

SUMMIT  
AT  
THE  
NORTH POLE



SKIRBY



## SUMMIT AT THE NORTH POLE

*The PM Saga, Book XI*

*by Susan Kirby*

In the more remote reaches of the world, somewhat east of Hollywood and north of Broadway, there is a land of Christmas Monsters. Into this land was born--of Maraschino and Spruce Monster--a female offspring, Purple Monster, nicknamed (unimaginatively, but appropriately enough, I suppose) PM. . . .



*"We interrupt this retelling of the now-classic 'A Christmas Fable'\* to bring you a special report from NPN News. Here is Redundant I'Dratherbeme."*

*"Good evening and nice night, ladies and gentlemen, women and men, females and males. We're at the North Pole, the Arctic circle, the top of the world, opposite the*

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\*"A Christmas Fable, or A Star is Born," the initial installment of the PM Saga, chronicled the evolution of PM from a neurotic fuchsia-furred outcast in a land of red and green Christmas Monsters into Santa's lead sleigh puller and Advisor Extraordinaire. Subsequently, nine additional episodes have recounted PM's exploits--her marriage to Alabaster Eggshell, her appointment as North Pole Ambassador, and the birth of her two mini-Monsters, Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst. These tales have told tantalizing tidbits about other residents of Christmasland as well, and if this is your first exposure to these fanciful fantasies, we'll try to fill you in as we go along. But if too confused you be, contact the author. She's confused, too, but can furnish bios and back copies.

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Antarctic, so to speak, so to say, where we are about to witness, view, observe an unprecedented, unique, previously never done before, first time ever, event, happening, occurrence--"

"Thank you, Dant. This is Walter Crewcut. In a few minutes, live via satellite, we will bring you an historic coming together of two superpowers: Santa Claus, the jocular purveyor of Christmas joy, and Viper Carrion, the hideously horrid head of U.S. SEGWAC (acronym for the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas). Although lacking the hooha and hoopla of the Reagan-Gorbachev reunion earlier this month, this is nonetheless a momentous occasion. The diametrically opposite duo will attempt to lessen the tensions that have been rapidly escalating between their two mighty organizations during the past decade. Here now with his analysis is Ted Topple."

"Hello. You want my analysis? My analysis is ... it's freezing up here! Where's the heat the network promised?"

"I second that, concur, accede and assent, it's brisk, sub-zero, chilly, nippy, and to repeat myself, say again, reiterate and recapitulate, it's colder than a--"

"Give it a rest, Dant. As you can see on your screen, Santa's reindeer-and-Christmas-Monster-drawn vehicle conveying the villainous Viper has just touched down at the North Pole Sleighport. We will return for the de-sledding following these brief messages."

"North Pole Network News is pleased to present ...  
**SUMMIT AT THE NORTH POLE**  
... brought to you by ..."



Enough, already. You've got to admit it's a clever (need I mention timely?) idea, a summit meeting between St. Nick and his nemesis. But believable? Aren't their ideologies mutually exclusive? Haven't Viper and SEGWAC vowed to destroy Santa and Christmas? What could these two possibly discuss? Well gosh darn it, if Gorby and Ronnie can confer, why not S.C. and V.C.? But a little background might be in order.

The seeds for this summit were sown in November. The sowers of the seed were Dove and Relicta. 'Twas in November that Dove (whom you may remember as Vulture Carrion, son of Viper, and a relatively recent convert to Christmas cheer) and his wife Relicta (the extra terrestrial intergalactic traveler who crash landed at the North Pole several years ago) made yet another trek to Viper Carrion's squalid hovel, daring the depths of urban decay to make one more probably futile attempt at reconciliation.



