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CHRISTMAS

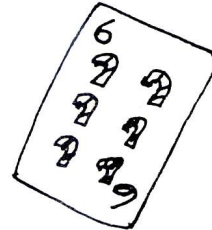
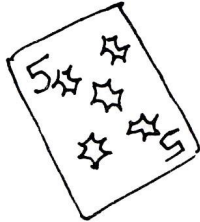


S. KIRBY

A VERY C^R_AZ^Y CHRISTMAS

The PM Saga, Book XIII

by Susan Kirby



I was bent over a blackjack table in Atlantic City, contemplating the House's five up. It was three in the morning, the day before the day before Christmas. I lifted my last stack of chips and doubled down on eleven.

There was a sharp tap on my shoulder. "Ms. Chronicler," a voice whispered urgently in my ear.

"Just a sec," I muttered. The dealer crossed my two cards with an ace. I moaned, then glanced around. There was a strange female creature behind me, garbed in a Salvation Army uniform. "Alien, what brings you here?" I inquired. It was Relicta, the ET IT.*

"There's a disaster at the North Pole!" she gasped, her antennae atwitter.

The dealer flipped over the hole card. An eight. "Break," I murmured imploring. The dealer pulled a card from the shoe: another eight. 21. Expletive deleted. Like homing pigeons, my chips made the short journey to the dealer's tray to nest, reunited with their kinfolk who had traveled that same rotten route.

"Disaster?" I sniffed sarcastically.
"This night's a disaster. I'm down . . .
Let's just say I have to hitchhike home
for the holidays." (I know I often
exaggerate, but this wasn't one of those
times--I'd just lost my airfare.)

Relicta pulled me off the stool.
"There's a crisis in Christmas
Monsterland!"



*Extra-Terrestrial Intergalactic Traveler. For further information on the cast of this epic, refer to *The PM Saga*, Books I-XII, or request a copy of "A Reader's Guide to Christmas Monsterland" from the author.

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“Great! First good news I’ve heard all day.”

Relicta dragged me through the casino, but I dug in my heels at a slot machine and dropped in my last dollar. Bar--Bar--Zip. Nada. Nothing.

“Great?” Relicta yelled, yanking my arm from the one-armed bandit and propelling me toward the exit. “We have a major problem, and you say great? How can you be so insensitive?”



I halted again in front of a quarter video poker machine and searched my pockets for change. That archaeological dig yielded a chewing gum wrapper. An empty matchbook. Lint. “Look,” I reasoned, “every year there’s a crisis. Every year the Christmas gang has been able to solve it. Every year I chronicle the agony and the victory. So, great! After the to-do is done and the hoo-haw over, call me with the details--and then I’ll punctuate the proceedings with my familiar, unfailing flair, frivolity, and élan. I need the check.” I felt deep in my last pocket. A \$5 chip! My effort to re-aim myself toward another blackjack table was met with an equivalent, counteractive force.

“The Christmas Crew is in no condition to conquer this catastrophe,” Relicta cried, then coerced me out of the casino and onto the Boardwalk.

Despite the late hour, a crowd was gathered around a golden, blinking orb parked precariously on the beach. We headed toward it.

“You brought your spaceship?” I asked.

“Yup.”

“That means PM, Al, and the rest are in the City!” I deduced delightedly. (Not an altogether illogical assumption. Relicta only pilots her ship OUT HERE once a year, when she hauls instruments and band members to the Big Apple for Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives’ annual appearance at the big Night Before Christmas Eve charity rock bash. Ipso facto, the group should be in Manhattan.) I considered my situation. \$5 wasn’t going to get me very far, and the way my luck was going, the odds of another sojourn at the tables resulting in bus fare weren’t very good. As I was not yet inclined to pawn the portable PC I toted with me (as you may recall, I’m a writer, it’s what I do, and a writer never leaves home without her laptop), I begged: “How ’bout a lift to 76th Street?”

“No, not New York! How can I get through to you?” (Okay, I admit I should have been more attuned to Relicta’s anxiety. But in my defense, I’ll argue that one can be incredibly dense when in the throes of debilitating debt.) Relicta shook me, a little less gently than was her nature. “Read my

lips. We've got to get to Christmas Monsterland. It's the worst. *Absolute* worst! SEGWAC's sabotaged Christmas!"

I was about to negate this scenario with a nasal "Na-ah-hhh" when a dark shadow slimed across the sand. Parasite Carrion blocked our path. The scurrilous son of the U.S. head of the Society for the Elimination of Good Will And Christmas addressed me: "Sssscribbling obituariesss now, Msssss. Chronicler?" (My, how that dastardly demon can hiss!)

"Bug off, mosquito," I swatted.

"Para, how can you be so mean?" asked Relicta.

Parasite turned to the ET IT. "Practice. If it isn't Vulture's little woman--or whatever. When are you laying out my twin brother? Do we get him for the family plot?"

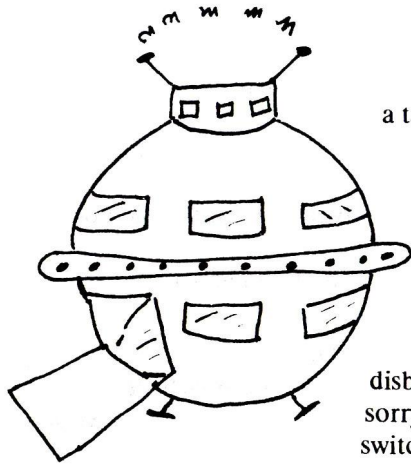
Relicta began to sob turquoise tears. (ET ITs cry funny.) "My husband changed his name to Dove. You know that. My beloved has crossed over to a higher plane, where you'll never touch him."

"With the rest of the moronic Monsters and the noxious North Pole crew, I suspect," Parasite spat, then slithered and slinked off, his sneering sniggle sputtering across the waves.

A thick fog of gloom and doom hung heavy over the Jersey shore. My innate narcissism was being poked and prodded by the possibility that the Christmas Crew was in truth imperiled, if not insooth impaled. In shock, I allowed Relicta to guide me toward her ship.

Fifty fellow fanatical flutterers were furtively jamming coins into every conceivable nook and slot of Relicta's vehicle and pulling every imaginable lever. Relicta wiggled her antennae and a door descended, scattering quarters and casino tokens here, there, and everywhere. The crowd scurried in the sea sludge to scoop up the jackpot, and in the melee Relicta pushed me on board. She twiddled her antennae again, and the door closed.





- 4 -

It was an awesome machine, but a tad crowded and cramped with controls and computers that dotted data across a dozen cathode ray terminals.

