death.”

Janus saluted her with his cup. “Just eat, drink, and be merry, eh?”

“Hey.” Cybele tossed a cushion at him. “Doesn’t that end, for tomorrow we die?”

Janus ducked and picked the cushion off the floor. “But that’s tomorrow.” He threw the cushion back at her. “The future is always in flux.”

Cybele tossed the cushion back on the couch. “Don’t forget. We never step in the same pile of shit twice.”

They laughed. Cassie’s bedroom door opened and she walked yawning into the room.

“What’s going on in here? You two are making enough racket to wake the dead.”

“And behold, Persephone enters in all her glory,” said Cybele.

Cassie stuck out her tongue. “The Queen of the Underworld, I’m SO flattered.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure your last boyfriend Brahma said you were a swallower,” Cybele replied. “Or maybe it was wallower?”

“Funny.” Cassie walked tiredly into the kitchen. “You clearly have had too much caffeine this morning.”

“Hey, we’re sorry if we woke you up,” interjected Janus. “We should have been quieter.”

“It’s okay.” Cassie leaned up against the wall and stretched. “I had to work late at the shop last night decorating a wedding cake for one of those Bridezillas. You know. One of those, ‘I want the icing to be in off-white but that’s not the right shade of off-white, it has to be the perfect off-white.’ Gods. Everyone knows colours look different in artificial lighting than in natural light. Good thing the figurine of the groom has a ring through his nose. He’ll be wearing it for the rest of his life.”

“Well, as long as you’re not bitter, right?” gently mocked Cybele.

“Never.” Cassie started to rummage in the fridge. “Hey, you guys want some food. I’m feeling in a cooking mood.”

Cybele patted her stomach. “Well, I’m hungry and you know Janus never turns down a hot meal.”

“Never.” Janus walked towards the kitchen. “I always eat food whenever offered.”

“So, what else have you guys been up to?” asked Cassie as she began to prepare brunch.

Cybele clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, great news! Janus has agreed to be a full partner in my cult." Her voice trailed off. "Oh, and Janus and Achates have broken up."

"Yep." Janus took a long sip of coffee. "Guess he's off to fertilize greener pastures."

"Hey, do you remember that pasture party we all went to near Starbuck?" asked Cybele.

"Yeah. In high school. We all got completely wasted and were introduced to the fine art of cow tipping," replied Cassie.

"Never again," answered Janus. "I felt like a complete monster when I saw that cow fall over and heard her confused moo."

Cybele agreed. "Oh, me too. Good thing those PETA Nazis weren't around that night."

Cassie shook her head fondly. "Yeah, you two really ran away from that cow pretty fast."

"Hey, cows are big and scary." Janus laughed. "I much prefer them on my plate than in the flesh."

Cybele smirked. "So speaks Tarzan – the carnivore."

Janus glared at her over his cup. "Good one." He paused. "We, who are about to eat death, salute you." He casually flipped her the finger.

Cybele opened her mouth to reply, but Cassie broke in.

"Playtime is over kids. Brunch is ready. Eggs, toast." She winked at Janus and Cybele. "But, since we're out of cow, you'll have to settle for bacon."

Cassie sat down at the table and started to eat. "So, have you guys actually decided where you are going to hold your cult meetings?"

Cybele looked over at Janus. "Janus has that little guest house on his property. I was thinking it would be a good cult house. And then we could use the grounds to perform our outdoor rituals. We'd have complete privacy."

Janus sat down beside Cassie. "Yeah. We can use it as the office for our web business too. That way I don't have a lot of strangers in my actual house and I get to keep my privacy."

Cassie, in spite of herself, chimed in. "And if the police ever decide to raid your property, they'll need warrants for both houses before they can search them."

Cybele softly kicked Cassie's knee under the table. "Ah, Cassie. Always the optimist."

"I try." Cassie kicked Cybele's knee back a little harder. "So, how are you planning to decorate this little cult house of yours?"

Oblivious to the *sub rosa* exchange, Janus replied, "Well, we definitely need a ritual meeting room – and the unfinished basement might be the best place for that."

Grimacing subtly, Cybele rubbed her knee. "We should probably paint the walls in strong, powerful colours, like red and black."

"Maybe use Pompeian red like in all those wall paintings in the houses they excavated in Pompeii," suggested Cassie.

"That a girl." Cybele threw her a forgiving smile. "Use that degree in Classics for good not evil." With a twinge of guilt for her flippancy, Cybele continued. "It's too

bad you can't recreate some of those wall paintings like those in the Villa of the Mysteries."

"That's more than we can afford right now, but once our cult takes off, we'll see," said Janus.

Cybele began to run her finger around the rim of her cup. "We need to find a way to make the room really hot – maybe by using space heaters. Our goal is to put people into a receptive frame of mind. A hypnotic state," she said in a confiding voice.

Janus began to tap his fork against his cup. "We should also use rhythmic noises, like chanting and drums, to help relax people."

Cassie snorted. "Don't forget the alcohol."

Cybele rolled her eyes. "Duh." She leaned forward. "You know, with our experience in pagan rites, Cassie and I can create some brew, using herbs like wormwood to help induce a state of intoxication."

Cassie nodded in agreement. "And don't forget about incense. Scents are very important in relaxing people."

Cybele stood up and stretched. "But, since I will be the incarnation of a Nature goddess, we have to have outdoor rituals too."

Cassie looked a bit worried. "Which means using fire and water."

Cybele began to rock the back of her chair excitedly. "Hey, we can re-enact famous mythological scenes like when Aeneas contacts the ghosts of the Underworld. It'll be such a hoot."

“Well,” Janus broke in, “as long as we have a good fire extinguisher, that sounds like a good plan.” Note to self. Review fire insurance policies before Cybele burns my house down.

“Are you guys going to have robes and stuff like that?”

Janus threw his hands up. “Whoa! I’m not dressing up like Merlin.”

Gods. What is it with men and dresses? Cybele forced herself to sound patient and not condescending. “They don’t have to be stereotypical magician robes, Janus, but we SHOULD make an effort to create an otherworldly atmosphere. It will add to the illusion we want to create.”

“Cyb’s right, Janus. You will need to wear something other than street clothing, but we can find something you’d be comfortable with.” She patted him reassuringly. “Don’t forget that religious rituals always use smoke and mirrors. If you break the illusion, you break the spell.”

Cybele broke in. “Don’t you remember how angry we were when we saw the *Buffy the Vampire* episode where Buffy is catatonic in the psych ward of a hospital and all her adventures turn out to be just mad delusions. None of the characters we have followed over the last few years turn out to be real people.”

Cassie agreed. “It was such a betrayal. We need Buffy and the Scooby gang to be real, to save the world from monsters. Even if we know it’s just television, they still have to be real on television. By turning them into delusions, Josh Whedon just killed them.”

“That bastard,” Janus said vehemently.

Cybele felt compelled to reminisce further. "And remember how disappointed we were with how they wrapped up *Voyager*? How the hell could they have had Seven of Nine end up with Chakotay, when clearly EVERYONE knows that she should have ended up with the Doctor." She shook her head in disbelief. "They were the ones who had built up a relationship over the years and now we're supposed to believe that Seven and Chakotay are right for each other. Puh-leeze."

Damnit. Janus sighed resignedly. "Both of you are right. If I don't throw myself into the game, it won't work. I won't be the Whedon who breaks the spell."

"Don't be such a grump," admonished Cybele. "Just remember that life is supposed to be fun. Enjoy the thrill of becoming someone else. Think of it as a mask you wear. It will help you avoid being self-conscious."

Cassie leaned back in her chair. "Not to be the cold voice of reason, but have you thought about the start-up costs for this business? How are you going to pay for them?"

Cybele's eyes widened. "Good question." She turned to look at Janus. "Janus, you're the businessman. Do you have any ideas?"

He shook his head thoughtfully. "Nothing springs to mind immediately. We should first make an estimate of the sort of things we will need to begin and then figure out costs."

Cassie, unable to resist getting in a dig, interrupted. "I don't think they give small business loans for people who want to start cults."