In the shadows and shades of the Carrion stairwell, Viper yanked open the door to sneer at the visiting pair. For all intents and purposes, the denizen appeared to be his usual mean, nasty self. But Dove detected a shift in his father's mood (which usually ranged from bad to badder to worse to worser to worst to downright dangerously dankest). On this visit, however, the SEGWACian despot did not slam the door in Dove's face. He did not hurl his machete at his cast-off kid. He didn't heave the proffered present on the dingy pavement and stomp on the festive wrapper. And—this is especially incredible—he actually slithered aside to permit Dove's and Relicta's entrance into the haunted hallway.

What could explain this uncharacteristic behavior? Hadn't it been a banner year for SEGWAC's malevolent machinations? Hadn't there been earthquakes, fires,



tornadoes, and other natural disasters to fuel sadness and misery? Didn't the Persian Gulf heat up? Hadn't there been further ozone disintegration? Wasn't Ethiopia bracing for another famine? Weren't thousands grieving over the loss of fortunes on Black Monday? Hadn't Fawn Hall, Jessica Hahn and Donna Rice shredded, shedded and bedded their ways to infamy and fortune? Didn't the media overflow with insider trading scandals and government corruption? And weren't the rich richer and the poor poorer? Human misery was on the increase, and SEGWAC thrived on suffering. Hadn't these events further hardened the hole where Viper's heart should have been?

Yet ... despite these SEGWAC successes, the Irangate hearings were a dud. Viper's substantial investment in Ollie North dolls had failed to yield the anticipated profits, and heavy betting on Bork's and Ginsburg's confirmation further depleted Carrion Senior's resources. The market crash--a glorious day for doom and gloom, SEGWAC's stock and trade (pun intended)--caught Viper with his margins down. When the dastardly demon dug deep into his pockets, he extracted lint. Without funds to cover his debts, Viper burrowed into the Society's bank account. Now the Powers Below were demanding a ledger sheet demonstrating a diminution of Christmas mirth, and Viper would be on the rack should he fail to provide an abysm of bleakness at the nadir of the season. Havoc-wreaking is expensive--and Viper's operating capital had evaporated.

Given these circumstances, one can hypothesize that Viper's attitude toward Dove meant he wanted something from him. Viper probably envisioned duping Dove out of a dollop of dough. It could be he suspected his son hadn't liquidated all his assets when the younger Carrion swore that he was giving up everything to follow the Christmas star. It stands to reason that Viper suspected his son of tucking some moolah away for a sunny day. "Had to be in the genes if not the jeans," he muttered. Perhaps the father looked to Dove for an odor of the putrid persona his offspring had wafted prior to his defection. But for whatever reason, Viper was, although not congenial by any measure, almost bordering on civil!

And Carrion mère? (We haven't heard from her since "A Very Moral Christmas Story"--you might remember she impersonated Mrs. Claus at the House Un-Christmas



Activities Committee hearings.) To put it bluntly, Lucretia was on the skids. Her black dress was two years behind the times, her raven dye job rotted on gray roots, and her previously svelte body was bulging from an overabundance of inexpensive carbohydrates. Mrs. Marcos no longer kept her supplied with shoes. Her pipeline of Tammy Faye Bakker Mascara had been shut off by Jerry Falldownthewell. Mother Carrion was so humiliated by the monetary muck her husband had mired them in (after all, hadn't she defined poverty as a one-Mercedes garage?) she forgot herself and snarled a snide "how-d'-do" to Relicta.

Thus, Dove and his bride found themselves ensconced across the table from Viper and Lucretia, sipping eye of newt soup and toe of frog tea. Papa Carrion endeavored to instill guilt by reminding Dove of his filial obligations. Lucretia grouched and groaned over her reduced wardrobe allowance. An hour later Dove and Relicta took their leave, promising to cogitate on a solution to their seniors' dilemma.

\* \* \*

After stopping at the Salvation Army shelter to drop off some clothing, the pair journeyed to Christmas Monsterland to report on their strange visitation. Following their revelations, PM gathered the Monsterland gang and teletransported the group to the North Pole.