"Put this on," Relicta commanded, handing me a gold lamé spacesuit. I struggled to get into it. Relicta donned her intergalactic apparel.

"Dove's dead?" I stammered in stunned disbelief as I strapped on my seatbelt. "I'm so sorry." My self-absorption was subsiding, switching into sympathy.

"No, he's alive," Relicta responded, then pushed a button on the dashboard. The spacecraft started to spin, slowly. More coins spewed from the ship, spiraling skyward into the outstretched hands of the gawking gamblers.

"But you said . . ."

"I said Dove had gone to a higher plane. According to Dove, he has."

"What about PM, Al, Santa, Mrs. C, Clyde, etc., etc.? Are they alive?"

"Yup." Relicta was concentrating on her console.

"They're all right?"

"Nope."

"What's going on?"

"You gotta see for yourself." She peered at me and commented, "You're looking a might mossy. Take some Dramamine," she offered. "Olive's not your shade."

We whirled faster and faster, out over the Atlantic, then up above the clouds. I wasn't feeling very well.

"The spinning will stop soon," Relicta promised. The centrifuging of my cerebellum was creating excessive discombobulation, and I earnestly prayed Relicta would be true to her word.

She was. After a few minutes we wound down, and I peered outside. Big mistake. We were in deep space, and the earth had receded into a distant speck.

"Why'd we have to leave the atmosphere?" I queried.

"I've got to do something. Patience."

"Okay, okay." It occurred to me I did not know Relicta all that well. What if the alien had flipped and was abducting me to another planet? Trust her, I urged myself. I'm okay. She's okay.

"Why'd you want Parasite to think Dove was history?" I asked, to make conversation.

"To buy some time," she explained.

"I see," I said. (I didn't.)

A dark, dank object was lurking ominously ahead of us. Despite my myopia I could make out the letters S-E-G-W-A-C on its side. Relicta steered toward it. After tickling the keys of her console and calibrating quickly, she asked, "See that red button on your right?"

"Yes."

"When I say hit it, hit it." The astronaut maneuvered the ship within a few fathoms of the SEGWACian sputnik. With a sincere wish that the foreign symbols on the button didn't spell *Eject*, when Relicta cried "Hit it," I obediently obeyed. A laser light beam bored through space and punctured a panel of the satellite, which glowed ultraviolet, vibrated, then vanished.



"That's taken care of," Relicta sighed in relief.

"Was that the source of the problem?"

"Yup," said Relicta, reprogramming coordinates.

"Wonderful," I whewed. "Christmas is saved and you can take me home. This year's fantasy will be a fraction derivative from the one in which you first appeared, but okay, we can't be brilliant all the time. You really didn't need me at all, but fine, fine." I was finding this out-of-orbit experience disconcerting. "Say," I suggested, "why don't you just take me to Saint Louis, and I'll write the story there. Give PM my best, and tell her I'll wave when she flies over the arch."

We zipped earthward. The portion of the planet we were approaching appeared particularly polar. The ship started rotating again.

"I'm not going home, am I?" asked I, I feared rhetorically.

"Nope. Take another dimenhydrinate. The source of the problem is gone, but the problem still remains. That's why I need you. I'm stumped."

I was seeing double. "Look," I said. "Look, Relicta, I'm a watcher. I contracted to chronicle--and occasionally contribute to--Christmas crises, not combat them. In calamitous conditions my confidence clunks and I crumble, collapse, and, yea, coagulate into a quivering catatonic clump of curdled cottage cheese." (Try saying that when you're gyiring counterclockwise.)

"Stop existing vicariously, Chronicler," Relicta counseled. "Get a life!" She pointed to an opening in the ozone (I saw two). "That's where SEGWAC was sending in the microwaves. I'm going through."

"Microwaves?" I mumbled, but shushed when Relicta sh-h-h-ed me. Once back into the atmosphere, the ship stopped spinning and we glided

toward the glaciers. I looked down. The Morning Star was rising over a crisp, clear Christmas Monsterland morning. I could see teeny, tiny little Christmas Monsters and teeny, tiny little Christmas trees, and 'ittle, itsy bitsy igloos and caves.

"Hey, I see Christmas Monsters!" I stated suspiciously. "They're moving. Nothing's wrong! Now I get it. It's a surprise party! That SEGWAC thing was just a ruse!"

Relicta glared at me in exasperation. She counted to ten under her breath, then said very slowly: "I'm putting us in a circling pattern." She switched to auto pilot. "We are going to go around and around and around and around until you hear what's happened and agree to help. Understood?"

I nodded nauseously, and shut up.

Relicta began her tale: "Yesterday morning PM teletransported Dove and me to Christmas Monsterland. We'd taken a leave from the Salvation Army to rehearse for the concert. During our noon break I decided to rewire the CD player in my spacecraft. Suddenly the ship's alarm went off. My instruments had recorded a bombardment of extremely high levels of microwaves. I threw on my helmet and suit--which as you know are made of midasmetal and are impervious to microwaves--and rushed out of the ship."

(Actually I didn't know that. I knew midasmetal could penetrate a SEGWAC forcefield,* but wasn't aware of this other aspect of the mineral that formed the shell of Relicta's UFO. But I accorded acknowledgment, rather than continue our revolutions any longer than necessary.)

Relicta's narration went on. "I ran into Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst. The twins were fine. I found Dove. He was okay. I phoned Santa Claus, who said he'd gotten the same reading and had pinpointed the SEGWACian satellite as the source. 'Don't worry,' he told me, 'be happy. Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole are protected by our Invisible Protective Shield.'

"Now, I would have taken off my helmet," Relicta continued, "except microwave emissions have a strange effect on beings from my planet--they give us the hiccups. So I played it safe and kept my spacesuit on. Good thing, too, for soon the readings got stronger--and stranger. The data indicated we were surrounded by an unusual form of radiation. After further exploration I discovered that when the microwaves bounced off the IPS, they transmogrified. I tried to consult Al, given his physics and chemistry background. That's when I noticed he'd changed. Then I discovered that all my friends had changed."

"How?" I asked.

"You'll see," Relicta replied.

*See *A Christmas Visitor, or The PM Saga, Book 6*.

This story was too weird. “Are you telling me that the North Pole has been nuked? Toasted?” I asked in amazement. “That Rudolph and the reindeer are radioactive?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Relicta said. “Christmas Monsterland is a wondrous place, but sometimes its defense systems are a trifle ineffective. The microwaves couldn’t kill the Christmas creatures, but the resultant radiation did transform them.”