"No," agreed Janus. "But if we do some brainstorming, I'm sure we can find some inventive ways to pay for the initial costs. Then when the internet magic business takes off, we'll be rolling in the dough."

Beginning to get a little bored with the whole discussion, Cassie stood up. "Well, why don't we crunch some numbers, think about some moneymaking ideas, and then meet back up again, and compare plans. Meanwhile, I feel like a little entertainment. Why don't we see if there are any good movies playing at Cinema City Eight?"

Feeling a little overwhelmed by the financial aspects of starting her own cult, Cybele took immediate advantage of Cassie's desire for a break. "Good plan. I'm in the mood for outrageously overpriced popcorn with rancid butter and maybe one or two oversized chocolate bars." She turned to Janus. "Did you buy a paper when you went for coffee?"

"No." He jumped up. "But there are always one or two good matinees on Sundays. Let's just go and see."

Cybele gestured grandly in the direction of the door. "Then once more into the fro, dear friends."

Gabe got out of his car and walked towards Shangri-La. God. I hate Mondays. Just another reminder that the weekend is over and the daily grind begins again. Hmm. He sniffed the air. Something smells good. They're supposed to have a really good lunch special here. Hope it lives up to its billing. He walked through the front doors and looked around for his employer, Iris Pontus.

There she is at the corner table, reading the menu and talking into her cell phone. God. What on earth is she wearing today? A bright red t-shirt and orange pants? She looks like she's on fire. And what's up with those green streaks in her greyish-black

hair? Is she trying to look like a Christmas tree? Doesn't she look in the mirror before she goes out in public? I'm surprised they let her in.

Gabe walked up to Iris' table and sat down. She immediately waved him to silence as she finished yelling at whomever was on the other line. Then she put her phone away and smiled over at Gabe. "So, got anything interesting for me?"

"Well, the information I'm getting from these street kids on what it's like to be a member of the despised underclass is fascinating. Many of them aren't really kids. They're in their early and mid-twenties." He glanced over at Iris to gauge the effect of his report on her. She didn't look as if she was daydreaming, so he kept going. "In fact, a lot of them come from respectable middle class families and this is just their way of rebelling during the day and going back to a warm bed and hot food at night." He paused to take a sip of water. "But, there are also a lot of others, the runaways and dropouts, who really do live on the street and need our help."

"Good." Iris leaned back and began to read the menu. "Sounds like you have enough information to do a series of articles, A Day in the Life of a Street Kid, etc." She looked up. "So, what's the hold-up?"

To give himself a moment to find the right words to convince her, Gabe pretended to flip through the menu. "I just think there might be a bigger story here than just that." He tossed his menu back on the table. "Do you know there's a rumour going around that Matthew Cain, the director, was in prison for involuntary manslaughter?"

They fell silent as the waitress came up to take their orders. They both ordered the lunch special – a B.L.T. with fries on the side. Once the waitress left, they returned to their conversation.

“Really,” she said with a smirk. “Well, if it’s a rumour, it must be true.” She leaned forward. “According to your unverified sources, who’d he kill?”

“His twin brother, Abe.” Gabe tapped his fingers on the table. “The details are sketchy. Apparently, they got into a fight over money. Abe accused Matthew of stealing from him. And when the dust cleared, Abe was dead.”

“Wow.” Iris’ eyes widened in surprise. “Juicy. But, even if it’s true, then,” she said dryly, “other than him clearly NOT being his brother’s keeper, so what? He’s served his time. In fact, it looks like he’s turned his life around and is making a difference to his community.”

“Well,” Gabe said uneasily, “I really don’t think it’s a good idea for someone who committed murder after he was accused of stealing to be in charge of disbursing public and governmental donations. It’s like letting the inmates run the asylum.”

Iris looked closely at Gabe. “Do you have any real evidence or is it all conjecture?”

“I just need more time.” Gabe looked up hopefully. “I need to investigate some of the employees too. One of them, Janus Styx, gives off really bad vibes. He’s clearly hiding something.”

“Really? Why?” Iris sounded more intrigued. “Do you think he’s working with Cain?”

“I don’t know for sure.” Gabe began to look a little more uncomfortable. “I searched Janus’ office last Monday evening and I found some files he had on some of the kids. His comments were pretty condescending. He clearly thinks he’s better than everyone else.”

They fell silent again as the waitress came with their food. They quickly started eating.

"Mmmm. This is delicious." Iris waved her sandwich at Gabe. "Look, last time I checked, being elitist is not a crime. Do you have anything more tangible?"

"No." Gabe clucked in annoyance. "Unfortunately, he came in before I was done searching. I pretended I had seen his office door open and was just closing it."

"Did he buy it?"

"Not quite. But what could he say? Nothing had been taken." Gabe frowned.

"Although I did get a lecture from Matthew the next morning about proper procedures to follow if I think there's been a break-in."

"Are you sure there's really something there?" Iris dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. "Janus could be perfectly innocent, you know. Maybe you and he are just two dogs pissing in the same territory."

"No," disagreed Gabe, "my gut tells me there's something big that's going on."

"You haven't been a reporter long enough to have a gut, Gabriel." Iris looked mockingly at his stomach. "A bit of a beer belly, maybe."

Gabe patted his flat stomach and snorted. "I don't have a beer belly." He leaned forward. "I'm sure there's a bigger story here than just street kids. Give me time and I'll find it."

Iris looked over at him and smiled fondly. "Gabriel, I've known you since you were in diapers. Your mother was my best friend. After she died, well... She would have wanted me to look out for you. That's why I'm going to give you some more time to search for a bigger story. But it's got to be based on facts. We're not the mainstream

media. We can't print wild speculations as truth and then hope everyone forgets we were wrong the next day."

"I appreciate that, Iris," Gabe said sincerely, "and I don't want truth to become the first casualty of my story. And I'm not trying to take advantage of..."

Iris cut him off. "I know that, Gabriel. But while you're doing this extra investigating, I still want you to be writing up those articles on the daily lives of Winnipeg's street kids. *Mixed Berries* is coming out in a few weeks and we need articles for it. You got me?"

"Gotcha." He paused. "Aren't you afraid no one will understand the title and you'll end up in the Cooking and Gardens sections of bookstores?"

"God. I hope not." Iris rolled her eyes. "We'll do lots of publicity to prevent that— television, radio, print — the works. And we'll have billboards with big bowls of raspberries, strawberries, and blackberries, and they'll say, '*Mixed Berries*, the more varied the berries, the sweeter the juice.' Our audience will get the message and even if others buy it by mistake, once they read it, they'll keep on reading."

"You're taking a big chance with this magazine. They're always a risky investment."

She looked over, shook her head, and smiled. "My baby stores are being franchised all over Canada. I took a big risk when I opened my first It Takes A Village but I knew that people would flock to a store that offered products from all over the world, and that donated a share of its profits back to the women in the Third World who made them and used them in their own cultures."

"I guess life's a gamble." Gabe spoke under his breath. "Sometimes, you just have to go with your heart."

"Yeah, you do." Iris swatted his hand playfully. "And this magazine comes from my heart. It will provide a voice for people who are tired of mainstream messages. It's something I would have liked to read when I was trying to discover my place in the world."

"Me too. That's why I'm so glad you asked me to write for it. I want to make you proud of me."

"I am." She swatted his hand a little harder than before. "But I want more progress on the story. Be a little more forceful in your investigation. See if there are any other ways or people to get information. Look at family and friends. Check police sources and find out if they're doing any investigations into the Loaves and Fishes. Because pretty soon, it'll be time to piss, shit, or get off the pot. You got me?"

"Gotcha." He paused. "Matthew seems to spend all of his time at the shelter. He doesn't seem to have a life. But, I think Janus might have a girl friend or at least a good female friend who might be worth investigating." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I think you'd like her. She dresses a bit like a hippie. Lots of colour. She also seems pretty talkative. I should be able to pump her for information without much effort."

Iris narrowed her eyes. "She sounds pretty cute."

Gabe nodded pseudo-innocently. "Purely coincidental, I assure you."

Iris groaned. "Just make sure that information is the only thing you pump her for."

"Iris," Gabe gasped, laughing.

