

White Monkey Chronicles



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The Complete Trilogy

Isabella Ides

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EVENUS OF PAROS,
5TH CENTURY BCE



BOOK ONE
HUMBOLDT COUNTY

P R E L U D E

ONCE UPON A COLD WINTER'S *night an infant deity was orphaned by his feckless parents. The father was a famous bachelor Jew, and the mother was married to an A-list Hindu. Both parents were reincarnation junkies.*

The Papa God, never noted for the quality of his parenting skills, scampered before it became evident that his beloved was with child.

When her offspring came out a bright, telltale blue—a sign of divine Hindu lineage—the Mama God was desperate to hide the evidence of her illicit liaison with the Semite deity. Alas, the newborn had to go, for the baby's sake as well as for her own.

Hence the misbegotten was never registered in the crowded Hindu pantheon, nor mentioned in any neo-biblical testament, nor listed in the catalogues of begats. He might have passed into the annals of oblivion but for a lucky chance.

In those days, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, there was a certain rogue order of nuns in a faraway land, a Sisterhood noted for a willingness to take in strays.

So it came to pass that the infant was carried across the seas to the Americas. As the baby made his passage in the white furry arms of a powerful protector, it appeared as if a wandering star were crossing the heavens.

O, HOLY NIGHT.



THE MONKEY BLINKED

SISTER MARY SUBORDINARY polished the canted bay window until the glass disappeared. Then, dust rag in hand, she stepped back and watched the blizzard white out the woods. After sixty years of practice, Sister was on the brink of achieving Immaculate Mind.

She pictured herself inside a snow globe, everything cool and clean and absolved in the mesmerizing swirl. A black plastic figurine at peace with the muted world, she waited for

the last tiny flake to settle at her feet. The little straggler never completed its journey. A leap of snow outside on the lawn split her attention.

The meditation crashed.

The snow globe tipped over.

Sister almost said *damn it*. Instead, she shook her dust rag at the unruly world. *Snow does not leap*, she mildly reproved. Then she brushed off the tingle of a premonition and straightened her sleeves.

Let the others believe in extraordinary events. She preferred to keep her thoughts tidy, her whisk broom at the ready. So she simply whisked. And with that executive whisk, she decided she had not seen a clump of snow spring suddenly upwards. Then she tucked the unwanted image in a drawer labeled illusions.

The phrase *snow blindness* drifted in her mind and banked there. The chill lent a satisfying numbness to a part of her conscience that had been bothering her since yesterday's visit from agents of the Magistere Magisterium, the dreaded inquisitional arm of The Great Church.

Staring into the infinite white had stopped time, blotted out yesterday's sheave of grievances—the red delegation of Cardinals, their strange gifts, the bruise of their boot prints on the pristine crust of snow. All of that, so beautifully obliterated in the silent night, all of that so carefully occluded from the snow globe meditation. Bliss is a brief address.

“There it goes again.”

This time she spoke out loud. This time the clump launched fifteen feet upwards and landed on the branch of a neighboring tree.

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“Stop misbehaving,” she admonished the strange snow, aware she could no more boss the weather than she could boss her own thoughts. The snowfall itself was an anomaly. It never snowed in Humboldt County.

A stray notion shuttled by: *perfect weather for godfall*.

“No, it is perfectly not!” She stopped herself, surprised by her vehemence and embarrassed that there was no one on the other side of the conversation. She lowered her voice to a prayerful whisper, “I must not lose my mind.”

As soon as the prophetic words were spoken, there it went—her beautiful mind skittered backwards, tumbled into yesterday and got lost. A bevy of red-robed Cardinals crowded her memory. Like angry red birds they circled and perched uninvited on the backside of her remarkable cerebral cortex; then they set to chattering until the interior red noise completely swarmed her view of the snowy scene outside.

A practiced contemplative, Sister Mary Subordinate resisted the urge to shake loose the clutch of invasive images. Now that she was caught in a recurrence loop, there was nothing for it but to take a clear-eyed look. She had an uncanny ability to replay a memory and note what was missed the first time around.

Go gentle, Sister, her inner guide cautioned.

Taking caution as her watchword, she rewound time prepared to let the virtual scene unfold as if she were standing outside the memory.

Once more she heard the insistent knocking, saw her hand on the latch. She braced herself for the onslaught. Then she opened the convent door on yesterday.

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There they stood, blood red against the snowy backdrop, three Cardinals—Delacroix, Bunbury and Oolumbo—bearing gifts: gold, frankincense, and a music box. A music box?

Too stunned to invite them in, she remembered staring into a pair of kohl-darkened eyes. All the Cardinals wore make-up, their eyes circled in thick kohl, their lips plum-colored, their pointed fingernails buffed with yellow resin. The visitors were dressed in red sateen robes and tri-cornered red birettas, with the traditional yellow appliquéd beak protruding mid-forehead.

The brood of Cardinals brushed past her. The recollection so exquisitely detailed, she heard the swish of their robes on the marble floor, caught the scent of frankincense that assaulted the room.

The memory spooled out.

She watched herself whirl around and catch the eye of Mother Mary Extraordinary, who stood implacable at the top of the staircase, towering over the unfolding tableau. This time Sister noted the gleam in Extraordinary’s eye when Cardinal Bunbury cleared his throat and began to speak.

“We have come at the behest of His Holiness, the Munificentissimus Divine Mallard of All Mysteries, Hierophant of The Great Church.” Cardinal Bunbury’s eyes slid sideways. His tell was obvious on replay. Sister Subordinary caught the lie, pinned it for later perusal.

“These gifts are for the boy,” Cardinal Delacroix stated flatly, not bothering with the courtesy of a salutation. The ferret on Delacroix’s shoulder hissed.

Sister Merry Berry hiccupped.

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Sister Subordinary almost said, “What boy?” but hesitated just long enough for Mother Mary Extraordinary to have the first word.

The two Sisters gave no hint of their dismay when the ancient prioress simply said, “Thank you.”

Extraordinary’s *thank you* hung in the incensed air. Time compressed into a ball of dark matter. The vacuum created by the absence of a boy sucked all the energy out of the room. Then, in one swift movement, the towering Mother Mary Extraordinary descended the staircase.

No. That’s not the way it was.

Sister Subordinary corrected the memory. Mary Extraordinary never descended the stairs. One minute the prioress was on the second-floor landing and the next instant she was backing the Cardinals into the foyer. In their billowing robes, the visitors might have been captives of a Titian study in vermilion when they stopped breathing and stood under the Gothic archway, eyes glazed, Magi frozen in time. Bunbury held the bag of gold. Oolumbo, the frankincense. Delacroix, the music box.

“Accept the gifts,” Mother Mary Extraordinary instructed her consœurs.