“SEGWAC’s despicable! Attempted premeditated Monster murder!” I paused. “Why didn’t you just zap the satellite to begin with?” I queried, a smidgen perturbed that Relicta hadn’t thought of that before.

“Because SEGWAC would simply have launched another one,” Relicta replied, a smudge put out that I hadn’t grasped the obvious. “I had to make them believe I was the only survivor, saved by my spaceship. Upon dialing your number, I got the message on your answering machine that you’d gone to split aces and eights. I set out to search for you, knowing that since SEGWAC monitors our communications OUT THERE, a malevolent minion would be dispatched to glean the reaction, then gloat. Thus my tears when Parasite confronted us. He’ll report that the North Pole is now a lifeless icecap, and SEGWAC’ll assume I destroyed the satellite for revenge. So now our mission, should you decide to accept it, is to find a way to neutralize the remaining radiation and reverse the effects on our friends.”

“With no new microwaves, won’t whatever it is just evaporate?”

“Possibly. However, the only exit is that small hole in the ozone. It could take hours, weeks, months, even years for the radiation to dissipate. Santa’s next ride may be in the next millennium.”

“Why doesn’t PM just teletransport everyone out of the area so you can vacuum the detritus?” I suggested.

“First, SEGWAC has spies everywhere. OUT THERE, the North Pole characters’ magic is missing, and they’re vulnerable. Second, even if we could find a safe place, PM would never agree. She isn’t listening to anything I have to say.”

“PM? She’s the best listener there is! You’re joshing.”

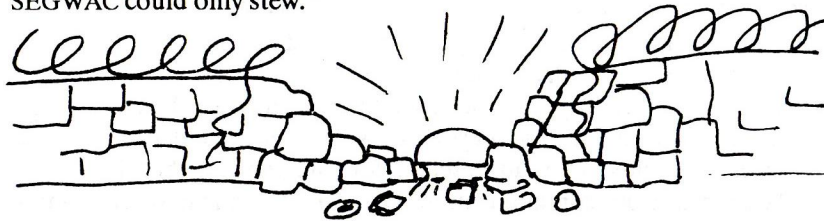
“Don’t I wish. Are you ready to see for yourself?”

I wasn’t so sure. But I assented, and Relicta flipped to manual override. We began a slow descent.

“I just hope SEGWAC doesn’t figure out the havoc they’ve caused here,” Relicta commented as she flew. “They’ve been particularly vile and vicious this year.”

Landing in an aircraft is not one of my favorite things. I diverted myself with speculation on the why’s and wherefore’s of SEGWAC’s escalating evilness. “Who could have predicted the momentous events that rocked the world this year?” I orated. “How SEGWAC must have relished

the squashing of the student pro-democracy movement in China! The massacre in Tiananmen Square rated a ten on SEGWAC's scale of the malicious and macabre. So imagine the anticipation with which SEGWAC viewed the spreading discontent in Eastern Europe, sure that the citizenry there would meet the same fate. But instead of tanks pushing into Poland and rifles raised against the Hungarians, there was a party on the Berlin Wall, as people seeking freedom chipped away at that symbol of the Cold War. There were promises of elections and reform. Summit meetings followed pre-summits. Instead of shaking fists, leaders were shaking hands. SEGWAC could only stew."



We were whipped by a windshear and the capsule bobbed and bounced. "Oh," wailed Relicta, "why couldn't SEGWAC have been satisfied with the death and destruction in the Middle East and Central America? Aren't drugs a sufficient scourge to satisfy the Society? Isn't there enough hunger? Enough violence? Why couldn't SEGWAC have been satisfied with Hurricane Hugo and the San Francisco earthquake, and left us alone?"

"Because despite disaster and disorder, and sometimes because of them, the human spirit soared," I offered. "To SEGWAC's and everyone else's surprise, Peace on Earth, Good Will to All appears possible. SEGWAC wants to burst that bubble of hope. Santa is an attackable symbol of the season of love and joy, thus he's still SEGWAC's favorite target."

"We're going to need desperate measures to counteract the effects of SEGWAC's desperate measures," Relicta prophesied and lowered the landing gear.

As we got closer to the ground, I tried to delude myself that Relicta was exaggerating the scope of the situation. Hadn't Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole survived hallucinogens, Apathia Sowhata, Monsternapping, and a host of other disasters? What could possibly be worse?

*

The spacecraft hovered over an iceberg outside PM's and Al's cave, then set down with a jerk. At last the mystery of Christmas Monsterland's miseries was about to unfold.

"Whatever you do, don't take off your spacesuit! If you need to, well, you know, eat or something, come back in here and use the facilities," instructed Relicta as she opened the door, and we exited (I, somewhat wobbly) the aircraft.

The first Christmas Critter I spotted was Rudolph. He was tethered to a tree.

"Hey, Rudy," I greeted, waving as best I could in my bulky outerwear.

"Quack."

"Excuse me, what?"

"Quack, quack."

With that Rudolph flew up in the air, his nose blinking wildly, his hooves furiously flapping. At rope's end he jerked against his harness and swooped back into a snowbank.

Relicta deciphered: "He's convinced he's a duck."

"A duck?"

"Specifically, a dabbling duck, a mallard. *Anas platyrhynchos*. He's been trying to fly south for the winter. Last time he hit his antlers on the IPS. Then he tried to paddle in the hot tub and almost drowned. I had to tie him up, for his own protection."

Rudolph squawked loudly.

"Do all my Christmas Monsterland and North Pole friends think they're ducks?" I generalized from this first exposure to the crisis.

Relicta groaned. "No. If so, there might be some hope for Christmas. At least we could cover the southern route."

"They think they're other animals?"

"I can't explain it. You'll have to see for yourself. Try to reason with Rudy."

I clomped my way toward the deer (the space boots were rather cloddish). "Rudy?"

A quizzical quack.

"It's the Chronicler. Listen to me carefully. You're Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer, not Rudolph the red-billed duck. You have a shiny nose, not a bulbous beak. Those things holding you up are hooves, not webbed feet."

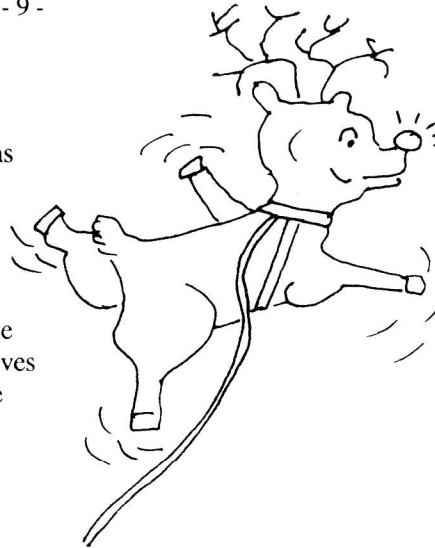
"Quack."