"I mean it. Do your thinking for this story with the head on your shoulders not the one below your waist." She chuckled. "You know, my poor grandmother once told me that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. Life has taught me that it's actually a few inches lower. Now get out there and get me a good story."

Gabe stood up, leaned over, and kissed her on her cheek. "It'll be well worth the wait." He leaned down to pick up the bill.

Iris waved him off. "I'll take care of it. You have a hippie to start pumping."

Gabe laughed and walked out to his car. He leaned up against it and looked for his keys. Piss, shit, or get off the pot. Strange. Why would I piss while sitting on a pot? Unless it was for a bet like trying to write my name in the snow while sitting down. Pretty awkward and messy though. Must be a woman thing. He got into his car and drove off.

Janus rolled off the couch and fell laughing onto the floor. "*Puppets Who Kill* is one sick show." He pulled himself into a sitting position and tried to remain straight-faced.

Cassie thumped the armrest of the couch for emphasis. "It's absolutely brilliant. I just can't believe Dan gives Buttons a rabbit to teach him how to love and then Dan kills the rabbit to make rabbit stew on Valentine's Day for everyone. He's one sick bastard."

Janus smirked. "Yeah. And he's the counsellor at the half-way house. The murderous puppets are the ones he's supposed to be trying to rehabilitate."

"All of them are sick. This is one subversive show."

Janus nodded. "That's why I love it. One of my favourite episodes is the one when Buttons is dating a flower child Wiccan and by the end of the episode, she's an evil Satanist. It's hilarious."

There was a loud fumbling at the door and then Cybele burst through, scattering the stack of newspapers left by the door for recycling.

"Eureka! Come my friends, dance with me the Dance of Joy." Cybele began dancing wildly, slapping her knees in the air, and then slapping her heels behind her back.

Janus leaned over to Cassie and stage-whispered, "Dance of Joy?"

"From *Perfect Strangers*," Cassie stage-whispered back, "remember Bronson Pinchot's series that he got after his bit part on Eddie Murphy's *Beverly Hills Cop*."

"Janus, Cassie, aren't you glad it's Wednesday? The day is almost done and that means the week is almost over. Weekend, here we come."

"Whoa Cyb. How much caffeine have you had today?" asked Janus.

"Only a couple cups of mochaccino. But enough questions now. Dance, puppets, dance."

Cassie began to dance the Dance of Joy opposite Cybele. Janus shrugged, got up, and began to dance his version of the Chicken Dance.

Cassie collapsed on the floor. "So, are you going to explain what that was all about, or do we get to guess?"

"Give me a minute." Cybele looked over at Janus and winked. "I've got to go and drain the lizard."

Janus threw himself on the sofa panting. "I hate to break it to you but you don't have a lizard."

Cybele laughed and began pirouetting towards the bathroom. "You're so wrong," she shouted back. "I'm the Incarnation of Cybele before the final apotheosis which rid her of all unneeded appendages." With a final twirl, she hip-slammed the bathroom door closed.

"Don't forget to wash your hands," Janus yelled at her.

"Wow. Someone's a little high on life today," said Cassie. She walked over to the newspapers and restacked them into a neat heap, a bit farther away from the doorway than before.

Janus rolled over. "I think you mean on caffeine. Did you see how dilated her pupils were? Maybe we should slip an Ativan into her next cup of coffee to calm her down."

"Shhh. She's coming back."

"So, Cyb, what's up?" asked Janus.

"What's not? Sitting at the Second Cup this afternoon, while drinking the ambrosia of the gods, a lightning bolt came out of the sky and struck me with inspiration."

"Strange. I don't recall any lightning today." Janus turned to Cassie. "What about you?"

"Maybe it was a metaphorical bolt." Cassie nudged him over to make room for herself on the couch. "You know, like what Constantine saw on the Milvian Bridge."

"Aaah. A portent from the gods. Sunspots and ice crystals? Makes sense. It is summertime in Winnipeg. So," Janus said as he turned towards Cybele, "in what sign shall we conquer?"

“The sign of the times – spiritual counselling,” replied Cybele.

“Cyb, my over-caFFEinated chum, what the hell are you talking about?” asked Janus.

Cybele shuddered. “First of all, never call me chum. It reminds me of *Jaws* and how they were always chumming the waters to attract the sharks. I like to think I’m higher on the scale of being than rotten fish guts fishermen use for bait.”

“Just above,” joked Cassie.

“Second of all,” continued Cybele smoothly, “it’s about what we can do to make money to help pay for the start-up costs for our little cult.”

“Spiritual counselling?” asked Janus.

“For you. If you want to,” said Cybele in a surprised voice. “Meditative counselling for me.” Cybele looked beseechingly at Cassie. “And Cassie, if she wants to have a little fun with me.”

Janus looked unconvinced. “But you and Cassie aren’t really counsellors,” he said dubiously.

“Silly.” Cybele brushed aside his qualms with an air of unconcern. “Anyone can call herself a counsellor. It’s perfectly legal. She just can’t pretend she has degrees in counselling if she doesn’t because that would be fraud.”

Becoming more fascinated by the prospect, Cassie leaned towards her. “Okay, but what exactly would we do?”

“It came to me today while I was watching television at the Second Cup. Yogi Bear and Booboo were stealing picnic baskets in Jellystone and I made the connection.” Cybele clapped her hands together gleefully. “Yogi and yoga.”

Perplexed, Cassie looked at her. "You want us to dress up like Yogi and Booboo and teach yoga?"

"Could you imagine the reaction if we did?" Cybele slapped her hand against her forehead. "But no, that would be a trademark infringement. I'm sure we'd get sued. Besides, that would hardly help us spread the message of our cult which is a cult of Cybele and NOT a cult of Yogi Bear."

"Then what?" asked Janus.

Cybele fell gracefully onto the floor in a cross-legged position. "Cassie and I have both taken yoga for years. So, we start a class which basically steals some simple yoga moves, change them slightly, and rename them something like..." Cybele paused as she thought. "Hmmm. Like Cybelean Contemplative Motion. We can then attract a wide range of students who want to learn a new meditative, body and mind, technique, and charge them for the lessons."

"That's a really good idea," said Cassie in a slightly surprised voice. "And if we hold them in the cult house, then we'd have a very low overhead."

Cybele decided to ignore the surprise she had heard in Cassie's voice and continued unabated. "Especially, since they'd have to bring their own towels, mats, water bottles, etc."

"I like it. But what if they say something? What if they know it's yoga?" asked Cassie.

Gods. Do I have to come up with everything? Doesn't anyone else have an iota of imagination. Or at least a LITTLE ability to bullshit. Cybele forced herself not to sound condescending. "We simply explain that all physical movements meant to connect

human beings to their spiritual selves are pretty similar since human body parts can only move in so many directions. That should shut up any troublemakers and if we incorporate some incense into our classes that should make them interesting and keep people coming back,” replied Cybele. “You just have to have faith in my powers of persuasion.”

“Powers of bullshit more like,” Janus said mockingly.

“Hey, a rose by any other name,” retorted Cybele.

Cassie brought their conversation back to the work that had to be done. “But, what about Janus? He doesn’t know anything about yoga.”

Cybele enthusiastically rocked back and forth. “He doesn’t have to. He has real counselling experience. He can do religious counselling. You know - persuade people that the answer to their problems lies in reconnecting their spiritual and physical halves.”

Janus tried to consider his position as he spoke. “I guess, I could sell our cult’s philosophy in a slightly, but not overly underhanded way, through therapy sessions. And I don’t have to mention our cult specifically because ...”

“If you hold the counselling sessions in the cult house, then they’ll automatically be exposed to our message,” said Cassie, becoming swept up in a wave of enthusiasm.

“Exactly,” said Janus.

Cybele shook her head uncomfortably. “But we have to make sure that people who come to you for this religious counselling know exactly what kind of religious counsellor you are. We don’t want to mislead or manipulate people who might be expecting something else and feel betrayed when they arrive and realize what we are.” She sighed. Damnit. Life would be so much easier if I was just a little more

unscrupulous. "The best way to do that is put our cult's name on any and every flyer or advertisement we put out, so people know ahead of time what to expect."

"I agree," Cassie interjected. "I guess Mom was right. Honesty is the best policy."