Sister Mary Subordinary and Sister Merry Berry moved with alacrity and relieved the mystified Cardinals of their offerings, so easily plucked from their cold but pliant fingers.

Extraordinary’s powers were subtle and effective. The strange Magi were reanimated and dismissed before the visitation became another holy card in need of redaction. Later,

the Cardinals would not be able to explain what had happened—how they came to leave the gifts with not so much as a glimpse of an infant, or why they stood speechless in the convent’s foyer, malign blessings stuck in their throats.

At the very last, out of the corner of her eye, Sister Subordinary witnessed a further trespass. When the red-robed delegation swept back out of the drafty receiving room, one of the befuddled Cardinals instinctively reached out and nicked a copy of Mother Mary Extraordinary’s book of prayer-poems, then quickly dropped it into his deep pocket. That clip of time was momentarily stuck on replay in Mary Subordinary’s mind.

Hand on the book. Hand on the book. Hand on the book.

Cardinal Bunbury was a pack-rat by habit and an inquisitor by nature. He was sure to uncover a trove of deviant leaps of the imagination when he scoured the pages of Mother Mary’s eclectic book of prayers. It’s a wonder the incendiary book hadn’t set his robes on fire. The picture of Bunbury patting out the flames and burning his chubby fingers on Mother Mary’s prayers had made Sister Mary Subordinary laugh.

Privately, of course.



THAT WAS YESTERDAY.

This morning Sister Subordinary regretted the chuckle, felt the transgression.

There it was: the quibble in her conscience. Why had she dismissed the theft and not told the others? Another question crowded in. Who had sent these gift-bearing emissaries, if not the Hierophant?

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She balked at the answer. Whisk.

The old enemy had not been seen since the historic persecution of the Sisterhoods.

Not since the night of the burning cross.

Not since the Sisters of the Joyous Mystery had gone rogue. (Gone gladly rogue, if she were to be perfectly honest.)

Not since The Great Church cast out its rebel brides.

Not since the ecclesiastical axe of severance came winging down had a single birdman set foot on the sacred grounds.

Now this violation. These Cardinals. Possibly factotums of the old enemy.

She knew only one thing. She must dig in and regroup forces. For clearly her ability to slip into a conjured snow globe was no longer proof against the power of the birdmen to unsettle her.

The recollected knocking and the red flashback shut Sister Subordinary so completely out of the day, she forgot all about the mystery unfolding on the other side of the perfectly polished glass where the world resembled nothing so much as a glittering holiday greeting card.

Reach out, Sister. Open the card.

A disconsolate Mary Subordinary was about to turn away from the window when another movement caught her eye. This time the curious white clump tumbled out of a tree and scampered across the snow-covered lawn. And didn't it just move as swift as you please as soon as it hit the ground? So much for tidy minds. She had better investigate this anomalous and unruly snow. Her job was to put things to rights.

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Sister walked briskly to the double wooden doors and shoved them open on a white-sheathed world.

A moment of grace: the view was empty of Cardinals.

A gust of snow flurries blew back her black veil. She let the delicious cold wet her cheeks. Or was she crying? She'd be the first to deny it; and yet the relief of letting the tears spill unseen was oddly uplifting.

She never knew what made her look down.

An ordinary cardboard box sat on the marble floor of the porte cochere, almost touching the polished toes of her black boots. She barely had time to register the curious fact that the cardboard was dry, when she was startled by a soft mewling sound coming from inside the box.

Unconsciously, she reached for her prayer beads. An Ave hesitated on her lips as she bent for a closer look. That first glimpse of the blue baby knocked the soul right out of her. She had to grab her run-away soul from the very air and press it firmly back into her chest.

This baby's skin was not the bruised cyanotic blue of death. This baby was sky blue, lit from within like a computer screen—this baby was all effulgence.

My Sweet Lord, what in the world? There was a white monkey in the box with the baby. A stuffed monkey, she assured herself, its furry arms wrapped around the luminescent infant.

A scampering clump of snow raced across Sister Subordinary's memory and jumped into the box. Was that possible?

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In her entire sublunary existence, this was the most baffling collusion of images that had ever slipped over the threshold of her exceptional mind. With so many impossibilities occurring simultaneously, the sensory data refused to resolve. And so she cannot be blamed for not reaching out immediately and scooping up the babe into her rescuing arms. The narrative part of her brain was stuck on pause. For a moment, the story simply would not move forward.

It was when the monkey caught her eye and blinked that Sister Subordinary came back to herself, as if called home from a distant moon. She reached for the infant and the monkey let go.

Smiling, she lifted what proved to be a naked boy. The fat blue baby had a tag tied to his ankle, an ordinary cardstock tag with a white cotton string knotted through one of the silver links in his anklet of charms. The boy kicked and laughed, and the air was charged with the tinkling of silver bells. Sister Subordinary held him high and watched the universe dance on the baby's tongue.

Time dissolved, and a great translucent drool, suspended from the boy's chin considered whether or not to fall.

Right then and there, the baby spoke. Either out loud or in Sister Subordinary's mind, she could never be certain, but the words themselves were clear and certain.

“Earth is the best place for love.”

Then a great silence followed.

Not another word until the boy was seven years old.

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AS TIME PASSED, Sister Subordinary would give the boy's first words an occasional once over with her feather duster. The best place for love compared to what other place? She flicked a dust mote from the word *love*. Or, did the infant mean the best place to invent love? She ran her duster over the word *Earth*. Or, had he come in search of love?

She stood back and inspected the tidied-up sentence at a distance.

Earth is the best place for love.

Perhaps she was making too much of it. Maybe the infant had merely echoed a stray phrase picked up from an itinerant angel who had witnessed a fat blue infant tumble from his mother's arms and fall through the heavens. The angel might have whispered in the babe's ear and with a gentle shove, changed the trajectory of his fall.

There was no telling. So the phrase earned a place in Sister's museum of spiritual mysteries.

Although Sister Subordinary kept the memory of the infant's message spic-and-span, she did dismiss the monkey's blink. Or seemed to. At least she never mentioned the blink to the others. Why occasion disbelief?

She alone had seen how the monkey's soft arms wrapped around the newborn's shoulders, how the monkey's long tail encircled the blue moon of the baby's belly and tickled his omphalos with brisk little flicks, making the baby gurgle with pleasure. She alone had registered the monkey's gaze.

It was an unforgettable jolt—that split-second glimpse into the animal's fathomless wisdom. Then more astonishing still, the wild creature returned the favor.