"Pay attention." I tenderly patted his antlers. "You're a deer, not a drake. You eat bark, not water plants and insects."

"Quack, squawk, honk!"

I returned to Relicta. "I'm not getting through."

"Welcome to the club."



"Did I hear club?" Our conference was interrupted by the raucous arrival of Peppermint Paunch, in top hat and tails. "Yes, friends, welcome to the Comedy Club! Did you hear about the Martian who had his antennae removed so he could get cable? Heh, heh. And what about the novelist whose work was so boring that even the word processor snored! Ha, ha."

I was not amused. "Paunch, what's going on here? Rudolph thinks he's a duck."

"If he waddles like a duck, if he quacks like a duck, he must be a duck. Yuck, yuck!"

"That's not funny, Peppermint," I critiqued.

"Tis too. Always a heckler in every crowd." Paunch declaimed defensively.

Relicta hunched her shoulders in a "see-what-I-mean?" shrug.

"Paunch, what's going on here?" I persisted. "Rudy's your friend. Why aren't you helping find out what's wrong?"

"No more detecting for me. I'm a stand-up comic. It's Peppermint Paunch in the Peppermint Lounge. Hey, what do you call a happy four-foot elf? The Jolly Green Giant! Heh, haw, haw! Comedy is my life!"



I was still not amused. "Peppermint, get a grip. Where's PM?"

"The heliotropic Othello-ette? Probably in her cave, wrestling with the green-eyed Monster."

Relicta and I left Peppermint cracking himself up in front of his captive audience. We heard him say as we headed away, "No Rudolph, I need a laugh track, not a quack track!"

At the entrance to PM's cave, Relicta noted, "He's been like that ever since the microwaves reverbed. If I hear one more alien joke I'm gonna deck him."

"What did he mean about PM?"

"Brace yourself."

We dinged the doorbell and were greeted by Alabaster, accoutered in a crimson smoking jacket. "Mon cheri Chronicler, and the resilient Relicta! Charmed, I'm sure you are."

Al smooched his own paw, then posed before the hall mirror. His mane was coiffured, and his tail was teased and tossed into a pouffy puff.

"No need to tell me how delighted you are to see me," Al exuded. "Of course you are! You desire to experience the wonderfulness that is I. You want to photograph me for this year's cover, oui? Ladies, take off your helmets, the better to see me."

Even though there was a cloud of condensation on my visor, I declined. Whatever Al had, I didn't want to catch it.

"How about a shot from this angle? The emeraldness of my eyes glows so brightly against my ermine fur, n'est-ce pas? Let's sit," Al proffered. "The light's better in the living room."

Alabaster half-reclined on one end of the sofa, then extracted a looking glass from his pocket and peered into it approvingly. "Ready for my interview. Let me fill you in on the extraordinary things I've been doing."

I sat at the other end of the couch. "Al, Rudolph thinks he's a duck."

"That dear deer is too, too deluded. He can fly, but he can't float. Don't know what's come over him."

"What are you doing about it?"

"Nothing, no time. Do you have any idea how long it takes to get my silver to shine like this? And my pawnails must be properly pedicured. Now, ask me about moi."

I couldn't censor myself. "When did you start wearing eyeliner?" slipped out as I ogled this monstrosity of a mascaraed Monster.

"Too much? I like the look. The makeup's for television, you see. I'm going to videotape myself for posterity." He consulted his mirror again. "Maybe if I smudge the liner a little more . . . " He did, and flipped his mane.

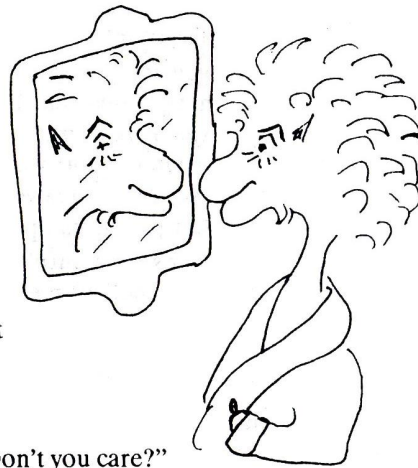
"Mr. Eggshell," I interrupted his reverie, "what about Paunch? He's quit detecting. He's given up the band. He's telling bad jokes."

"He's become a bore. Who needs that band anyway? They insisted I stay in the back behind my drums, where no one can see me."

"But what about tonight's concert? Don't you care?"

"How can I say it delicately? I won't play because I perspire when I paradiddle, and it's so gosh-darn unattractive."

A lump of lavender fuzz catapulted over the back of the settee and pounced on me, pummeling my chest. "Take your grimy hands off my husband, you helmeted hussy," screeched from the muzzle of the mauvette mugger.





"PM, cease and desist!" protested Al, jumping out of the way and rearranging his jacket. "My darling, you've mussed my mane. I must touch it up." And he, if I must say so (and I suppose I must), strutted out of the room.

The North Pole Ambassador was still shrieking. "You two vampish vermin, keep away from my Monster or I'll scratch your eyes out. You finks, you traitors! You worm your way into my confidence just so you can steal my husband!" She poised to pounce again.

I somersaulted over the sofa and ducked behind an arm chair. "PM? PM! Stop! What's got into you? It's me, your Chronicler!"

"I know who you are, you satirizing siren. You're the one that got that wart hog Big Pig publicity in *The New York Times*. I, whose exploits made you, whose glorification has garnered you praise, don't rate even a column inch penned by your pen in that paper."



If you have never seen a purple Christmas Monster foam in fury, believe me, it is not a pretty sight. I tried to reassure her. "PM, you've got it all wrong. I'm your friend. Relicta is your friend."

"Friends? Bah! Now that you're buddy-buddy with that galaxy-hopping gadabout, you don't need me. Don't lie to me, you writing wench! That interstellar interloper is featured this year, isn't she?"

"Yes," I had to admit, given all that had occurred thus far. "But you're still the star," I hastened to add.

"Is she going to be on the cover?" PM insisted, assaulting me with candy canes.

Al's "Dear, I'm on the cover this year" emanated from the dressing room.

"Is that your plan? Put Al on the cover and alienate his affections? You back-stabbing publicist!" raged the livid lilac Monster.