"From what Dove says," PM proposed to Santa, Mrs. Santa and the other Noellers, "I think Viper might be willing to negotiate. Obviously, we are not about to render financial aid, but if we offered some, let us say, cosmetic reductions in Christmas glitz, Viper's tinsel count would be reduced and he'd save face (not to mention his hide). In return, we might convince him to reduce his arsenal of greed, corruption and general nefariousness. It certainly wouldn't hurt to talk to him."

Clyde Elf wasn't having part of this discussion. "You can't trust those scurrilous scalawags, you can't, you can't,



you can't, oH oN, Santa!" the diminutive pixie protested. Remember, he had fallen under SEGWAC's spell before, lured by lucre and lasciviousness. He had let himself be convinced that Viper was not as bad as his reputation, and when the SEGWACian displayed his true lack of color, the half-pint helper's life was almost ruined (see "The Prodigal Elf"). "He's bad, bad, bad," Clyde repented imploringly. "Tell them, Rudolph! Tell them, Peppermint!"

Peppermint Paunch (PM's cousin, a graduate of the Red Green Detective School and an all-around good guy) also wasn't buying the "perhaps the SEGWACian has changed his ways" argument either. "You know as well as I that Viper is a SEGWACian. SEGWACians are terrorists. We don't negotiate with terrorists. Therefore," the striped sleuth syllogized, "we can't negotiate with Viper! Didn't his organization put an hallucinogenic substance in the Christmas gang's eggnog one year? Weren't Alabaster and PM kidnapped by the Society? Need we bring up the time SEGWAC led Clyde down the path of almost-no-return? What about trying to blow up PM when she was pregnant? And last year, we almost lost the toddler twins, little Lapis and giggly Geranium, to Viper's wily ways. How can you even contemplate giving the U.S. leader of the contra-Christmas crew the time of day?"

Alabaster broke in. "Peppermint, we're not disputing your depiction of SEGWAC as the Evil Empire."

"I've been misquoted. I actually labeled them the Slimy Slimeballs. Don't fall into their trap! They are not going to give up anything!"

"I agree," piped Rudolph. "True, Dove was able to reform, but a Viper transmogrification? That's too much to hope!"

"Aha! That's the word I was waiting to hear," Santa said. "Hope! Hope! That's what Christmas is about, isn't it? What harm can there be if we try to come to terms with Viper, and maybe alleviate some of the horrible sadness and hatred in the world?"

"Years ago," Relicta contributed, "I found a second home here after my own planet blew itself up. I have kept careful watch for signs that your Earth is orbiting toward annihilation. But the Soviets and Americans have taken a small step--they agreed to talk, and from those talks they've now agreed to dismantle 2,611 warheads. Granted, that's a miniscule step for mankind, considering how many nuclear arms remain. But I believe bombast beats bombs any day, so why not listen to what Dove's dad has to say?"

Santa smiled at the antennae alien. "I agree. We must make every effort to find peace. 'They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' That's a dream that goes along with Christmas." He turned to his wife, and she nodded assent. "I vote we pursue this further."

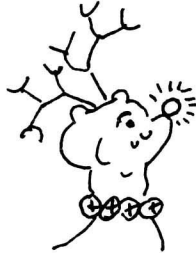
"But Santa!" chimed Clyde.

"But Santa what?" countered Mr. C. "How long have you been with me, Clyde? And your father and grandfather? Do you think I would ever do anything to trade away any of the true essence of Christmas? PM," he announced, turning to the mauvette minister of Peace and Good Will, "make inquiries. Let's see if this is a sham on Viper's part--or if we might get some concessions."

\* \* \*

*"This is Ted Topple. We're back live as the SEGWAC entourage is stepping onto the red and green carpet. First to ooze off the sleigh is Parasite Carrion, Viper's heir apparent. An interesting note: Parasite and Dove are identical twins, the only distinguishing feature being the mole on Parasite's*

nose. Another inky-garbed goblin--I think it's, yes, it is Knave, Viper's valet--is slinking off as twenty toy soldiers strike up 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas.' Here comes Santa Claus out of his workshop, flanked by PM, the North Pole Ambassador, and Alabaster Eggshell, Counsel and Consul General for Santa's side of the summit. Santa is now extending a hand to Viper Carrion as the SEGWACian steps onto the tarmac. Rudolph's nose is blinking 'W-E-L-C-O-M-E' in Morse code. We have a mike on the runway. Let's listen."