"Yep," said Cybele. "Making money is fine but not doing harm is more important."

Janus shook his head in bemusement. "Boy, for a bunch of anti-establishment pagans, you two are sure fond of ego and superego imposed ethics. Whatever happened to free will, sex, drugs, and rock and roll?"

Cybele looked at him in disbelief. "I can't believe that you still don't understand what I've been trying to tell you about paganism."

Janus winced. Damnit. I tried to yank her chain and now she's going to subject me to another lecture. Life sucks.

Unaware of his inner turmoil, Cybele continued on with her lecture as she began to pace back and forth across the floor. "Actions have consequences. If you abuse power, that abuse will come back to haunt you. My motive for starting this cult might come out of a desire for profit but I'm not going to get it at the expense of others. I don't need to. In exchange for their money, I intend to give them back a sense of spirituality that they may not have in their lives already."

"*Mea culpa*," said Janus. Thank God. She hadn't gone on for too long this time. Note to self. Don't yank Cybele's chain when she's in an over-cafeinated state.

Cybele smiled forgivingly. "It's all right. You'll get paganism eventually."

With a mental jerk, Cassie brought herself back to the present. Ahh. Cybele's stopped pacing. The lecture must be over. "Speaking of getting members," Cassie said, although they had not, in fact, just been, "Where do you think we should advertise for them?"

Janus replied, "Definitely put up flyers at the U of M and the U of W. Then put up flyers around Portage Avenue. There are always lots of people around there."

Cassie patted Janus' shoulder. "Why don't you see if you can get some of the street kids you work with to help distribute the flyers. And as long as they're over eighteen, they can come to the meditative sessions as well."

"Good idea," agreed Cybele earnestly. "They could benefit from a little reconnective therapy. They always seem far too angry and alienated from the natural environment and their spiritual selves."

Janus stood up and stretched. "You know all these ideas are good but we might need to make more money to pay for our start-up costs - more than these ideas will earn."

As she began to come down from her caffeine high, Cybele sighed tiredly. "Gods. How do other cults pay for their expenses and still manage to make a profit?"

"Do you have any specific ideas in mind, Janus?" asked Cassie.

"I'm thinking of something related to telemarketing but I haven't thought of anything specific yet."

"That's a good area to explore," said Cassie, "after all Winnipeg is the telemarketing capital of North America." She shook her head distractedly. "I'm sure I saw that on a billboard somewhere. Maybe religious counselling through a 1-800 number?"

“Just make sure it’s not a psychic network. I don’t want to end up indicted like poor Madame Rio,” Cybele chimed in.

“I might need to do some research on how other religions raise money. I’ll crunch some numbers and get back to you guys,” Janus replied.

Cybele yawned. “Well, we’ll leave that research in your capable hands. I’m beginning to crash from all this caffeine. How about we call it an evening?”

Wanting to get started on his research without any further interference from Cybele, Janus agreed. “Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you guys later.”

When he left, Cybele turned to go to bed, but Cassie gently caught her by the arm and stopped her.

Cybele gave her a puzzled look. “What’s up, Cassie?” Wow. She looks like she has a bad case of indigestion.

Cassie bit her lower lip. “Cyb, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but I think I got a little carried away tonight. Your excitement was so contagious that I was swept up in it.”

Cybele blinked her eyes as she tried to focus on what Cassie was saying. “Okay. And now that the glow has faded, and reality has set in...”

Worried about hurting Cybele’s feelings, Cassie blurted her words out as fast as she could. “I’ll still help you with the initial yoga sessions but I don’t really want to be intimately connected with this cult. My job at A Taste of Indulgence is a full-time commitment and I just don’t have time to be a partner with you and Janus.”

Cybele winced as her head began to explode. I definitely have to drink less coffee tomorrow. She waved Cassie’s words off. “It’s okay, Cassie. Don’t worry. I had a

feeling you might start to get cold feet. You're not the kind of person who would be comfortable running a cult for profit." She rubbed her forehead. Gods. I'm beginning to see spots. "I would never ask you to compromise your beliefs." Wow. If it wasn't for the pain, this could be quite a psychedelic experience. She forced herself to continue speaking. "You know, it's not the pagan way."

Cassie sighed. "I have faith in you." Although you do seem a little out of it, right now. "I'm just worried that not everyone may be as enlightened as you are and you could get hurt."

Cybele yawned. "Don't worry about me, Cassie. I'm the ultimate survivor. I'm a gambler." Singing under her breath, she walked away. "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run."

Cassie looked at her, sighed again, and then went off to bed herself.

Cybele reached over the table and snagged another slice of bacon. "Thanks for inviting me over for brunch today, Janus. It's such a blessing not to spend my entire Sunday hearing Church bells."

"I guess it can get pretty irritating after a while. The musical equivalent of living beside a flashing neon light."

Cybele shuddered. "The horror. The horror." She took a bite out of her bacon. "It's just like on *Seinfeld* when that Kenny Rogers' fried chicken restaurant opens up outside their apartment and Kramer's room is always filled with that bright red light."

“Yeah. That was pretty funny. Especially when he became addicted to the chicken and couldn’t stop eating it.” Janus placed his fork protectively over his last slice of ham. “But, good as it is, I actually didn’t invite you over to talk about fried chicken, believe it or not.”

Cybele waved her bacon tauntingly at him. “Hey Ripley, aren’t we breaking the stereotype here? I’m supposed to be the one who loves fried chicken. You’re supposed to love olives and ouzo.”

“You’re the one who loves olives.” Janus picked up his last slice of ham and casually waved it at her. She’s such a salt addict. “Give me watermelon any day.”

“Well, watermelon filled with ouzo is pretty good,” said Cybele refusing to respond to his bait.

“Ah, well, since I’m only half Greek that must explain why I only like the ouzo.”

Cybele rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, that must be the logical explanation.”

She’s such a card. Janus laughed. “Okay, once watermelon comes into season, we can have a watermelon and ouzo party. I’ll bring the Chicken Delight, you bring the kalamatas.” He cleared his throat nervously and blurted out his words all at once. “Um. To get back to what I was saying before being so wilfully distracted. I. um.” He scratched his face. “I’ve been doing some thinking, and I’ve come up with a great telemarketing idea.”

“Which is?” asked Cybele impatiently. Gods. Get to the point.

Janus forced himself to look at Cybele. Note to self. Show no fear. Or she’ll go for the jugular. “Well, we need something that will make a lot of money and still

somehow be faithful to our message of empowerment and freedom from patriarchal constraints, right?"

Cybele looks at him warily. "Right. So, what issue are we dancing around, Janus?"

Janus walked over to his living room coffee table and returned with a piece of paper. He silently handed it to her.

Cybele read it over. Her mouth dropped open in disbelief. "Good gods. Tell me, you haven't already distributed this flyer around the city or put this advertisement in any of the papers."

"Well, as a matter of fact," replied Janus huffily, "I have. I think it's a great idea and it will definitely allow us just to sit back and rake in the money."

Cybele pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. "Oh, it's definitely a money-making idea all right. I'm just curious about whether or not you've lost your mind." She threw up her arms in disbelief. "I don't think this idea is even legal much less completely moral and you know that the most important requirement for starting our cult was that we weren't going to break any laws."

Janus put his hands on his hips and glared at her. "As long as we get the proper licenses, it's completely legal, so I really don't know what your problem is. Instead of overreacting, think about this with a logical, less bourgeois attitude."

"How?" She shook her head. "Where did you get the inspiration for this brilliant gem?"

"From you, actually."

“From me?” Cybele laughed disbelievingly. “I NEVER suggested we do this. It NEVER even occurred to me.”

Janus looked at her pseudo-patiently. “Don’t you remember when you were talking about Madame Rio and her psychic hotline. It made me think about late night television and the kinds of people who stay up to watch all those infomercials.”

“I see.” Cybele took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Note to self. Remain calm. Do not jump up and down in anger. Despite her best efforts, she spoke scornfully. “You thought of all those stupid *Girls Gone Wild* videos and those ridiculous shows with surgically ballooned women frolicking on beaches and begging lonely, horny guys to call their 1-800 numbers. Yep. Clearly, I gave you this idea when I told you we should not do a psychic hotline for fear of being indicted. All my idea.”