"No, no, you'll be on the cover," I assured her, and darted to avoid an onslaught of air-borne ornaments.

Al rushed from the dressing room with a distressed "Woe to the world! I thought I was to be on the cover this year. How can you deprive my public of me?"

"I'll put you *both* on the cover," I promised the pair, and started inching toward the exit.

Relicta tiptoed behind me. "Does that mean I *won't* be on the cover?" she needled me with a wry grin.

"Not enough paint," I sotto voced. We moved faster.

PM lunged after us, fur flaming fuchsia. "Depart, double-crossers, before you decide you want my children too. Husband stealers, child nappers!" Relicta and I barely escaped the cave.

We took shelter in the spaceship. "What's going on?" I panted breathlessly. "What's happened to our heroine?"

"She's convinced every female is after Al--Rosette was attacked, even her mother, Maraschino."

"The microwaves have put the Purple Monster into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure," I surmised, paraphrasing the Bard. "Oh, what has happened to them? Give me rest of the bad news."

"You asked for it," Relicta complied. "Take the twins. Lapis is so dependent that he's stopped talking and clings to the nearest paw around and won't let go. Geranium, on the other hand, has become so independent that no matter what you tell her to do she does the opposite. Maraschino, always a fount of tolerance, is now super-critical; nothing can be done to her satisfaction. Workaholic Spruce is now slothful--he lumbers around the house chugging eggnog and belching."

I exhaled astonishment.

"Did you talk to Pimento Poppy?"

"Christmas Monsterland's child psychologist won't take his pawnail out of his mouth. He just shakes his rattle," Relicta relayed.

"Oh no. Freudinella?"

"Our expert analyst is compulsively cleaning. She scrubs and scrubs and scrubs, quoting Lady Macbeth."



"I'm convinced things are definitely dire here," I admitted. "Obviously nothing's being accomplished. And it's getting late. There's no way that group can get together to rehearse for tonight's concert. If PM keeps up that screeching, she's not going to have a voice left. And what's Santa going to do if his sleigh pullers aren't exercising? Speaking of Santa, tell me things aren't quite so bad at the North Pole."

"Not as bad," Relicta accommodated.

"Oh, good."

"Badder."

"Ugh. Guess I've got to go there. Ready when you are."

Relicta consulted her computer. "The microwave readings have subsided," she reported, "but the other radiation levels are the same. I hoped they would've decreased."

With the spacecraft safely sealed, we removed our helmets. My co-partner evidenced extreme exhaustion--her eyes were glazing and one antenna sagged.

"Relicta," I said, "you haven't told me about Dove."

"We're going there now," she answered, starting the engine. "He's isolated himself on the northern border of Christmas Monsterland."

*



We touched down next to a breathtakingly beautiful ice pyramid. After relatching our helmets, Relicta and I de-capsuled and approached the structure, a glistening, glorious oasis in the snow-covered wilderness. The crunch, crunch of our boots crashed the tranquil silence.

We crawled softly into the sculptured haven. Once inside, I gasped. The interior was flickering with candle flames and the reflected glitter of a thousand quartz crystals.

It took a moment to adjust to the low light, and then I saw him, perched lotus-position on a burlap mat. He was clad only in a loincloth.

"Welcome, Wife, Storyteller. Become one with the universe, the cosmos," Dove chanted. It was eerie, for he never opened his eyes.

I sat silently next to him as he intoned "Mooo-o-o-o. Mooo-o-o-o-o."

"Dove, I don't mean to intrude, but don't you mean OM," I calmly corrected.

"You have your mantra, I have mine," he mellowly mused. "Peace, Partner. Pacem, Penciller."

Relicta and I crawled out of the pyramid.

"He'll be all right," Relicta reassured herself as we re-boarded the spaceship.

"I see why you didn't want Dove's evil twin to learn what's been going on here," I said. "But if we don't come up with a solution soon, there'll be no concert tonight, and everyone will know there's something dreadfully wrong. Let's hurry to the North Pole," I urged, and we did.



*

"UFO, identify yourself," Clyde's voice crackled over the radio.

"XM-AS2 requesting permission to land," Relicta returned.

"Password?"

"Mistletoe."

"Permission granted" staticked back.

"What's this? You've never needed permission to visit," I said.

"It takes too long to argue."

Relicta bounced the ship perilously close to Santa's workshop. Clyde stood guard in front of the module door as it descended. "Identification," he demanded.

"Relicta, née Sentries, previously of an exploded planet, now dual citizenship of New York and North Pole."

"Proof."

Relicta handed him her laminated Salvation Army ID card.

"You," Clyde said, addressing me.

"Clyde, you know me."

I glanced at Relicta. "Humor him," she whispered.

"Chronicler, of the Big Apple and Saint Louis," I complied, and displayed my driver's license.

"Hm, the picture's so bad it must be authentic." He lifted a Polaroid and blasted a bulb at my face. "I'll make up your Visitor's Pass." He ambled into the workshop.

"Is this necessary?" I asked Relicta.

"Clyde thinks it is. He's become the ultimate bureaucrat. Not even Kafka could envision the pinnacle to which Clyde has taken the term. Mr. Elf regards his rules and regulations very seriously and enforces them with rigor. Believe me, it's easier to go along."

Clyde returned with a badge, and I clipped it on. (My photo was typical: my two crossed, red-pupiled eyes stared out from the helmet.)

"Tut, tut, tut, Ms. Chronicler," Clyde said, "your list is overdue."

"Clyde, the deadline's four o'clock Christmas Eve," I corrected.

"That was changed. I sent you by facsimile transmission Notification No. DAN-E, Form BO, Request for Early N&N."

"When?"

"Last night, 2300 hours."

"I wasn't home." Fortunately, I had the data with me. "Naughty and Nice list," I declared, digging a floppy disk out of my purse and waving it.

"Debugged?" Clyde squinted suspiciously.

"Totally deloused," I reassured him. (Clyde did have cause to be leery. Last year I inadvertently vented a computer virus on the North Pole computer system.)

"Follow me," Clyde ordered and led me into his office. "Fill out Form JBJBJATW in triplicate and sign here, here, and here."

"What is it?"

"Certification that the Naughties and Nices are your sole opinion and do not necessarily reflect the views of Christmas Monsterland or the North Pole."

"But . . ."

"Rules are rules."

Relicta retreated. "I've got to make some calculations," she informed me. "As soon as you can, find the Clauses."



I signed and dated form after form, which Clyde dutifully stamped and filed.

"Oh," I mentioned, muddled from the paperwork, "maybe I should change that one Naughty back to Nice. The person was a little better this year."