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One blink and the monkey's ancient eyes had penetrated the very rock of her reason. In no time flat, he scrambled through every chamber of her heart, every niche in her mind, every turn of her soul. Only when the examination was complete did the exemplary guardian surrender the baby. As much as memory would later rearrange the picture, so much was clear in those first moments when she lifted the radiant infant from the downy white arms of the monkey.

And yet.

And yet, after the boy and the monkey and the box were brought inside, there was no possible way to argue with the sandpaper crackles of the Velcro tabs when Sister Subordinary separated the monkey's paws. Nor was she even remotely inclined to argue with this newly remade, diminished reality. This nun was infinitely skilled at taking reality on its own terms when it suited her, even at times when those terms were being rapidly renegotiated.

It is a fine testament to the strength of Sister Subordinary's mind that she held herself steady through the remarkable day. More than steady. She was suffused with joy. Her step was light upon the stair. She pulled out one of her dresser drawers and created a snug little nest for the unexpected guest. Then she pillowed the boy nicely among her underthings.

When Sister Merry Berry popped in moments later, Sister Subordinary took the opportunity to dash down to the kitchen. She set water to boil and improvised a baby formula of watered-down evaporated milk, sweetened with a bit of maple syrup.

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She sterilized a dozen bottles left over from the days when foundlings were a common occurrence.

Left on her own, Merry Berry picked up the stuffed toy monkey and placed it in the drawer with the sleeping infant. Instinctively, the baby reached out and pulled the monkey close. The darkening room whispered hush, and a soft blue light filled the dresser drawer.

A baby in the house.

ONE GLANCE AT THE SLEEPING blue infant and the ancient Mother Mary Extraordinary experienced a painful insurrection of hope. That unwelcome surge of longing had to be arrested before it hijacked her heart.

Mother Mary Extraordinary was a tall woman, topping off at six feet, and she was exceedingly thin despite her extraordinary appetite. It was said that some dark secret was eating her up from the inside and made her appear somewhat like a broom in a modified burka as she swept down the halls. Well into her second century, the white hair hidden beneath her veil reached all the way to her ankles.

Her hair had not turned white; it had always been white. Her eyes were a pale but piercing blue—anywhere from ice blue to diamond blue, depending upon her mood. The angrier she became, the whiter her irises, so that at her angriest there were only little black dots on the opaque white orbs. That extreme of temper will only manifest once, and to startling effect, in the course of this narrative. Frightening off a Cardinal was a trifle compared to what she was capable of in high dudgeon.

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Ensnconced in her private study, the ancient prioress makes an unprecedented refusal. She sets her will against providence and quickly catalogues an arsenal of arguments for putting the baby up for adoption, her black boot tapping out a Morse code of irritability to cover her mounting affliction.

At the other end of the west wing, Mary Subordinary keeps a prayerful vigil. She dangles questions and listens for Mary Extraordinary's footfall. There is a happy silence in the hall.

Holding the inevitable contretemps in abeyance, Sister Mary Subordinary steals the moment, seals it against time; it is a morning glory moment—the gleaming bottle of formula on the nightstand, the fat drop of condensation rolling down the glass, Sister Merry Berry bending over the swaddled newborn, then lifting him towards the light. There is the smack of a bright kiss that Merry Berry plants on the boy's forehead. Then the holy card resolves—like a classic Madonna with babe in arms, Sister Merry Berry gazes heavenward to make a quick prayer before she places the holy infant back in his nesting drawer.

Mary Extraordinary pauses in the open doorway. She sees how the Sisters are besotted and means to end the insurrection before it begins.

“We have no business raising a child in this, our season of woe,” Extraordinary's deep voice throttles to a halt on woe.

Woe hangs in the air, damp and musty.

Sister Merry Berry wants to blast the fog of woe out of the room. Her fantasy entails a certain red plastic ray-gun she'd spotted the last time she'd snuck out to the local 7-Eleven.

THE MONKEY BLINKED

“By some chance or mischief, this boy has been endowed by The Great Church. His windfall wealth gives us options. We could send him to a lamasery in Tibet. He does look rather like a fat blue Buddha,” Mother Mary Extraordinary smiled.

“Tibet?” Sister Merry Berry pouted, “Why, that’s awfully far. I think we should keep him.” She poked her head up, blinking against the light much like a prairie dog who’s been hiding in the dark safety of her burrow, keeping her thoughts carefully cached.

In the box of holiday chocolates, Merry Berry was the cinnamon-dusted espresso truffle that everyone reaches for first. She was short, round, athletic. She had bounce. Her springy aubergine curls made constant mischief with her veil. An intriguing dimple in the center of her chin suggested that at any moment she might bubble over with laughter. From childhood on, she was always the girl with at least three best friends in tow. Sadly, her last set of besties were currently buried in the makeshift convent cemetery, victims of the prayer eaters.

“At the Chodrak orphanage,” Mary Extraordinary ignored Merry Berry, “he would be surrounded by other children.”

“What about me?” Merry Berry offered herself, palms up. “I could be his best friend.” Merry Berry looked to Mary Subordinary for support.

“I believe,” Subordinary entered with caution, “that when a foundling is left on the doorstep, certain obligations are entailed.” Subordinary paused to give Extraordinary room to

reflect, aware that the elderly nun had been knocking on heaven's door and might not wish to entail new obligations.

For the first time in her very long life, Mary Extraordinary was refusing a call. The celestial phone kept ringing and she kept hanging up.

“We’ve never raised a boy,” she side-stepped. “He would have no father figure of any kind. Well, perhaps that is not altogether a negative. Ouch!”

Sometimes when her conscience pricked her, Mary Extraordinary experienced it as an actual physical sensation. Her eyes rolled up and her head tilted slightly to the right. The two Sisters waited while Mother paused a moment to address her conscience.

Her silent prayer went like this: *Mea Culpa. Mea Culpa. Now leave me alone. I'm busy. I did not mean to anathematize the entire male sex, much less insult our little blue guest. Mea Maxima Culpa. Satisfied?*

Then her voice boomed, “If I do have an incipient prejudice against men, blame it on the Cardinals!”

She realized she had spoken this last out loud and simply continued with a rueful smile, “So blessed be the boys, for Lord's sake.”

Having settled spiritual accounts, she returned to the matter at hand.

“We must consider the fact that he would have to be kept in the strictest secrecy. The Cardinals know something. We can't be sentimental. An orphaned boy might prove a temptation too

much for The Great Church. Kidnapping is not unheard of, dear Sisters. Remember Edgardo Mortara.”

They did not remember. Mother Mary’s memories extended to the archaic, if not arcane. Once upon a true but antiquated history, the six-year-old Edgardo had been snatched from his Jewish parents by officers of the Inquisition and secreted away in Rome.

The Sisters took her point. The boy would be in constant danger from The Great Church. True, it was a reformed church, and this was Humboldt County after all. Nonetheless certain vestigial mindsets persisted through the oceans of time.