(Camera focuses on Santa.) "How jolly, Viper."

(Close-up on Carrion.) "How droll, Claus."

(Back to Ted:) "Walter, Redundant, what a propitious occasion this is!"

\* \* \*

The road to this moment had been rough and rocky. Once Santa's blessing had been given for exploratory talks, Dove contacted Anaconda Adder, a Viper minion, to arrange a pre-summit meeting between PM and Dove's sycophantic sibling. Peppermint Paunch, security chief for the PM contingent, warned Dove that any venture the Christmas Folk made away from Monsterland or North Pole magic would be wrought with peril. Anaconda, for his part, knew Parasite would not be comfortable wandering far from mayhem and madness.

Dove proposed a possible site. Princess Olga, the regal and royal Samoyed ruler of the kingdom of Jackman, Maine, had offered her palace, an idyllic spot that was remote and relaxing. But the SEGWACians rejected the site as too "clean and restful."

Adder suggested the Dark Hole of Calcutta, a choice quickly nixed by the Christmas representative.

After studying the utopias and quagmires on the two groups' lists, Adder and Dove finally figured out that the Big Apple and Gotham were both names for New York City, and the first agreement was reached.

Phone calls were placed, and PM and Parasite accepted the day after Thanksgiving as the date for the pre-summit. PM told Alabaster privately that it would be one of the first tests of Viper's real intentions. Clyde Elf had told her

excitedly that the Snoopy balloon would return to the parade, this time on skates, and PM reminisced sadly how the last Snoopy had been blown up in 1980 by sadistic SEGWACians. If Snoopy survived his flight down Broadway, PM pronounced, she would breathe easier.

Once New York was chosen as the preliminary meeting site, it then became necessary to choose an appropriate setting. Anaconda Adder volunteered an XXX movie theater on 42d Street; Dove countered with a Salvation Army shelter. Adder proposed Dollar Don Trumpcard's penthouse; Dove suggested the Bronx Zoo. Finally, after further feuding, Dove remembered Penelope Pigeon's abode on West 76th Street. It was the ideal location. As the setting for Clyde Elf's last bout with debauchery, it had enough of a stench of depravity to suit Anaconda's taste. But as the building also housed PM's chronicler, it was acceptable to the Christmas Crew. A second agreement had been reached.

(When the advance team determined that Penelope's coop was too tiny, this writer volunteered her apartment. Adder inspected it and declared it slovenly enough to suit Parasite, and preparations were made. You might wonder why, since your correspondent labors by day on vowels and consonants in the bowels and corridors of a major newspaper, The New York Times failed to carry this story. I was sworn to secrecy, you see, and not allowed to report these events until now.)

\* \* \*

The Friday after Turkey Day, the two groups arrived.

"I must insist," PM opened, "that if Viper and Santa are to meet, it must be at the North Pole. Santa cannot afford to take time out now at the height of the busy season to travel. Mr. Claus will provide transportation, of course."

"Of cours-s-s-s-e," sneered Parasite. He knew only too well that SEGWAC had not yet learned how to penetrate the North Pole's invisible protective shield, and thus couldn't fly there themselves.



Alabaster presented the next requirement. "Mr. Claus has stated that the only available time he has is Christmas Eve. Until then he must concentrate on making toys, and following his round-the-world romp he retires to the Bermuda Triangle for vacation."

"You're just trying to s-s-s-sabotage our s-s-s-saboteurs," Parasite hissed. "You buying time to build up your stockpile before you have to cut back."



"No," PM parried, "we want to ensure that any treaty will not be broken by your family prior to Christmas, once you get Santa's signature. You know dang good and well Viper always goes back on his word. Santa never does."