"Fill out Form N&N, Authorization to Use NP Computer, and Form XN&NCHANGE, to change the listing. In quadruplicate."

"Not *that* much better," I surrendered, and abandoned the project. "Would it be difficult to get an advance on my fee for this year's story?" I inquired hesitantly.

(It was important, after all, since my cash flow had flowed into Atlantic City.)

"Fill out XZBROKE, Request for Prepayment, in sextuplicate, with Rider CIWK giving cause. Go down the hall two doors, turn left, then left again, window 4, for a voucher, which you take to Room 1225 for verification of signature, then Room 816 for check issuance."

I contemplated being queued through the next decade. "Never mind. There may not be a story this year."

"You have a contract, duly executed," Clyde complained. "If you do not intend to fulfill that agreement, complete Form NOTALE89, have it notarized, two witnesses, and file one copy with me, one with our lawyer, two with . . ."

"All right, I'll write," I relented.

We were interrupted by Elvira Elf. At least I think it was Elvira. This elf wore a sequined midriff top and a miniskirt. She had fake eyelashes and dyed chartreuse hair, and had painted her face with scarlet lipstick and rouge.



"Clyde, bitsy boopsy, take a break," Elvira purred, sidling up to Clyde's side.

"Not now, Elvira. Why aren't you at your desk?" Clyde reprimanded. "Your break was over at 1205. It's now 1207. And change your uniform--it's not regulation length."

"Pooh, you party-pooper. Come to my place for dinner, sweetums," the vampish elf suggestively suggested. "Candlelight, a little bit of the bubbly, some sugar plums?"

I'd seen enough. Before Clyde could invent another form I slid quickly out of the room. I took a deep breath. It was time to find Mr. and Mrs. Claus.

I wandered by the workshop, and wondered that I could hear no ting-ting-ping of tiny hammers, no whirr-whizz-whirr of pint-sized power saws.

Nor was there any pop-pop-pop of popcorn popping in the kitchen. Instead I found Mrs. Claus, rocking in her rocking chair, back and forth, back and forth.

"Mrs. S., it's me, the Chronicler," I helloed heartily. I touched the stove. Ice cold. "Shouldn't there be some baking going on?" I hesitantly asked.

"I'm afraid I don't have the right recipes," Mrs. Santa replied, wringing her hands. "I've asked Clyde, but he wants me to fill out all those forms," Mrs. Claus complained. "I'm fearful I'll put too little vanilla in the spritzes, or too many buttons on my Gingerbread People. And I'm terrified I'll burn the bonbons or mutilate the marzipan."



"Well, maybe you could wrap some presents." I had seen a few completed toys on the porch. "Those dolls are awfully naked, and Christmas is fast approaching."

"What if I don't cut enough paper? Or if I attach the wrong label, and tag coal for a child that should get a toy, or vice versa? That poor youngun's psyche would be irrevocably damaged. If you can't do something right, don't do it at all, I always say."

"There, there, Mrs. C." I patted her grey head. "I'm sure whatever you do will be fine. Why, you've done your job perfectly for, well, centuries."

"That was then. What if my hands tremble when I tie a bow? What if..."

I left her, rocking and wringing, to search for Santa. I found the great man in his study, sitting behind his desk, his unlit pipe in his hand.

"Ho! ho! ho! Santa," I hallooed.

"No, no, no, no ho ho ho."

"Santa, you don't mean that."

"Indeed I do," Santa insisted. "I've been reading letters from all the children. I got my own nine-digit ZIP code this year, did you know that? This one, from Sarah," he held up a crayon-scrawled note, "asks me to bring her daddy a job. How disappointed she'll be Christmas morning, when I've failed to provide. And this one here, from Theodore. He's homeless. I can only hope one of my Helpers OUT THERE finds him, for I never will. If he gets nothing for Christmas, think of what he'll think of me. And all the little Janes and Johnnys, who want their Nintendos and bicycles, dolls and puppies, what good am I to them? Ten years from now they won't believe in me any more. Johnny will hear from someone that his mother bought the game at Toys 'R Us, his father wrapped it, and after little Johnny fell asleep his parents put it under the tree. Bye, bye, fat guy."

Santa paused and peered out the window. "I should have been a missionary," he sighed. "Or a doctor. Or a teacher. Do you know how many children are inadequately educated to live in this modern world? I'm so ineffective. One night a year I fly through the air, slide up and down chimneys delivering presents, and hark to hear the little tots sing my praises. But what do I accomplish?"



"Dear Santa," I said, "when I was a child, I believed in you with all my heart. I dutifully behaved myself, to the best of my ability, so I could be on your 'nice' list. I used to stand in long lines in department stores, waiting in anticipation to sit on your lap and whisper away my secret dreams. 'I want a stuffed dog,' I'd rehearse over and over."

"You *always* wanted a stuffed dog," Santa reminisced.

"There you'd be," I recalled, "resplendent in your red suit. I was in awe. I'd go to sleep Christmas Eve, leaving milk and cookies next to the tree, and awake the next morning to find crumbs and a room full of presents (you never forgot the stuffed dog!). You were wonderful, wondrous."

"But that didn't last, did it?" challenged Mr. Claus.

"No," I admitted. "Some years later some petulant peer snottily informed me that only babies believed in Santa Claus. Oh, at first my parents assured me that, 'Yes, dear, there is a Santa Claus,' and I held out a little longer. But that blabber-mouthed brat had sown the seed of skepticism. Yes, at some point I ceased believing. I acknowledged the 'truth.' Mom and Dad had provided the presents. The Santa to whom I'd divulged my secrets had been an employee of the department store, a merchandising gimmick. No longer could I be deceived by fake beards and rented costumes."

"Ah ha!" huffed Santa. "That's my point. Eventually all kids abandon me, unable to counter the nihilists who proclaim 'THERE IS NO SANTA CLAUS!' "

"Perhaps," I ceded. "But think what you accomplished! As a child I went to Sunday School, and each Christmas there was the nativity play. The little girl (invariably blond) playing Mary, dressed in blue, sat center stage next to a doll in a manger. I wore a sheet sewn into a gown, on which were

pinned wire wings covered with silver-trimmed gauze. I remember the cue: 'And the angel said until them.' 'Fear not,' I stammered, my Reynolds Wrap halo askew above me head, "for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.' Then the multitude of our high-pitched voices chorused 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' "



"That moment always moves me," Santa said. "It's the real message of Christmas."