Now that the baby was safely nestled in the dresser drawer, the Sisters appreciated what a close call it had been. Yesterday’s visit from the officers of the Magistere could not have been a coincidence.

“There is only one eminence at the Sanctum Avesticum Quoborium who has the divinatory skill to predict the coming of a deity.”

Sister Mary Subordinary bowed her head in silent acknowledgement.

Mother Extraordinary continued, “I am exceedingly surprised that he was off by one day.”



THE EXCELLENT HOLY HIGH MAGUS of The Great Church, His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary, Magistrate of the Magistere Magisterium and Court Astrologer, did not believe for a Schrödinger’s second that he had been off by one day. Reading

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the stars one evening, he had noticed certain anomalous movements. Stylus in hand, he calculated the coming of the holy infant with peerless mathematical precision. He knew when, and he knew where, but he was a little shaky on who. The stars were maddeningly silent on the matter of the infant's patents of divinity.

The child's mother had been exceptionally wily in disguising her pregnancy—a secret locked in her heart's most guarded chamber, a sweet bump veiled in yards of fair white silk. Neither her sacred consort nor her illicit lover knew of the boy's existence. Only the Monkey God had been present at the birth.

Carried across the oceans from the farthest steppes of India, the holy infant arrived in the Americas cradled in the furry arms of a peerless guardian. The white langur monkey was drawn fast by the honeyed scent of prayers, the enticement of metaphysical cookies left cooling on a windowsill in the stonework wall of a secluded convent in Humboldt County.

On first arrival, the monkey hid himself and the boy high in the leafy canopy of the woods that bordered the convent, so he could surveil the scene undetected. He watched the party of three Cardinals come and go from his perch in the tall trees, watched their footprints fill with fresh snow. He watched Sister Subordinate polish the window, appreciated her singularity of purpose, admired the transparent sphere of downy flakes that she balanced in her mind. With a caution born of ancient wisdoms and warfare, the monkey waited a judicious twenty-four hours after the last Cardinal went out the western gate before he kicked over Sister's snow globe and delivered the boy.

THE MONKEY BLINKED

THE MAGUS WAS CORRECT. The boy had arrived in the Northern Hemisphere on Wednesday, January Fourteenth, 40.8019° north longitude, 124.1636° west latitude, 7:00 am, Pacific Standard Time.

An undocumented deity in the Americas was an unheard-of breach in the protocols of theophany. The thought of some precocious hippie coming of age during his reign, some unsorted barefoot guru gadding about his neighborhood serving fish and fishing his men, nearly scorched the over-amped brain of the Magus.

The Excellent Holy High Magus, His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary, was an impeccable agent of his own ambitions. Currently the second most powerful eminence in The Great Church, his eye was on the Hierophancy. Operation Magi had been his ingenious brainchild.

The unannounced visit to the convent was meant to be a preemptive political strike artfully disguised as a peace-making overture. The historical precedent of gift-bearing royals suggested obeisance. The elegant reenactment was designed to pave the way back into the good graces of the Sisters and thereby gain access to the child.

His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary had much to amend in his relationship to the Joyous Mystery Sisters. The Inquisition of the Order of Immaculate Conceptions had been initiated at his command.

Strange to tell, His Eminence had no particular interest in credos or doctrinal purity. His religious bent was flexible, spongy even. His was an absorbent mind, attracted to the experimental and the unlikely.

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Power was his elixir.

And the Sisterhood had dared drink from his cup, the cup of wands: the cup of divine powers. As Magistrate of the collective Magistere Magisterium, he was the Inquisitor of Record, the mastermind who oversaw the eradication of female priests during the historic persecution of the Sisterhoods. He knew better than to show up on Mary Extraordinary's doorstep.

In any case, the art of conciliation was not in his skill set. Nor was his appearance an asset in animating trust. He was ostentatious and terrifying, attractive and repellent in equal measure. The Excellent Magus was literally breath-taking. Women were known to faint at the sight of him.

All the Cardinals were vanity queens and applied theatrical effects to look as much as possible like their totemic avian namesakes. Cardinal Cassowary went them one better. An adept at self-modification, he had recessed his cheek bones, carved out sockets and embedded two gorgeous cassowary eyes. Not satisfied with the merely decorative, the Magus had managed to make the eyes of the raptor operative as well.

His four eyes burning holes in Mother Mary's imperious posturings would have hardly furthered his cause. To avoid provocation, he had enticed the ambitious Cardinals Delacroix and Oolumbo to act as his proxies in Operation Magi. The clever Bunbury stepped up without priming.

At the initial clandestine meeting that saw the birth of Operation Magi, all parties had agreed that the gifts would need to be impressive if the overture were to be successful. But the Magus had argued rancorously with Delacroix and Oolumbo

over the sum of gold that was necessary to demonstrate that they were in earnest. The Magus wanted to give away what amounted to a king's ransom.

Gold that could be borrowed from the church treasury, Bunbury reminded everyone present. And paid back with interest, he felt no need to mention. Before promotion to Cardinal, Bunbury had been a dedicated Goldfinch and sat on the board of the One Avesticum Bank and Trust. He still held a major interest in the One.

Bunbury's nose twitched involuntarily at the scent of money.

Delacroix and Oolumbo dug in their heels and closed their pocketbooks.

"Begging everyone's pardon," the obsequious Bunbury had uncharacteristically pushed himself forward and taken the floor at the fateful meeting. "You will forgive me, if I herewith toss in my vote with His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary. Regrettably, we are now two against two. An unfortunate stalemate."

Bunbury was built like a snowman, round in the middle, with sticklike arms, and mittens of plump pink fingers that he interminably rubbed with his thumbs as if he detected something sticky in the air. "All things considered, as it were," he wetted his lips, "I must say that Cardinal Cassowary's is the better argument. Largess is the ticket. So, dear Oolumbo and dear Delacroix, I am afraid we are at an impasse. I stand with Cardinal Cassowary. Alas."

The Magus chuckled and repeated Bunbury's, "Alas."

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Then as if a silent alarm went off, all affability vanished. The room went chill, and the mercurial Cassowary turned on the two holdouts. “If there is going to be a new deity darting about the Americas,” his voice began to drill, “that deity had damn well better be domed under The Great Church!”

Cardinal Cassowary’s face went blood red. His right hand tingled and twitched—the skin began to contract, and the blackened nails were growing.

“Dammit,” Cassowary hissed under his breath and placed his left hand over the unsightly right.