"Christmas-s-s-s-s Eve it is, then," grumbled Parasite.

It was obvious to the Christmas party that the Carrions were indeed in a bad way, so willing was Parasite to agree to these conditions. But Junior was not without his own conditions, which he handed to Alabaster.

"There is to be no mention," the SEGWAC representative began, "of one word. Should that word escape the lips of anyone in my father's presence, he will not sign any treaty. Father has agreed to a meeting under the greatest duress. The briefest whisper of THAT WORD will not be tolerated!"

"And what word is that, Para?" PM inquired mock-innocently.

Parasite scowled a scoundrelly scowl, then spit, "You know perfectly well, Madame Ambassador. Must I spell it out?"

"How could I know?" PM persisted, beginning to enjoy herself. "You haven't told us what it is yet."

Parasite sputtered. "It's l-l-l--- I can't say it either. L-l-l-l--- Blast you, you purple prune, you say that blasphemy all the time, I hear it every year in your holiday harangue."

"I just can't imagine what it is." PM tried desperately to look like she was pondering the solution to this mysterious problem. "What could it be? Starts with 'L.' Mmmm, 'L.' L-l-, I've got it, lecherous? Could that be it?"

"I don't think so, dear," Alabaster bantered. "That's your word for me when I've got snerkling too much on my mind. Certainly Viper wouldn't object to that. I think it might be another one. Could it be ... lavender? Is that it? I know Viper dislikes you, dear, so maybe that's the word."

Parasite started to stew and steam. "You know the word," he blurted. "It's L-l-l-l-- Damn you all!!! Vulture, you'd better help me out. It rhymes with your namby-pamby new name. Either agree that they won't say it or I'm stomping out!"

Dove shook his head sadly. "Dad is so afraid of certain words. But then he's always known the power of language. Of course the one word forbidden in his house, heresy to Pop, is 'love.' He considers it profane."

PM and Alabaster sighed. "My, my, I don't know," mused PM. "I can't imagine even a minute going by without Santa saying it. But ... we'll agree. Anything against synonyms?"

"Gr-gr-gr-gr," growled Parasite. "Just don't try anything tricky."

"Let's discuss your second point," Alabaster moved on. "It's unreasonable to insist that Santa refrain from shaking when he laughs like a bowl full of jelly."

"Then Viper must be allowed to fume, snarl and sneer as necessary," Parasite bargained.

And the bickering continued.

\* \* \*

*"Walter, there has been quite a bit of advance publicity about the alleged feud between Mrs. Claus and Mrs. Carrion. Let's focus on the two wives. If I'm not mistaken, Mrs. Santa has made herself a brand new red velvet suit, and her faux polar bear hat and fake ermine muff are quite attractive. But Lucretia Carrion! Her outfit—it's a dream! a creation! She's resplendent in a moldy lizard suit with an asp clasp."*

*"I might add, Ted, that the shoulder wrap Mrs. Carrion is wearing is not a feather boa, it's a boa constrictor. I think we can safely say Mrs. Carrion has upstaged Mrs. Claus!"*

\* \* \*

After arranging the groundrules for the summit, the North Polians and SEGWACians returned to their respective





homes to draft the proposed reductions. First, however, PM and Alabaster took a few days off. They wanted to spend some quality-time with their young-uns, and PM had promised to direct the Christmas Monsterland pageant. But once the show was running, the parental pair planted their progeny in their paws and high-tailed it to Santa's workshop.

Viper's initial proposal contained a lot of tricky verbiage. Peppermint and Alabaster huddled with two dictionaries to decipher it, while Santa, PM and Mrs. Claus worked on their own version.

Meanwhile Spruce (PM's father) spruced up the North Pole, adding an additional gleam to its regular glitter. Maraschino (PM's mom) needlepointed new stockings for the fireplace. Eliva Elf polished the silver sleigh bells to a glossy sheen (only to have Clyde, the perpetual paranoid, hide them, convinced that SEGWACians could not resist anything of value within their reach).