Janus began to get annoyed. “There’s no need to be sarcastic. This is much better than YOUR idea of having me do religious counselling – whatever the hell that was supposed to be - and with the money we can make from this, you don’t even have to do those yoga rip-off classes.”

Her feelings hurt, Cybele sank down in her chair. “Those yoga classes, by whatever name I called them, will give people a chance to achieve balance and harmony in their lives. They’re meant to help people, not just make money for me.”

Beginning to feel he had gone too far, Janus sat down beside her. “Well, my business will help people too.”

“Really, do tell,” said Cybele sarcastically.

Janus forced himself not to rise to her bait. I just need to speak her language to convince her I’m right. “All the callers will be able to achieve sexual ecstasy, which is a

very important part of achieving balance and harmony in one's life, you know. In fact, the purpose of those orgiastic rituals, which the original Cybele worshippers held, was designed to do the same thing. You've told me a million times about the role of enthusiasm and ecstasy in pagan rites."

Cybele nodded her head slowly. "Yes. Ecstasy originally meant to go outside your body and enthusiasm meant to have the god come inside your body." She sighed. "No pun intended, of course. You couldn't have one without the other. But a phone sex operation, Janus? I'm just not sure it's a good idea."

"Why not?" Yes. I'm getting through to her. "Think about it. Religion and sex have always gone together."

Seeing Cybele's reluctant nod of agreement, Janus continued. "One is the repression of primal urges and the other is its expression. It's really no wonder ministers are always being caught with prostitutes or having affairs. It's just the natural order of things reasserting itself."

"The superego and ego battling the id, eh? A classic struggle throughout the aeons." She looked over at him and shook her head. "I see the point you're making but you should have consulted me before you started advertising this business. We're in this together as equal partners, remember?"

"You're right," said Janus apologetically. "I just got so excited about this idea that I couldn't wait to run it past you. Plus, I knew you would see its potential once we talked about it."

"Well, I definitely see its potential, but I'm still uncomfortable having our cult associated with it. I wanted to create a ritual that brought people back into touch with the

natural world, not perpetuate alienation for people through an increasingly heavy reliance on technology.”

Janus patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t be such a Luddite, Cyb. Think of all the people we can reach through this business. We can advertise as an encounter session in which callers can explore their religious and sexual fantasies with amateur but open-minded counsellors of sexual healing in a safe and accepting environment. How can encouraging openness and allowing people to get in touch with their innermost feelings be a bad thing?”

Cybele rolled her eyes. “I guess it’s true,” she said mischievously, “the devil can quote Scripture for his own ends.”

“Ouch. Come on. You know you’re totally against censorship. We’d be encouraging free speech and the open exchange of...”

“Bodily fluids,” said Cybele, unable to resist another jab. “Okay. You’ve made your point. It’s a great idea. But you know, this is something probably only men will do, so we’ll need to hire female operators to answer the phones.”

“Don’t be so sexist. I’m sure there are lots of women wanting to explore their sexual fantasies.”

“Oh. I didn’t say there weren’t,” said Cybele sardonically. “But, the essential difference between men and women is that women don’t like to throw away their hard earned money for something they can get for free. That’s why women usually don’t pay for prostitution. They can get sex by walking into any bar pretty much anytime they want.”

“Good point. I hadn’t thought of that.”

Cybele smirked. "Well, let's hope that's the last thing you haven't thought of concerning this business idea."

"Meow," said Janus playfully, hoping to tease her out of her bad mood.

Cybele glared at him and then relented and laughed. "So, have you received any responses to these ads yet?"

"Not yet, but I only put them in yesterday."

"Well, when you do, I want to be part of the interviewing process." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Have you thought about creating a bible of sexual fantasies – a template for our operators to follow, in case they don't have an overactive imagination?"

Janus flashed a triumphant smile. "We don't have to. I managed to get a copy of one from a friend of mine – you know Falstaff - who did his thesis on escort agencies in Vancouver. He lifted it from one of the escorts. It's pretty interesting, a wealth of information."

"Okay. Great. Why don't you make copies and give me one to read, so I can see what the first official bible of our cult will be." She stood up. "I have a million errands to run today so I'd better get going. See you later." She walked to the front door, and then deliberately turned back to face him. "Keep me informed of ANYTHING new that comes up."

"Of course." Janus closed the door behind her and walked back into the kitchen. God. You think she would have been a little more appreciative of all the time and effort I spent trying to turn this brilliant idea into reality. She's too damn bloody conservative for someone who's supposed to be a free-spirited pagan. Hypocrite. He smiled. But I knew I could convince her that I was right.

Cybele walked into A Taste of Indulgence where Cassie was waiting on a customer. Cybele moved over to the display case and began lightly running her ring finger in an aimless circle around and around the decal of a little bride and groom on top of a wedding cake. Ah. Pygmalion. Why did you have to keep trying to change me? She started as Cassie came up and touched her on her hand.

"Hey. What's up? I know how you feel about the sexist customs in most traditional weddings but that's no reason to try and rub out the bride and groom. Plus, I'm the one Marie Antoinette is going to make clean off those fingerprints."

Cybele shook her head and smiled wanly. "Sorry. Where is the Wicked Witch of the Gateway to the West, anyway?"

"She's out delivering some cakes. For some reason, everybody wants to be a June bride."

"Yeah." Cybele groaned. "Go figure. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce and yet people still feel this compulsion to go out in the world two by two. And they think nothing of going into huge debt to pay for something that's really nothing more than a big party. Maybe they should spend some of that money on therapy to make sure they're ready to spend the rest of their lives stuck sharing bathroom space with some person who'll probably never leave the seat down, leave little hairs all over the sink, and somehow never seem to manage to refill the toilet paper roll."

Cybele looked up at Cassie and shrugged. "Sorry. I didn't mean to go on a rant. Just had a bit of a bad morning. Felt the urge for an emotional purging. Thought of you. She smiled. "Of course."

Laughingly, Cassie shook her head. "Of course. And I'm truly flattered that the thought of purging yourself made you think of me. So, what's put you in such a mood?"

Cybele rolled her eyes. "Well, I just came from brunch with Janus, and I found out what his big plan is for us to make money."

Wow. Cyb looks like she just sucked a lemon. This ought to be good. "And you don't think it's a good idea?" asked Cassie in a pseudo-innocent voice.

Cybele nervously tapped the top of the display case. "Oh, I think it will make money but I definitely don't think it's a good idea."

Trying not to laugh, Cassie asked, "Well, are you going to make me guess?"

With a sigh of resignation, Cybele gave up the information. "Religious sexual fantasy telephone counsellor."

Cassie grabbed her stomach and bent over with laughter. "Did you say 'Religious sexual fantasy telephone counsellor'?"

"Oh yeah." Cybele began to smile. "Apparently I'm moving up in the world. From graduate student to cult leader to telephone pimp."

"What made him decide on phone sex?" asked Cassie as tears began to fall from her eyes.

"Apparently, I gave him the idea when I brought up the psychic hotline."

"Well," Cassie said, as she wiped away her tears, "I've always said the quiet ones are the most repressed."

Cybele shook her head as she saw Cassie trying to stop laughing. "I'm pretty sure I'm the one who's always said that."

"Then clearly, you're psychic because I'm always thinking it. Hmmm." Cassie bit down on her thumb to force herself to focus. "Is it even legal to set up that kind of business in Manitoba?"

"I'm not sure." Cybele became more interested as they started to explore the potential of Janus' idea. "But look at all those chat lines. They always give local numbers. I'm sure sex comes up in those conversations."

"True. And don't forget that Janus knows all the tricks of running a business and getting licenses. He'll find a way to get this religious sexual fantasy telephone counsellor thing up and running," said Cassie reassuringly.

Cassie waited expectantly for Cybele to continue their banter but Cybele seemed oblivious to the opening Cassie had given her.

Cassie shook her head in disbelief. "Poor Cybele, when you pass up the chance to make sexual innuendoes, I know you're upset." Cassie walked behind the display case and returned with a plate of cookies. "Some Imperials will make you feel better. They're hot out of the oven."