The Magus dared not look down lest he draw attention to the hand that was slowly mutating into a raptor claw. He smiled gratuitously at the wondering Cardinals. It was a disarming smile, a distracting smile. And by design, the smile changed the chemical balance in the Magus’ brain—a stratagem that halted the anger-driven reconfiguration. Then he slowed his heart rate and lowered his voice to a throaty whisper. “Gold buys access,” the smile broadened, “and access means influence.”

Calm as you please, the Magus closed his human eyes, but his cassowary eyes remained open.

Bobble heads nodding, Cardinals Oolumbo and Delacroix conceded the argument. Simultaneously, the two Cardinals reached for the jewel-encrusted amulets suspended from gold chains around their necks. They unscrewed the tiny caps, lifted the amulets to their noses, and took long, gratifying sniffs.

The veneer of gentleman’s club ambience was restored, although the room remained decidedly icy.

THE MONKEY BLINKED

No one, excepting Delacroix's ferret, had noticed the near mishap. The sight of Cardinal Cassowary's nascent claw had sent Felix scampering deep inside Cardinal Delacroix's red sleeve. Now the unhappy ferret tentatively peeked out, sniffing for traces of predator. Detecting no sign or scent of the raptor claw, Felix scampered back to his accustomed perch on Delacroix's shoulder.

"Let me refill your amulets," the Magus offered, flexing the fingers of his restored human hand. Free refills of Prayer Juice were uncommon. Delacroix and Oolumbo were temporarily mollified by the offer.

Bunbury was that rare Cardinal who refrained from inhalants. He claimed allergies and kept his suspicions about the sanctioned drugs to himself.

"What will you have, Bunbury? A shot of distilled spirits?"

His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary now acted the part of genial host. That it was an unconvincing performance no longer mattered. He had succeeding in creating pliable agents—Magi made to order. Besides, he preferred operating in the wings, his fantoccini performing in the spotlight.

"Let the Sisters think you come at the behest of the Divine Duck," the Magus instructed the three subdued emissaries.

"Oh, has His Holiness been put in the picture? Do we have the blessing of the Munificentissimus Mallard?" Cardinal Oolumbo belatedly thought to ask.

"Yes," the Magus reassured, thinking to himself how the Hierophant habitually and indiscriminately blessed everyone and everything.

WHITE MONKEY CHRONICLES

Assurances notwithstanding, the Munificentissimus Divine Mallard of All Mysteries, His Holiness, Hierophant of The Great Church, remained blissfully unaware of Cardinal Cassowary's machinations. By the time the Divine Mallard woke up from his long winter's nap, the Sanctum Avesticum Quoborium would be in crisis.

ON THE DAY OF THE VISITATION, still confident in the divinatory skills of the Magus, the three sateen-robed paragons of orthodoxy had set about their mission with self-important resolve. Gifts in hand, they were mortified to find themselves stomping their boots on the porte cochere of the convent for a good twenty minutes, noses reddened by the cold, knuckles bruised from repeated knocking.

When Cardinal Delacroix examined his bruised knuckles the next morning, his jealousy of the church Magus purpled into disdain. His only consolation was that Cardinal Cassowary and his vainglorious claim that he could read the future was henceforth soundly discredited.

There was no boy.

Operation Magi had proved a mockery. Word of the debacle echoed in chirps and tweets up and down the art-bedecked grand halls of Sanctum Avesticum Quoborium. The power players among the birdmen were jostling for position, hoping to knock the Magus off his perch and take his lackeys down a few pegs for good measure. The winds of contention were blowing high and mighty.

THE MONKEY BLINKED

In the east quadrangle of the Avesticum, outside the private apartments of the Hierophant, a delegation of ruffled Cardinals waited impatiently, petitions in hand. The Munificentissimus Divine Mallard of All Mysteries had been asleep for five long days while the crisis roiled.

Avesticum couriers stationed in the hallway were prepared to run through the palace ringing bells to announce the awakening of His Munificentissimus or, should it prove necessary, to run to the campanile and toll the death-knell.

The courier-priests belonged to the Excellent Order of Geococcyx Californianus. These runners sported gold and brown diamond-patterned tights, crested caps, and gold prosthetic beaks. A blue stripe painted across their eyes finished the runway look.

All the birdmen were aware that one of these fine days, in the not-too-distant future, the Mallard's sleep would become permanent. Numerous wagers rode on the daily outcome: to wake or not to wake, perchance to dream on in the sweet hereafter. The Excellent Order of Geococcyx kept dutiful book on the Hierophant's life expectancy.

Cardinal Delacroix passed by a huddle of Geos and gave up a silent prayer. His money was on an even-numbered day. A red day. As Delacroix continued his jaunt through the halls of virtue, he became increasingly aware that heads were turning his way. Conversation stopped at his appearance and resumed at his back.

The Avesticum avians were all aflutter, twittering away in paroxysms of hearsay. Gossip was their daily bread, and on this occasion, they were well-fed birds.

WHITE MONKEY CHRONICLES

Delacroix straightened his back when three Hooded Crows emerged from an alcove and assaulted him with jests.

“How’s tricks in the Magi business, Your Eminence?”

“Would Your Eminence care to see a man about a camel?”

Delacroix increased his brisk pace and pretended not to hear. It was unendurable to be the square toes of every passing joke.

Today, the affronted Cardinal had ditched his dress reds and wore a dark-purple elastane workout unitard. A sweatband tied around his head gave him the appearance of a latter-day ninja. Only a tiny red bird perched on the silver-cross logo stitched on his sweatband evidenced his brand.

Delacroix reached inside his athletic bag for his ferret—the unhappy Felix—who promptly sunk four pointed canines into the Cardinal’s hand. The pain was a trusty anodyne. His determination reinvigorated, he ducked down a stairwell and made his way to the ball courts.

CARDINALS DELACROIX AND OOLUMBO had been giving one blue racquet ball a sound thrashing for the past half hour, a blessed respite from the taunts of their peers.

Unfortunately for Delacroix, self-castigation took up where the chattering Avesticum aviary left off. At one point, Cardinal Delacroix swore he could hear Mother Mary Extraordinary gloating and counting gold coin. The inner critical cawing continued unabated in Delacroix’s beleaguered brain until, without warning, he slammed his racquet against the wall.

“You dropped your racquet,” Cardinal Oolumbo coolly observed.

“Take a point,” Delacroix shot back.

“I’m done,” Oolumbo conceded the game. “You win.”

“I win nothing!” Delacroix roared. “That preening pretender, predictor of marvels and messiahs, that Holy High Maggot!” Delacroix picked up his racquet and served the ball.

Oolumbo did not engage. Both men watched the ball lose momentum and roll to a stop.

“I, for one, plan on surviving your bruised ego,” Cardinal Oolumbo snarked. “The Magus was charged with malfeasance. Give it a rest, Delacroix.”