"But an abstract one," I added. "How can a five-year-old, with her concrete thinking, conceptualize the promise of that baby's birth so many years ago? But you, Santa, were not abstract. Hadn't I just sat on your lap? 'He knows if you've been bad or good,' I sang, and I behaved. At a young age a week is eternity, and death doesn't exist. How can a child comprehend waiting a lifetime for the promise of heaven? But it wasn't a great leap for a youngster to make the connection between a week or a day of unselfishness or kindness or goodness and the presents under a tree."

Santa sighed. "That proves my point. I'm an outside conscience promoting material rewards. Parents use me to threaten their kids: 'You better watch out. Don't shout! Don't pout! Or the great Santa Claus won't give you squat.' Images of me are used to sell hamburgers and house slippers, and everyone gets a kick out of the fat fraud who fools little kids."

"I prefer to think of you as the marvelous mythological embodiment of a Grand Concept. That you are abandoned later, as you call it, is for the best--by then we hopefully have internalized right and wrong, and accepted our responsibility to give and share. How much easier to find faith in that which we cannot see, because you fulfilled our faith in that which we, if only for a few years, could see."

"They don't need me OUT THERE," stated Santa. "The adults can keep the legend alive without me."

"Ah, not if some part of them doesn't still believe," I countered. "Not if there aren't some presents under the tree that even the parents can't explain! The figments of you left in my imagination opened me to PM's saga when she introduced herself fourteen years ago. Get with the program, Santa! Why don't you get back to work and ready your sleigh, so I can complete this year's episode?"

"Why don't I not, and you can pretend that I did," he rejoined and continued brooding.

Heartbroken, I joined Relicta in the spaceship. "I'm too old for this," I confided. "Did you know that I hit the big four-oh this year?"

Relicta indicated ignorance of that event.

"Gravity has been very, very bad to me," I confessed. "Look at these wrinkles, these laugh lines, these frown lines. Santa just informed me that I have to create any chronicle of a Christmas ride this year. I cannot be expected to salvage Christmas. It's too big a burden to place on my shoulders. PM is so good at inspirational exhortations. I'm too terribly tongue-tied." I was bawling, blubbing babble.

"Oh no, it's hit you too," Relicta panicked. "I was so *sure* midasmetal was the answer, but if you've gone gaga, my whole idea is kaplooeey."

"No, I've got PMS. This is my normal response to rampaging hormonal upheaval. It'll pass. My symptoms aren't PM's," I assured her. "Somewhere in the midst of my whining did I hear you say you've got an idea?"

"Yes, but I need a lot of help. Somehow we've got to get the Christmas Monsterland crew into the laboratory here."

"If my diagnosis is correct," I said, "I think I can persuade them."

"Let's go," Relicta said, revving the motor. "Enlighten me along the way." And once again we were off and flying.

"The way I see it," I began once the twirling stopped and we were cruising, "our Christmas friends are not the same Christmas friends we know and love, but yet they are."

"You're riddling, Wordsmith," Relicta ribbed me.

I elaborated. "It's my theory that the radiation has caused the character trait a Christmas Character works hardest to suppress, or is the most destructive, to become dominant, to the point of exclusivity. If you had asked me for a description of PM before the change, I would have said she hasn't a jealous bone in her body. That is, if she has bones--if we get out of this, I'll have to check with Dr. Arké Elf, the North Pole veterinarian. But I digress. Where was I? Yes, that PM wasn't a jealous Monster. But Santa's lead sleigh puller grew up purple, alienated in a land where only red and green were accepted. How could she not have been a mite envious? But she worked to keep her jealous outbursts to a minimum, because those feelings got in her way. She pushed them aside so she could work toward her goals. Same with Al. He sublimated his vanity in the service of his studies."

"Makes some sense," Relicta agreed. "Clyde's leanings toward dictatorial bureaucracy have been buried by his natural naïveté. And Mrs. Claus: she has always been so busy she hasn't had time to be self-judgmental or insecure."

"As for Mr. C.," I contributed, "how seldom is heard a discouraging word at the North Pole! But with the world as it is, how can Santa *not* at times get discouraged? It's just that he so rarely lets us see his frustration."

"And my devoted Dove," Relicta said. "Throughout his early life, he was dastardly and devilish, hyper and hypocritical. He sought hostility, not tranquility. After his conversion to Christmas cheer, he's dedicated himself to doing the things we'd all approve of. In aspiring to selflessness, he's denied himself self-exploration--until now."

"Take Peppermint Paunch," I added. "He works so hard to be taken seriously. He sometimes jokes, but he sincerely seeks to be seen as a super sleuth and a gifted guitarist."

"Rings true. Except for Rudy. I just can't believe he's been suppressing an identification with duckdom."

"I admit that befuddles me. If I stretch my theory, maybe it's a hidden horror of hunters. Ducks are prized game, as are deer."

"So what you're saying is --"

"What I'm saying is, our friends are bonkers, nuttier than a Christmas fruitcake," I chuckled.

"You mean they've got bats in their jingled belfries?" Relicta twittered.

"They're dotty!"

"Goofy!"

"Crazy!!"

"Bonkers!!!!"

'Twas the season to be silly, for Relicta and I were hooting hysterically. But our fatigue-induced giggling gaiety quickly turned into melancholy as the sky darkened and flakes of snow dashed against our windshield. "So how do we get the gang to the North Pole?" Relicta asked after a moment. "The concert's in four hours."

I mapped out my method.

*

Relicta dropped me off at PM's cave and set out again to pick up Dove.

Peppermint Paunch, still entertaining the captive Rudolph, had resorted to pratfalls. Poor Rudy, for his part, could only evoke a despondent, forlorn, quivering quack.

"Mr. Paunch," I began my plan, "you're needed at the North Pole. Santa's sad, and you're the only one who can help him."

Peppermint beamed. "Just what I need, a new audience! I'll put the ha-ha back in the old geezer," he agreed.

"It's a top secret mission," I whispered conspiratorially.

"I'll aspire to spy to your specifications," the striated Monster chortled.

That was too easy, I told myself as I once again knocked on PM's door.

PM barred the entrance. "Avaunt, vixen! Stay away from my Monster." Lapis was attached to her neck, clinging closely.

It was difficult, but I elbowed my way into the cave. "I'm going to see Al," I asserted, and located the egotistical Dr. Eggshell contemplating a bust of himself.

"Dr. Eggshell," I tendered, "Peppermint has just agreed to come to the North Pole to aid in secret scientific experiments so advanced that he'll probably win the North Pole Prize. Of course, his picture will be in all the papers. I was wondering, could we borrow a few Bunsen burners?"