Cybele leaned up against the wall and began to munch on one. With her first bite, she began to feel better. "You know, it's not that I'm against the idea of phone sex. I just never imagined myself operating that kind of business. I feel like I'm exploiting the women who work there and the men who call in."

"You're not." Cassie waved her cookie to emphasize the point she was making. "The men who call in are no more being exploited than if they bought a Playboy or rented a porno movie. They're just looking for a quick fix."

Cybele took another bite and let the warm cookie dissolve in her mouth. Mmmm. Sugar and butter. What a combination. "Well, what about the women?"

Cassie popped the last piece of cookie in her mouth. "You're giving them jobs. Allowing them to make a living just by talking. How hard a life is that?"

Cybele sighed. "I know that, in theory, but reality is always different."

Cassie smiled at her affectionately. "Do you know what your real problem is?"

"Why do I think I'm about to find out?" Cybele said as she wiped the crumbs off her mouth.

"You are the most wildly romantic person I know. Idealism seeps through every pore of your body."

Cybele's head snapped up in surprise. "I think you must be smelling the garlic sausage that I ate this morning."

Cassie shook her head knowingly. "Laughter is a defensive mechanism."

Cybele rubbed the back of her neck. "Thank you, Freud. Shouldn't you be salivating over a cigar right now?"

Cassie wagged her finger at her. "You've just proven my point, Cyb."

"Touché. Okay." Cybele looked curiously at Cassie. "What makes you think I'm such a hopeless, helpless romantic?"

"You believe in the best of people. You want them to live up to their potential within. Cassie looked carefully at Cybele to gauge her level of acceptance. "How many times have I heard you quote Yoda when he says, 'luminous beings are we, not this crude matter'?"

Oh. Damn. I think Cassie might be right. How the hell could she see what I couldn't? Cybele bit the bottom of her lip. "Probably a million times. But I'm really cynical about people, Cassie. I'm not a romantic."

Cassie took another cookie off the plate and began to munch on it. Mmmm. So good. She looked over at Cybele. "Beneath the heart of a cynic, lies the pain of a frustrated idealist. Humanity has disappointed you so many times that now you don't even want to admit your hope that it will transcend pettiness and become what you believe it was meant to be."

Surprised, Cybele looked over at her. "I've never heard you speak like that before, Cassie." She reached over and grabbed a cookie for herself.

Cassie laughed. "That's because normally, I don't have to cheer you up. You're usually like a firecracker that's just gone off."

Cybele raised an eyebrow. "Well, I've always been fond of big bangs and dramatic climaxes."

"Aha. A sexual joke. You're feeling better."

She smirked. "I yam what I yam. As Sally Fields would say, 'You like me, you really like me.'" She began pacing around the shop. "You know what really bothers me about this whole religious sexual fantasy telephone counsellor thing is that Janus did it behind my back. He started advertising for workers without even telling me first. He had to know it was something I would have a problem with." She stopped and stamped her foot. "Damn it. We should have talked about it first."

"Did you talk to him about that?"

“Yeah. He said he thought he was doing me a favour by getting everything set up and presenting it as a *fait accompli*.”

“Well,” said Cassie as she tried to think of a way to resolve the problem, “then chalk it up to a miscommunication and just keep a closer eye on him to ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Oh,” Cybele said quite firmly, “I will.” She hesitated for a moment. “It’s just that...”

“What?” What else could be bothering her? Is there something she’s not telling me?

Cybele shrugged. “Well, part of me feels like such a hypocrite.”

Cassie looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Because here I am this big defender of free speech and advocate of sexual freedom and I act like such a bourgeoisie about the idea of phone sex.”

Cassie chuckled incredulously. “Cyb, you weren’t bothered by the idea of phone sex.” Even I know better than that. “You were worried at the thought that you might become an exploiter, a collaborator within the system of oppression you want to overthrow.”

“Yes.” Cybele’s face lit up. “Like what Kira had to do when Bajor signed that Treaty of Non-Aggression with the Dominion and she had to work with the Cardassians. She became one of the people she had despised while fighting in the Bajoran resistance against the Cardassian Occupation of Bajor.”

Yes. She's made the connection. Funny how she can see the truths in TV but not about herself. Okay. I know where to go from here. "Right. Eventually, she had trouble looking at herself in the mirror and had to become part of the Resistance again."

"Well, I guess I have to make sure it never comes to that point for me." Cybele shook her head. "I just hate being hoisted on my own petard. Here I am, this free-spirited pagan who goes around pontificating on the insanity of our vice laws and I still haven't broken completely free of patriarchal control. I've internalized it."

Cassie smiled reassuringly. "Hey, you're a pagan, not an anarchist, and like all of us, you're a work in progress."

"I know. I still believe that it's ridiculous for women to be able to walk into any bar they want, have sex with as many people as they want, but it's illegal if they want to charge for the use of their body."

"I agree," said Cassie, who was trying not to laugh at Cybele's earnestness. "It's just another example of women being underpaid for their work in a patriarchal society."

"Yep. I guess the difference is that it's one thing to believe that women should have control over their own bodies and sell themselves if they want to, and another to be the one running a business that takes a percentage of the profits from their work."

Cassie nodded. "It's different because if women are the entrepreneurs, then you don't really believe they're being exploited. They're the ones in control. But if they're working for you, then you're the one in control, and you then become a potential exploiter."

"Maybe," said Cybele thoughtfully, "I'm just afraid of power."

“Don’t be.” Cassie winked at her. “Just remember that with great power comes great responsibility.”

“I will, Spiderm’am.” Hmmm. Cassie’s deeper than I thought.

Cassie looked at her watch and groaned. “Damn. It’s getting late. I should probably get some work done now before Her Royal Highness gets back.”

“I’d better get going too. Do some window-shopping while the stores are still open.” Cybele walked to the door and stopped. She turned and gave Cassie a quick wave of thanks. “Maybe I should rename you Petra. Have you become the rock upon which I will build my cult.”

Cassie watched as Cybele left. She shook her head and then went back to decorating wedding cakes. She sighed. May you live in interesting times. Mercedes Lackey had it right. It was the greatest curse of all.

Janus sat working in his office at the Loaves and Fishes. What a wonderful way to spend a Saturday morning. God. I hate this job. I need to get a more exciting life. He laughed bitterly. I need to get a life.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. He sighed. More problems on two feet no doubt. “Come in.”

Janus looked up to see four of the residents walk in looking angry. Janus motioned for them to take the seats in front of his desk. He carefully shut down his laptop and then turned to them.

“Tan Talus, Ardiaeus Peters, Ixion Smith, and Ajax Lister, the Fab Four. So, what can I do for you, young men?”

Tan spoke up first. "It's Matthew, man. All he does is boss us around and give us a hard time."

Ixion broke in. "Yeah. Just because we were smoking in the back parking lot and drinking some beer, he had to hassle us."

Ardiaeus snapped. "Like, where does he get off. It's not like we were smoking pot or shooting up. Like, give us a break."

Janus turned to Ajax who was squirming in his chair. "And what's your version, Ajax?"

In his usual irritating way, Ajax immediately began to complain. "He's always picking on us. Always trying to make us do stuff around here."

"This is a shelter not a hotel," said Janus exasperatedly. "If you want to live here, you have to follow the rules. You know that Matthew doesn't want you smoking and drinking on the premises, so don't. If you want to do those sorts of things, just make sure you're out of his sight."

"Man, why can't Matthew be cool like you?" said Tan as he tapped his foot in frustration.

Janus smirked. "That's because Matthew cares about you, thinks you have the potential to change your life around." He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out several chocolate bars. He tossed them to the boys. "On the other hand, I don't really know. That's why I don't hassle you. I say, live and be free. What's the point of life if you can't have fun?"

Unaware that Janus was serious, the boys laughed and began to rip open the bars.

“So, what’s your punishment?” asked Janus as he stood up and began to stretch his back.

Tan sniggered. “Talking to you and we have to help wash dishes in the kitchen and help serve the meals today.”