“Those birdbrains who mock me will quiver in their red booties when they discover I was the one who gave the order to have Cardinal Cassowary shut up in the tower.”

“The question remains: will the Hierophant honor the charges you brought against his beloved Magus? The Divine Duck takes his beatitudes seriously.”

“The question remains: will the Hierophant wake up any time this century? And another thing, where was Bunbury when we wanted a third signature on the warrant? Damn sycophant!”

The bickering Cardinals went silent when Delacroix’s envoy, the bear-like Brother Umbruco, opened the door to the ball court. Umbruco was a member of the recondite Hooded Crows, some of whom occasionally hired themselves out to ranking Cardinals for special services.

WHITE MONKEY CHRONICLES

Without preamble the monk announced, “There’s been a double murder.”

“Give me more,” Delacroix ordered.

“The Magus killed two of the three guards who came to arrest him. Eviscerated them, he did.”

The hair on the back of Delacroix’s neck bristled. “Did Cassowary get away?”

“No.” Umbruco knew Delacroix was not going to like what came next so the monk drew the moment out. “The Magus stepped over the dead bodies and finished the arrest himself. He’s in the tower.” Umbruco waited.

“You mean *locked* in the tower.” Delacroix was clearly shaken.

“There’s more. Something happened to his hand. It’s not human anymore.” Umbruco was enjoying this but hid it well. “Sheer speculation, Eminence, but my guess is that the Magus himself is in possession of the key. In any case, the prison door is wide open.”

“Landica!” Oolumbo swore.

After a brief stint as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, Oolumbo was raised in one of the many orphanages where The Great Church incubates its baby priests. Swearing in Latin was mother’s milk to the ill-used Cardinal.

“Deodamnatus. This is on you, Delacroix. Arrest the Magus? Futue te ipsum!” Oolumbo picked up his balls and left the court, changed his mind, turned around, and hurled one ball at the back of Delacroix’s head.

“CLOWNS,” THE MAGUS RESPONDED when Bunbury shared the gossip.

“As per usual,” Bunbury took up his thread, “the Divine Mallard’s head was tucked under his metaphorical wing when the order to arrest Your Eminence was stamped, sealed and set into motion by those turncoats, Delacroix and Oolumbo.” Expert at keeping his podgy buns covered, Bunbury had scurried into his hidey-hole on the morning of the arrest. Now he was all gracious availability.

“Your Eminence, is there anything, anything at all I can do to make your stay more comfortable?”

“My stay? My stay at the Comfort Prison Suites? Surely, you jest.”

“Surely, it will not be an extended stay, Eminence. Besides you hold the keys.”

“Be honest, Bunbury. What do you really think of this prison tower?”

Bunbury squirmed. Candor was not his *métier*. “It’s lofty,” he ventured.

The Magus actually laughed—a deep sonorous laugh.

The Excellent Holy High Magus, His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary, Magistrate of the Magistere Magisterium and Court Astrologer, was currently awaiting court review. Most likely, there would have been no pending review had it not been for the gold squandered on a nonexistent deity. Allegedly nonexistent, the Magus amended as he reviewed the warrant.

To be sure, the matter of the murdered guards merited censure, but there were rituals that absolved crimes of passion.

Still, the Magus acknowledged privately, he would have to address the murder charges at some point.

Damned claw.

It was, however, the missing money that rankled most in certain halls of the Sanctum Avesticum Quoborium. Operation Magi had been a costly, embarrassing error. The violation seemed personal, almost sexual. The much-reviled Mary Extraordinary had grabbed the exclusively-male Avesticum by the purse strings.

The Association of Goldfinch was—not unreasonably—demanding that the Magus reimburse the treasury. They sent him unsigned, urgent notes, delivered by genetically modified carrier pigeons.

Gold was not the only consideration. Now that their prized chemist was ensconced in the Sanctum's prison tower, the aficionados of spritz and sniff were understandably nervous. Surely the Magus would not cut them off.

A flash mob of worried supplicants headed for the cathedral. The basilica under the Golden Duomo began to fill with a steady thrum of desperate Pater Nosters, setting off the intricate and tumultuous choreography of an Avesticum prayer rally. The flock of ardent petitioners shared one desire—that the Divine Mallard of All Mysteries intervene on their behalf and keep the font of Prayer Juice freely flowing.

The momentum shifted when a counter valence of clamorous Aves was launched by a charm of Goldfinch who rushed down the center aisle without ceremony. These dedicated accountants of the One Avesticum Bank and Trust

made an unwelcome, but striking appearance in flowing yellow robes trimmed in black velvet. They wore black masks and matching black beanies, studded with neat rings of pointy orange beaks. The Frères Finch were fierce practitioners and meant to outpray the aficionados of spritz and sniff.

The prayer-off was overwhelmed when a funeral march of beautifully groomed Loyal Red Kites entered in military formation with eight pallbearers and a quartet of snare-drummers. Their customary duties more ceremonial than belligerent, the Kites dressed in uniforms made for parade. They wore furry red top hats and feather-tipped red tailcoats with an excess of brass buttons. The high-hatted Kite at the lead carried a gold mace that he tossed high in the basilica and caught with breathtaking precision. He was followed by the Kite Ecclesiarch who swung an incense-burning thurible suspended from gold chains.

One Cardinal stood at the back of the sanctuary, just outside the melee of competitive prayer. As blame for the Magi-debacle accelerated with the drumbeats, the politically ambitious Cardinal Delacroix saw how the botched arrest and the deaths of the two Red Kites might prove providential.

Although assassinations were commonplace on Mount Quoborium, the politically astute hired them out. Cassowary had made a rare blunder. A thrill coursed down Delacroix's spine.

Bang the drum slowly, Delacroix whispered, *this is Cardinal Cassowary's funeral.*

The Cardinal with the claw was no longer a contender for the Hierophancy, not with two murders on his account. Were an election held today, with the bloody eviscerations fresh on

every birdman's mind, Delacroix was convinced that the Hierophancy would be his. If only the Mallard of all Mysteries would take this blessed opportunity to pass into the sweet hereafter.

Cardinal Delacroix reached for his ferret, but the unreliable Felix was not in a biting mood. The lively creature ran up Delacroix's arm and perched on his head. The Cardinal ignored his fuzzy headgear. The urge was upon him. He went down on one knee and prayed with unaccustomed, but steadfast fervor that the Hierophant—may it please God—not wake up.

Subtly aware of the cacophony of prayer, the Mallard rolled over in his sleep. The titular head of The Great Church, His Holiness, the Munificentissimus Divine Mallard of All Mysteries, was not at all averse to dying, but that finality had so far eluded him. Dozing off was his next best benediction. His Holiness was renowned for his ability to sleep through anything. He happily suffered from a debilitating case of SNS, sudden nap syndrome. Moreover, this well-rested Hierophant was even-handed to a fault, slow to judge and quick to mercy.