A brief snag was snug when Mrs. Carrion refused to respond to Mrs. Claus's invitation to a cook-in of marzipan and spritz cookies. Lucretia wasn't interested in domestic duties, and instead wanted to inspect the computer facilities to examine the record-keeping capabilities. (Peppermint flatly refused to allow the tour, declaring the technology determining who was naughty and who was nice was tip-top secret.)

Santa was having considerable difficulty with the "Love" condition of the summit. "Without love, how can I possibly negotiate?" he bemoaned. He tried to practice a sentence without the word: "I like seeing happy children ... no, I love seeing happy children. Oh foo, I just can't do it."

PM commiserated. "It's difficult, Santa, I know. I too love saying 'Love.' But I have an idea to help you." And she explained her plan to Santa, who chortled with glee.

\* \* \*

*"The two superpowers and their coteries have finished their dinner, and as part of the entertainment we have been listening to a concert from the famous rock group, 'Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives.' As you can hear now, PM, Alizarin and Rosette are rendering 'Silent Night' with a reggae beat. This is truly moving, Dant."*

*"Yes, yea, aye, affirmative, it's emotional, expressive, tear-jerking, but the Carrions aren't clapping, putting hands together, hallooing. How rude, crude, impolite. But halt, stop, wait! Mrs. Carrion is speaking, talking, communicating with P.M. What can she be saying, expressing, requesting?"*

*"If I'm not mistaken, they're beginning to play 'Nuttin' for Christmas.' And Viper, Lucretia, and Parasite are singing along! If I didn't know better, I'd swear their faces are almost blank. For the Carrions, that's as close to a smile as I've ever seen!"*

\* \* \*

"Santa, how can you possibly agree to a reduction in sugar plums and gingerbread?" Clyde queried querulously.

"Sugarplums are not what Christmas is about, my munchkin friend. So what if we lose a few calories? No problem. Mrs. C. will have a bit more time to attend to other matters."

"But Santa," Peppermint pouted, "you're also cutting back on mistletoe and holly."

"Yes, but in return SEGWAC won't mug the volunteer Santas who ring the bells on the city streets."

Elvira ventured a concern. "Santa, you've also accepted their request to deploy fewer toys this year. Won't the disappointment of the children offset any gains you might get from SEGWAC?"

"My dear teeny-tiny elf, you have a point. I'll explain. I've only agreed to dismantle the toys for the children who have plenty already, whose mothers and fathers can afford to get them whatever they want. A reduction in instant gratification is not necessarily bad. Beloved little one--see, I just can't avoid that word--in return we've gotten a commitment from SEGWAC not to distribute any more blinders to those who pass the homeless in the streets, nor deafen their ears to the cries of the less fortunate. Do you realize that the numbers of homeless are increasing daily, and that one-third of them are children? Our aim must be to open the eyes of those who are able to help, not sit back and allow SEGWAC to steal their attention through phony politics and media focus on electronic gadgets instead of social solutions."

"Sure," Peppermint complained, "SEGWAC's gonna cease its diversion tactics. I'll believe that when I see it."

"We have a verification clause," Santa explained. "The first time I hear of any trivial redirection of concern away from the less fortunate to a focus on false values, I will intervene. Basically, what we're negotiating is interference—I'll not artificially force joy on humans with an overabundance of presents, and SEGWAC is limited in the amount of greed they encourage. But, of course, humans will still be humans. SEGWAC can't be blamed for all of mankind's cold-heartedness, and I can't take credit for all of their empathy. My clever Sherlockian sleuth, as a mythic creature you've granted me--and SEGWAC--more power over humans than we actually have. I only pray that without Viper's and my excesses, those beings down there will wake up to what is truly important about their brief existence--and about Christmas--that they love (see, there's that word again) and care for each other."