“And we have to clean the bathrooms tonight.” Ajax continued to whine as he delivered the rest of his complaints. “Living here is like living in a prison. With all these rules, it’s worse than living at home.”

“Don’t do the crime, if you can’t do the time.” Janus paused. Guess this is as good a time as any. “Say how’d you like to do a little work for me?”

“Anything would be better than washing dishes and cleaning toilets,” said Ixion, interested.

Janus shook his head. “No. You’d still have to do your punishment chores. That is if you still want to continue living here. Matthew’s house, Matthew’s rules. I was thinking of some extra work that I would pay you for.”

“Like putting up more flyers, man?” asked Talus.

“Eventually.” Janus nodded. “But right now a friend of mine is starting up her own business and needs some help fixing up the place. It’s twenty-five dollars a day and I’ll provide the pizza and drinks.”

“Beer?” asked Ixion, hopefully.

Janus sat back down and looked at them sternly. “Pop. I don’t want you getting drunk on the job.” He paused thoughtfully. “On the other hand, I don’t take care if you go outside to take smoke breaks as long as you get your work done.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Tan. “We’re in.”

“What kind of business are we talking about?” asked Ajax, cautiously.

Janus shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “Some new age, alternative, spiritual movement. I don’t really know all the details. I’m just helping her out a little.”

Tan decided to reassert his leadership role within the group. “Sounds cool. We’re in.”

“Great,” said Janus. Now I need to ensure that they won’t blab everything the minute they leave. As he spoke, Janus looked directly at Tan. “Might be better not to advertise that you’re working for my friend. Some of the others might try to cut you out for the jobs. And Matthew might not be too thrilled that you’re working for a pagan.”

Ardiaeus grimaced. “Yeah, like he might try harder to save us.”

“That would suck big time,” agreed Ixion.

Ignoring them, Janus wrote down the address on a piece of paper and handed it to Tan. “I want you all there tomorrow at 10 a.m. Don’t let me down.”

Tan carefully folded the paper and put it into his pocket. “We won’t.” He walked to the door, stopped, and turned around. “Hey, Janus, this pagan friend of yours, is she like a Satanist?”

Ardiaeus broke in. “Man, that would be so cool. Black masses and ritual sacrifices. My parents would be so pissed if I became a Satanist.”

Ajax chuckled at the idea. “My parents would probably spend all their time in church praying for my soul.”

“Trust me,” said Janus. “She’s the furthest thing from a Satanist you’ll ever meet. And if you have any sense, you won’t bring that topic up when you meet her.”

“Why?” Ixion asked curiously. “Will she put a hex on us?”

“Is she a witch like from *The Wizard of Oz*? Like the one the house fell on who had the red shoes or is she like the good witch who helped Dorothy?” asked Ajax.

God. I’m surrounded by fools. Janus forced himself to answer patiently. “She’s not a witch and she won’t put a hex on you. But she will sit you down and talk *ad nauseam* about the difference between paganism and Satanism until your ears start bleeding and you want to fake a heart attack to get her to stop. And if she’s had a couple of mochaccinos then, like the Energizer bunny, she just won’t quit. You’ll begin to wish she was a Satanist because then at least she’d eventually kill you.”

Tan shook his head in disbelief. “She sounds like some of the teachers I had in high school before I dropped out. They would never shut up either. That’s why I finally stopped going. Had better things to do with my life.”

“Just think, if you hadn’t made that decision, you wouldn’t be lucky enough to live your life like this. Complete freedom and no stupid teachers telling you how to live your life,” said Janus, knowing they wouldn’t see the irony of what he was saying.

“You got that right,” Tan said.

“Right.” Janus stood up. Time to get some peace and quiet. “Now, you have some chores to do. You don’t want to give Matthew a reason to give you more for tomorrow.”

The boys left the room and Janus carefully closed the door behind them. He sat down behind his desk and began to review the faxed resumes he had received at his home office. So many applicants for positions as phone sex operators. Who would have thought there would be this kind of interest? I should start setting up interviews soon. Don’t want Cybele to have a cow again so I’d better call her to let her know. Mindless

peons. I am so much better than this life. I just need a chance to prove it. By the time I'm done, this cult will be bigger than anything else. We'll be making money hand over fist. Scientology will be nothing but a long forgotten memory compared to mine. Achates will be sorry he said I was a loser.

Another day, another dollar. One more day to Wednesday and then the week is almost half over. Cybele slowly walked up the driveway to Janus's guesthouse. She sighed. I don't want to go in and have to start interviewing applicants for this damn phone sex operation. Maybe I should just make some excuse and leave. This is Janus' baby. He should be the one to change the dirty diapers. No. This cult has my name on it. I am responsible. I must do my duty.

She stopped right before the doorway. I wonder if it's too late to give up this whole idea. Go back to not writing my thesis. She shook her head. No. I have to take this chance. Make a change in my life. Properly managed, this cult could be a force for spiritual good in the world. I just have to keep believing that. That will be the light at the end of this tunnel. She sighed again. I wonder if L. Ron Hubbard ever felt this way. Well, no one ever said starting a religion is easy. She laughed. Actually, come to think of it, I can't think of anyone who ever started a religion who had it easy. Makes sense. It's hard enough to get people to change their brand of coffee or favourite beer, much less their brand of religion.

She walked through the door and towards the little bedroom that had been turned into her office. Time to see if anyone else has faxed in any more resumes for these jobs.

Janus walked out of the bedroom on the opposite side of the hallway that served as his office. "Cybele, you're in early this morning."

Cybele turned towards Janus. "Just came in to do some paperwork and then get ready for the applicants coming in this afternoon."

Janus hesitated. "So, you're sure you want to sit in on the interviews?"

"I feel that I should. We are in this together."

"Right." He paused. "Look. I know you're uncomfortable with this idea. Why don't you just leave it up to me?" He patted her on the shoulder. "You can trust me to do the right thing."

"I do trust you," said Cybele, "but I need to do this." She rolled her eyes. "After all, if I'm going to star in my own cult, I should be able to hire phone sex operators. So, when are the first applicants coming in?"

Janus glanced through the front window as he spoke. "Actually, I've scheduled some to begin in half an hour. They should be here soon."

"Good." Cybele rubbed the back of her neck as she looked around. "So, where do you think we should do the interviews?"

"Hmm. Why don't we have them wait in the dining room and then do the actual interviews in my office since it's bigger than yours?" suggested Janus.

"Great idea." Cybele walked into the kitchen. "I'll just make some coffee while we're waiting."

Janus followed her inside. "Sounds like a plan."

"You know." Cybele paused as she looked for where Janus had hidden the sugar. Aha. Found it. "One thing we must really make clear to our applicants is that this is

strictly religious sexual fantasy telephone counselling. They can't be making appointments over the phone for private meetings between customers and clients. The last thing we need is to be accused of running a brothel."

"No Mustang Ranch, eh?"

Cybele swatted him on the head. "Absolutely not. And I'm pretty sure that Mustang Ranch went out of business. I think they didn't pay their taxes and the IRS got them."

"Tax evasion. Wasn't that how they got Capone?"

"I'm not sure." Cybele handed him a cup of coffee. "But the important lesson to learn is always pay your taxes. Never give the government an excuse to shut you down."

"Don't worry. I've got the proper licenses for everything and I'll make sure all our taxes are paid."

"Good." Cybele took a sip and screwed up her face. Gods. How old were Janus' beans. She gasped. "No tax revolters here."

Janus gave her a strange look. What the hell's wrong with her now? "Just tax revulsers."

Cybele laughed and began to lighten up. "I can't believe we're actually starting a cult."

"I know. It's so cool. Something very few people in the world have done successfully." He took a sip of his coffee and tried not to spit it out. Yuck. What the hell had happened to the beans? He gamely swallowed. "We're going to be so awesome at it."

“You’re right.” Cybele raised her cup and was about to take another sip when she stopped. Gods. Have I lost my mind? I can’t drink this crap but Janus is so damn touchy about his beans. I don’t want to upset him now that we’ve made up. She faked a swallow and then looked over at Janus. “We’re not doing anything illegal or immoral. Let’s have some fun with these interviews and with the whole phone sex business.”