Down on his knee, Cardinal Delacroix was forced to consider the possibility that the whimsical Hierophant might do the unthinkable and pardon the murders, might even go so far as to hold Delacroix responsible. In a rare consoling gesture, the ever-alert Felix began industriously licking the Cardinal's ear. Despite the quick action of the ferret's sluicy pink tongue, the Cardinal refused to be consoled. He slapped at the ferret, who finally obliged the Cardinal with a scream-inducing bite.

Two courier Geos ran past ringing hand-held bells.

The Hierophant was awake.

THE MONKEY BLINKED

THE SECRETARY OF SACRED WRIT sat, pen in hand. An impeccably groomed birdman, Sagittarius Milton wore translucent white face paint with powdery orange shadows around his eyes. His tight thin lips were heavily silvered. This striking look was fashioned after the elegant secretary bird (Sagittarius Serpentarius). The ensemble included black knee breeches, a grey tailcoat, and a smart quill-embellished cap. A model of decorum, the secretary waited—he'd been waiting for nearly a week—while an opinion slowly wound its way through the intricate maze of the Hierophant's lofty mind. At some point the opinion had simply exhausted its will to find a way out.

"I have no opinion." The Hierophant, still in his dressing gown, stood and stretched his creaky bones.

"If you will not meet with the Cardinals, you must at least generate a document, a declaration, some sort of official proclamation." Sagittarius Milton lifted his pen.

The Hierophant took his cue. "In that case, proclaim this—'His Holiness met with His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary in the historic Sanctum prison tower.' There's a fine opener." Satisfied that he had got off to a good start, the Hierophant wandered over to a well-laid breakfast table, poured himself a cup of tea and took a nibble from a chocolate chip cookie.

"You know, Cassowary has done marvels with his prison quarters," His Holiness spooned sugar in his tea. "You should see it. The view from the tower balcony? Breathtaking. The Golden Duomo is simply stunning at sunset. To observe that architectural landmark from that balcony at that hour was a rare blessing—the Duomo backlit, rosy-fingered, Homeric.

Well, I shan't be climbing those tower stairs again, not I, not on these wobbly stems. Pick up your pen, man."

"His Holiness has not given his—." The secretary was at pains not to use the word opinion. He changed tack. "What did the Excellent Holy High Magus have to say for himself?"

"Cardinal Cassowary claimed the deaths were accidental. As it turns out, he is not entirely in control of his claw. It's newish. He apologized profusely and assured me that he is diligently working on a fail-safe."

"And therefore?"

"Must I write the entire proclamation myself?" The Hierophant was being uncharacteristically snappish.

The secretary put down his pen and gave His Holiness a long look.

"Don't get your quills in a ruff, Milton." The Hierophant blinked several times. "I feel as if I am—I am about to sneeze. It must be an opinion coming on. Dear me. Write this: 'The Divine Mallard of all Mysteries found himself moved by the plight of the Magus.' Now that's poetic. 'And His Holiness, mindful of the beatitudes, offered to bless the claw.' There, you have it."

"Did you?" The rarely startled secretary lifted a brow.

"I did, yes. What? The poor man had blood on his claw. We can't have him Lady Macbething about the sacred halls. Out, out damn spot and all that dramatic queening that goes with a guilty conscience. Don't write that."

"As if," the secretary glanced up, then continued composing the proclamation. After several thoughtful additions and a few

formal flourishes, the Secretary of Sacred Writ handed the improved document to His Holiness for perusal, certain that there would be no revisions. The Mallard was not much inclined towards second thoughts, much less first opinions.

Before the proclamation could be read to the assembled Cardinals, rumor got out that His Holiness meant to call Hierophant's Prerogative and effect the immediate release of Cardinal Cassowary. Objection, in the form of Avesticum law, came quick on the heels of rumor. Forgiveness, in this instance, required the assent of the five Cardinals of the Signatura Tribunale.

At the behest of Cardinal Delacroix, the Sanctum Legal Eagles advised the Mallard that Hierophant's Prerogative could not be invoked in the case of homicide, accidental or otherwise. So, despite the Hierophant's saintly intentions, the second most powerful member of The Great Church was left cooling his heels and his claw in the praetorian pokey.

For reasons Delacroix could never fathom, the highly adaptive Magus chose to honor Avesticum protocols and stay put. No guards were posted. No one bothered to lock the tower. No one believed that the Excellent Holy High Magus was much inconvenienced by his change of residence.

IN THE SECLUSION of his prison suite, the Magus contemplated the exquisite composition of the claw. He saw that it was a thing of incomparable beauty. The artistry was sublime. The visceral sensation was orgasmic. And the disappointment was crushing.

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The Holy High Magus of The Great Church, His Eminence Cardinal Cassowary, wanted nothing so much as to be in control of his splendid claw. Although he was loath to admit it, there was a flaw in its morphological design and, by implication, a flaw in the designer. That irksome paradox dogged him at every turn. How does a flawed creator amend his creation?

It was the perennial question that haunted his every incarnation.

Be that as it may, the primal power of the claw had overtaken Cardinal Cassowary's big brain when it disemboweled the two unfortunate Red Kites. To make matters worse, the Magus was unable to reconfigure his human hand after the blood bath. Now he was stuck with a permanent claw.

Bunbury cleared his throat. The Magus looked up.

"The perils of self-modification," Cassowary sighed, examining the nine-inch sickle-shaped nail on his middle finger.

Bunbury supplied a dutiful chuckle.

"I have not forgotten about the boy." The Magus turned his full attention on Cardinal Bunbury, searching for any sign of doubt.

"Nor have I," Cardinal Bunbury answered too quickly.

The Magus tilted his head. The ovoid center of his cassowary eyes pinned the punctilious Cardinal, searching for the lie.

An understandably anxious Bunbury hunted for a consoling bromide. Any palliative would do, so long as it did not call into question the divinatory skills of the Magus.

“Really,” Bunbury settled, “a boy is not of much account until he reaches the age of seven or so.”

“Point taken. Seven years. I like it. Tell His Holiness that a seven-year sentence will be acceptable.”

Cardinal Cassowary abruptly turned to other matters. “I will need the drafting table brought up from my study. And my case of drawing tools. I want to rebuild my lab here in the tower. I’ll need a state-of-the-art refrigerated centrifuge and an electron microscope—those are the pricey items. Here’s a list of chemicals, graduated beakers, pipettes and various et ceteras.”