\* \* \*

*"Ted, Theodore, Teddy, the pair, duo, dyad are about to sign, put pen to paper, ink to sheet, scroll, parchment, paper ..."*

*"Stuff a sock in it, Dant. We're going live now to the signing of the treaty."*

*"Mr. Carrion" (Camera 1 on Santa) "I can only hope" (Camera 2 reaction shot of Viper: a perceptible wince) "that this agreement will last forever. I know I cannot expect you to change completely--it's too much in your nature to breed dissension and hate. But miracles do happen, and I'd l--"*

*"Don't say it, or the agreement is off!" (That's Viper, of course, anticipating a breach.)*

*"Oops. Almost caught me!" (Santa chuckles.) "Let's say I'd be glad to hear that you've softened a bit."*

*"Never. This is purely a financial arrangement. I can not and will not support Christmas. And I will not give up Weltschmerz!" (Viper is shaking.)*

*"Nor will I abandon Star Peace. The Star of the East will continue to blaze as long as I'm around to stoke it."*

*"I'll be counting candy canes, Claus."*

*"Doveryai no proveryai?" (Santa's quoting quietly.)*

*"Trust but verify." (Viper translates with a dubious nod.)*

"Mr. Carrion," (Santa again) "it's time to bid you farewell. My elves must return you to New York now so they can get back for my ride. You know how much I l---" (Viper hisses menacingly. Santa puts a hand to his mouth.) "Perhaps next year we can remove more obstacles to your understanding of this season. Is it a deal?"

"Well, let's see how this deal turns out. Better I convince you to skip a year next year."

(Santa rolls his eyes at the absurdity of the thought.) "I have a present for you, Viper. PM?"

(PM carries out a large silver ornament, on which is painted a Christmas tree. She presents it to Viper.)

"Mr. Carrion, to commemorate this day, we'd like to offer you this small token of the dream we have that Christmas will one day have meaning for you."

(\$\$\$\$\$\$ glitter and glisten in Viper's eyes as he accepts the present.) "Hrrumph, bah humbug. Silver's still worth something. I'll take it. What's a Christmas tree anyway? Nothin' but a dead fir, a heathen, pagan symbol transformed to suit humans' own self-amusement. Crass commercialism, that's all. I'll take it."

(And Viper and Lucretia, clutching the shining decoration, depart.)



*"To wrap up," (and now the camera is back on Ted Topple) "on behalf of my colleagues, Redundant and Walter, I wish you Merry Christmas, Seasons Greetings, Noel, Happy Holidays ... great, Dant, now you've got me doing it! Goodnight, everyone."*

\* \* \*

Peppermint Paunch safely steered the eight-reindeer-powered vehicle back onto the landing ramp. "Santa, they're back in New York. I suppose all did go smoothly, but I've certainly missed hearing you say my favorite four-letter word."

"Me too," concurred Alabaster, tickling Snowflake's tail. "Christmas Eve at the North Pole is just not the same without the 'L' word. Too bad Viper won't let himself be exposed to it. He might see the light."

PM, Santa and Mrs. Claus exchanged conspiratorial glances. "Hmmm, not a bad idea," Santa mused. "I wonder if something could be done about that?" He winked at PM.

The lilac Monster jiggled Geranium on her knee. "Oh, I would imagine so."

"Dove, what do you think your father will do with our gift to him?" Mrs. Santa queried.

Dove thought a second. "If I were still a betting man, I'd wager he'll stick it on his nightstand, away from his thieving thugs, and tomorrow he'll get it assessed."

"Dove, be prepared to hear a loud yell all the way from SEGWAC headquarters when your parents turn out the lights tonight!" PM predicted. And she and the Clauses laughed uproariously.

"Come on, gang!" Santa exhorted. "We're running behind schedule! Hop aboard the sleigh! It's time for another great Christmas!"

\* \* \*

*"We now return you to your regularly scheduled Christmas story."*

\* \* \*

And Santa was heard to exclaim as he flew out of sight,

"Peace on Earth, and Good Will everywhere."