Janus looked over at her and smiled. I can’t believe she’s drinking this crap. So much for her taste in coffee. “You’re on.”

They both turned as they saw shadows moving across the dining room window. The doorbell rang.

Cybele took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “One small step for Woman, one giant leap for Humankind.

Janus laughed and went to answer the door. Three very different women walked in looking both excited and nervous at the same time.

“You’re here to apply for the job to be a telephone solicitor?” asked Cybele as she gave them a reassuring smile.

They nodded.

Janus closed the door and came back towards them. “Would you like some coffee before we begin the interview process.” Oh. Wait. The coffee. Damnit.

Cybele’s eyes widened. Oh. Damn. Say no. They’ll think we’re trying to poison them.

“Oh, I’m too excited to drink anything,” said the one who looked like a red-headed Tinker Bell.

"Me too," said the second dark-haired woman, who looked like Hathor from *Stargate SG-1*.

"Actually, would it be all right if we were interviewed together?" said the third woman, a dead ringer for Julianne Moore in her role as Clarice Starling from *Hannibal*.

Janus looked perplexed. "Why do you want to be interviewed together? Are you friends?"

"Actually, we're sisters," said the Hathor look-alike.

"Oh," Cybele said, "that's certainly not what we expected."

Tinker Bell spoke up decisively. "I'm Thalia Vervain." She pointed to the Julianne Moore look-alike. "That's Euphrosyne Benzoin."

"And I'm Aglaia Plumeria," said the dark-haired woman.

"Well, interviewing you together shouldn't be a problem. By the way, I'm Cybele Moondragon and this is Janus Styx. We're the owners of this business."

Janus gestured towards his office. "Why don't we all go into my office and get started."

Janus sat down behind his desk. Cybele sat in a chair beside him. Thalia, Euphrosyne, and Aglaia sat in chairs in front of them.

"So, what kind of business place is this?" asked Aglaia curiously. "The brass sign on the door said 'The Mysteries of Cybele.'"

Cybele looked over at Janus before answering. "It's actually a multi-faceted business. Part spiritual, part mundane."

Janus nodded his head in agreement. "Your participation, if you are hired, will be in the more mundane, but nevertheless, highly important aspect of our organization."

“You see,” said Cybele as her face began to light up with enthusiasm, “we are in the business of re-introducing a new spiritual belief system to the world. It goes back to prehistorical times, but it died out when matriarchal governance was subjugated by patriarchal rule.”

Janus chimed in as he saw the bewilderment on the faces of the sisters. “It’s based on the Mystery religion of Cybele which is slowly becoming more prevalent in the world today.”

“So, we’ll be working for a religious organization?” asked Thalia.

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t the impression we got from reading your flyer,” said Aglaia.

“No,” giggled Euphrosyne. “We thought we were answering an ad for a business that needed phone sex operators.”

Cybele laughed a bit uncomfortably. “Well, actually, we prefer the term religious sexual fantasy telephone counsellor.”

Janus glared over at Cybele. Damnit. Just keep things at a level they can relate to. “Well, in essence that is what you’ll be. But since you will be part of a subsidiary business of The Mysteries of Cybele, we like to couch what we are doing in more religious terms.”

“That’s okay. We like euphemisms too,” said Thalia confidently.

“Yes,” agreed Aglaia, “it’s always fun to reshape the reality of our jobs by redefining our job descriptions.”

Euphrosyne broke out in a fit of giggles. “In fact, all of us used to be escorts for Around the World With Eighty Ladies.”

“Well, escort is a euphemism, of course, for what we actually did,” said Thalia.

“That’s great,” said Cybele hesitantly. “But, here with us, we would expect your contact with callers to be strictly over the phone. No giving out personal information or arranging private, hands-on sessions.”

Aglaia nodded serenely. “Oh, that’s no problem. We’re out of the escort business. We got married and our husbands didn’t want us to see other men.”

“Well, other than them,” said Thalia with a knowing wink. “They were actually escorts whom we married. Like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.”

Euphrosyne laughed a little snootily. “Well, except Julia Roberts played a street prostitute and we were definitely a cut above that.”

“Well, that’s wonderful.” Unsure where to take the conversation, Cybele tried to sound properly motivating. “You clearly have lots of valuable experience and would be an asset to our organization.”

Janus looked over at Aglaia, Thalia, and Euphrosyne. “Why don’t we talk some more about what the requirements for this job are?”

Cybele began to regain her equilibrium at interviewing such enthusiastic experts. “Yes. That’s a good idea, Janus.”

“We have a bible of sexual fantasies that we have put together that you are expected to be familiar with. If there are any fantasies which you do not wish to talk about, we will need to know before we set you up with a caller,” Janus said.

“Yes.” Cybele leaned forward to examine the sisters’ reactions closely. “You **MUST** be comfortable improvising, because not everything will be covered in the bible.”

Aglaia gave Cybele a knowing look. "Oh, that's no problem, dear. We're quite used to mirroring back the words our clients use, in order to heighten their fantasy."

"Actually, you might find this even easier than creating fantasies in a more purely physical environment," said Janus.

"Exactly," said Cybele as she began to relax in her role as interviewer. "For instance, since the caller cannot see you, you can pretend to be whomever he wants. The best way to do that is if he asks you what you look like, don't tell him right away. Instead, ask what he thinks you look like and play off that image."

"Just be off slightly enough so that he thinks you really look like the description you're giving," said Janus.

"That makes sense." Thalia tilted her head back and thought of an example. "If he thinks I'm 5'8", I'll just pretend to be 5'7", but wearing heels."

This one's no fool. Janus smiled. "Perfect."

Euphrosyne cheerily rocked back and forth in her chair. "I guess it helps that we're not exactly amateurs in this type of business."

"Absolutely," said Janus. What enthusiasm! She's a natural.

Aglaia looked over at Cybele. "So, how exactly would this business operate?"

Janus immediately broke in to detail the specifics. "If you are hired, we would have the call system so that all initial calls come here first. We take the caller's credit card number and find out what kind of sexual fantasy he wishes to confess and explore in greater detail. Then we forward the call to your own home on a separate line. You take care of the fantasy and then we charge them for however long you spend with them."

"And how much will we be making per caller?" asked Thalia.

Cybele looked over at her to judge her reaction. "You will be making a percentage of what the caller is charged."

Janus chimed in. "Twenty percent. So, if a caller spends 5 minutes with you on the phone, you will receive four dollars. That's not bad for five minutes work."

"Plus," said Cybele, "you will be working in the convenience and privacy of your own home. No one will have to know what you are doing and you never have to leave your home."

Janus looked over at the sisters. "So, is that something you would be comfortable doing?"

"Sounds pretty good," said Thalia. "We're just looking for a part-time job, something to keep us busy while our husbands are away."

"Yeah." Aglaia winked conspiratorially. "You know, rocking the cradle of civilization and keeping the world safe for private enterprise. And we just couldn't get excited about selling Pampered Chef products or Avon."

"No," Euphrosyne said sassily, "We'd thought we'd go with our strengths."

Cybele couldn't help but chuckle at the sisters' effervescence. "Well, that's great. There will be a six month probationary period but I have a good feeling about all of you."

Janus looked over at the sisters. "We have to do some more interviewing today and tomorrow, but we'll get back to you with more specifics, signs to form etc. We just won't be making formal job offers until the interview period is officially over."

Everyone stood up. Cybele escorted the sisters to the door, while Janus remained behind in the office.

Cybele ran back to Janus and gave him a quick hug. "Gods. You were so right, Janus. This is going to be a great money-maker. Those sisters are perfect."

"Not feeling so guilty now, eh?" Janus forced himself not to sound smug. "No more qualms about being the great exploiter."

Cybele playfully swatted him on the shoulder. "No." She paused. "You know, I think you have everything in hand. I'll leave the rest of the interviewing to you while I get started working on the information that we can put on our web site."

Janus gave her a gentle push towards the door. "Good plan. May as well divide and conquer."

Cybele blew him a kiss and left for home.

Janus walked over to close the door. Yep. I knew this was a brilliant idea. I can't wait to see what happens next. So many opportunities, so little time. With a complacent smile, he started preparing for the next round of interviews.

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