Then the Magus took out a pen, inked his distinctive signature and handed his acolyte a sizable check. “Keep the change.”

Bunbury made some quick calculations, nodded his appreciation, and left the Magus to his many endeavors. The generous gratuity would swell Cardinal Bunbury’s secret offshore account—brisk business as usual in The Great Church.

Though initially outraged by the effrontery of the arrest, the Magus would come to relish his lengthy seclusion. He was not given to the society of churchmen. He was, *prima facie*, a maker—a necromancer, a tinker, an engineer, a scientist, a designer. He was crafty.

When the Holy High Magus finally emerged from his prison tower seven years hence, he would be more powerful by leagues. And a good deal wealthier. He had a thriving business of the sort that imprisonment does not impede.

Ensnared in his prison suite, the engine of his ambitions humming nicely, his mind a machine like no other, it would be

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months before Cardinal Cassowary noticed the spectacular view from the tower balcony that had so charmed the Hierophant.

Now the Magus flexed the muscle of his new monasticism and pleased in the power of his infrangible will. It would not be breached again, he promised himself. There was a quickening in his bones. His human eyes agleam, he scanned the future. “The next generation of prayer-laced inhalants promises to be my apotheosis,” he addressed the bright tomorrows lining up before him.

Then he began browsing Mary Extraordinary’s prayer book, *What the Goat Girl Dreamed at the Holiday Inn*. The mysteriously titled book that Cardinal Bunbury had passed along held the key ingredients for the next generation of designer inhalants and atomized Prayer Juice. Merely reading Extraordinary’s poems created an intoxicating chemical cocktail in his brain. The distilled essence of her ungoverned prayers promised untold illuminations. He looked forward to drawing under the influence.

“DWI, drawing while intoxicated,” the Magus intoned and closed the book.

As one black sickle-shaped nail traced the gold-embossed lettering on the pink leather cover, Mary Extraordinary felt the graze of a raptor claw on the backside of her mind.

THE SISTERS WERE at an impasse. No decision had been made about the baby. Each night was one more night to be savored, and each morning they hesitated on the brink of giving the boy up.

One day more to find a reason to stall one more day.

At a critical pause in the ongoing debate, Sister Merry Berry made the mistake of admiring the Magi's gifts. She was particularly enchanted by the gold-encrusted ormolu music box. Wary of enchantments, Mary Extraordinary determined how Sister Merry Berry must consign the three gifts.

"Go on, then," Extraordinary directed. "Now is as good a time as any."

"Whatever you say," Merry Berry soothed, while silently promising herself that she would decide whether or not to obey the letter of Extraordinary's law. She missed the more equable Mother Mary Extraordinary of the convent's heyday. More to the point, Merry Berry was partial to presents. She was certain that this was one time when Mary Extraordinary ought to mind her own mysteries.

Almost as Mother ordered, Sister Merry Berry went about dealing with the gifts of the Magistere cum Magi. She locked the gold in the vault behind the tabernacle exactly as proscribed, and unceremoniously dumped the incense in the trash pile as ordered.

Incense made the air dirty, Mother Mary Extraordinary had opined. It was bad for the lungs. Breath was sacred and so on.

Merry Berry allowed herself the critical observation that Mary Extraordinary had far too many opinions these days. As for the ormolu music box, with its delightful nursery tune, there was no good reason on the good green Earth to stuff it away in a dark musty vault. Why should Sister Merry Berry deprive

herself of such an enchanting object? Still, she did not wish to openly defy Mother Extraordinary, so that is why Merry Berry placed the music box on a shelf in the underground wine cellar where she had frequent occasion to visit.

Lucky thing.

Unbeknownst to Merry Berry, a voice-activated listening device had been cleverly hidden inside the music box. Its maker had envisioned the gift sitting on a shelf in the nursery, monitoring the boy—his cries and whispers, his first words. Had the box been placed nearby the infant, the Magus would have been a well-rewarded and rapturous listener this very night.

As it was, only certain celestials were privy to the Sister’s ongoing debate. The baby’s fate hung in a delicate balance, a cradle blowing in the rock-a-bye of indecision.

Newly refreshed from a tippie of cabernet and her small act of rebellion, Merry Berry rejoined her consoeurs. As Mother rambled on, turning over the question of what to do about the boy, Merry Berry’s attention drifted back to the music box tucked away in the wine cellar. It might be just the thing to amuse a blue baby one day.

“Care to join us, Sister Merry Berry?”

“What? Of course. I was just thinking—”

“Please don’t.”

“I wouldn’t dream—”

“As I was saying, I do not want a plague of social workers to descend upon the cloisters with advice, and forms to fill out,

and inspections, and interrogations, and whatnot. The baby would have to be our very closely guarded secret,” Mother Mary bent over the infant who slept on in happy oblivion in the dresser drawer.

It seemed to Sister Subordinary that there was a decisive shift, but that was not the case. The ecclesiastically tall and lean Mother Extraordinary was merely listing to prevailing winds in the recondite precincts of her mind.

“If we could manage to somehow keep the baby off the books and undiscovered,” she listed one way.

“On the other hand, it is not a healthy prospect for a child to be raised on the QT,” she listed the other.

The catalogue of objections had merit. The convent was not safe. Long stretches of silence hinted at hidden sorrows and darker matters. A powerful current held them back. The decision grew impatient.

Just when it seemed they must let the boy go, Sister Subordinary, recalling her singular exchange with the monkey, introduced the deciding factor.

The baby was blue.

“Wouldn’t his color attract a veritable circus of all the wrong sorts of attention, if we gave up the infant to the secular world?”

Sister Mary Subordinary allowed herself a moment of self-congratulation, certain that she had at last taken charge of the conversation. Then the monkey entered her mind, and all certainty vanished. In an instant, she was suffused with the warmth of the langur’s approval, haloed in yellow light as if his personal sun were rising above her crown chakra.

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Surya namaskar, the monkey chanted.

In the name of the sun, Sister easily translated. A linguistic adept, she quickly surmised the identity of the white monkey.

“Sister, you are positively glowing,” Merry Berry exclaimed.

Somehow Sister Subordinary stumbled forward despite the alarming intimacy with the monkey and the novelty of being lit up like a holiday tree-topper.

“Blue,” she repeated. “Dear Sisters, even in far off Tibet, word of a blue getsül would surely get out. The boy would become a curiosity.”

This consideration of the infant’s color cleared the community conscience. Heads bowed, they gave out a collective sigh. What a relief to discover that the best course of action was the one the three nuns most ardently desired.

They had fallen in love with the babe, each nun in her own way. Each harbored an unspoken hope, almost too sensitive for private meditation, much less public airing. Each was taken aback when her hope lifted sail and left safe harbor.

They were in the deeps now.