Al fumed and fussed. "Paunch? What does he know about science? I, with my Ph.D.'s in chemistry and physics, should have been asked."

"I would never dream of taking you away from your mirror," I answered innocently.

"He's not going anywhere with you," protested PM with a savage push to my solar plexus.

"PM, my pet," rejoined Al, "they need *me*! Peppermint doesn't know a test tube from a jelly jar. That joker's arrogance only exceeds his incompetence. I shall go."

"All right," I agreed, "but don't tell Paunch why. No reason to upset him."

"Whither Al goest, so goest I," PM petulantly proclaimed and stomped her paw. "You're not getting out of my sight, you potential philanderer."

So far, so good.

"Well, I'm not going," Geranium said from the corner, where she was sulking stubbornly.

"No one asked you," I told her. "Stay here and stare at the stalactites."

"I won't," she said, and joined her brother on her mother's mane.

By the time Relicta re-landed, all six had been gathered outside the cave.

"Are they coming?" she asked.



"Oh, can't keep them away," I winked. "Reverse psychology is a powerful persuader."

Relicta surveyed the bickering group. "They're not all going to fit in the spaceship. Dove brought all his crystals."

I was getting a little cocky. "Watch this," I bragged to my co-conspirator. "Al, Peppermint, get on board," I instructed. "PM, we'll come back for you later."

"No way, you treacherous tale-teller."

"But there's no room," I reasoned.

"Then I'll just teletransport Al, Peppermint, the kids, and myself. You're not getting within three feet of them."

BOING!! And that group disappeared.

"What about Rudolph?" Relicta reminded me. "I need him for the darkroom work."

I considered, pondered, then thought some more. "I wonder if PM still has the present I gave the twins on their first birthday." I returned to the cave and tore through the kids' room.

"Put this on the back," I said when I returned. Relicta attached the mobile to the spaceship and we took off, with Rudolph happily honking behind a flock of painted wooden ducks.

*

Back at the North Pole we somehow managed to collect everyone in the lab. (Clyde, of course, required another form.)

"Okay," Relicta said, "I've got a project. It requires all your special talents."

The group grumbled, but Relicta's resolve rose about the fray. "The ingredients we need are tinsel, candy canes, and pine cones."

"Geranium," I warned the red-maned mini-Monster, "whatever you do, don't ask Mrs. Claus to help you find the candy canes." Mrs. Santa was immediately dragged away, and was heard to say, "What if I can't find them? What if they're stale?"

"Only you can collect the tinsel," I flattered the arrogant Alabaster, "for it must matching the gleam and sheen of the silver in your fur." Off he went, holding his mirror to ensure the match.

Peppermint, prodding Santa with puns, pushed off to reap the pine cones. Dove tagged along to commune with nature.

"What are we making?" I asked Relicta.

"A magic mixture to mitigate the radiation."

"Oh."

"Chronicler, it's time I told you. This could be very dangerous for you," the alien confessed.

"Why?" I inquired in trepidation.

"I need your spacesuit. It's got the required amount of midasmetal I need for the final ingredient."

"Sure you don't want to use yours? Or take some from the ship?" Who could know what loathsome character trait lurking in my subconscious was about to be unleashed?

"I'm going to need my craft and suit for another flight tonight. Be brave!"

I gingerly removed the golden garment. After the suit was sectioned, the midasmetal was extracted, and we set about grinding and combining the various ingredients. After detailing to Clyde the precise proportions and specifications for heating and cooling, Relicta disappeared with Rudolph into a thick-walled room and closed the door. We could hear an occasional squawk as we worked away.

Under Clyde's supervision, we sifted and separated, then measured the mixture, and finally poured the powder into the pine cones and pack it in.

So far I was feeling no ill effects from my limited exposure. "I'll bet I'm immune," I reassured myself. "What was that ratio of candy canes to tinsel? Could be a good Lotto number."

Soon there were several hundred pine cones spread out on the floor. "I wonder how many there are," I said to Al. "How 'bout a pool? I'll go with 465. A gumdrop each to buy in. Whoever's closest without going over wins!"

Clyde counted the cones while I collected the wagers. Relicta re-emerged. "Well, my part's done. How're you doing?"

"No ill effects for me," I reported. "Clyde, how many?"

"464," Clyde reported.

PM waved her ticket. "I've got 463!" she hollered. When I demanded a recount, the wisteria winner bit me. (She may or may not have bones, but she sure has molars.)

"We're missing one last ingredient," Relicta announced to me in private as I licked my wound. "Unless it's combined with the midasmetal, I don't think we're going to get the right effect."

"What's that?"

"Love. Where are we going to find love, with everyone here so self-absorbed?"

"Two to one I've got the answer," I anteed.

"You're on," Relicta called.

"You said Dove brought his crystals. Where did they come from originally?"

"He collected them from the caves of PM and the other Monsterland residents. The rock candy came from Mrs. C.'s kitchen."

I grinned. "Pay up, Space Traveler. Those crystals have absorbed so much love this year alone that there's bound to be plenty left over. Use them!"

And we sprinkled the crystals over the pine cones and carried them outside. "Now what?" I asked.



Relicta revealed her work. "Rockets," she said. "We're going to shoot the pine cones into the atmosphere, where they'll explode and, I hope, neutralize the transmuted microwaves."

Al began to lay out one half of the rockets in a pattern that was an uncannily caricature of himself.



Relicta strapped herself in the ship, with Dove by her side for psychic support. "I'll shoot off the other half from above. If only the blizzard would stop," she said. "It would be more effective."

Would it surprise you that the snowflakes dwindled, then fizzled, and there was a clear night? Or that the North Star sparkled brightly?

Zoom, up went the space capsule.

Relicta radioed down. "Ready?"

"Ready," Clyde reported from his station.

"Twelve-eleven-ten--" Relicta began the countdown. I cranked up the Victrola for a some merry mood music.

"Three-two-one! Let 'er rip!"

Silent Night! KA-BOOM! The first pine cone exploded.

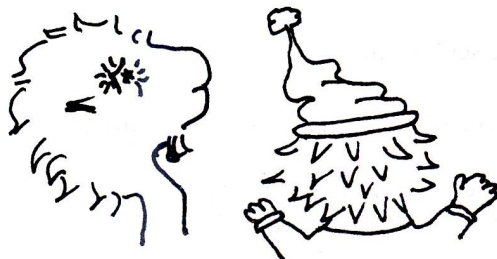
Holy Night! WHIZZ! Rockets sailed. KER-POW!

All is calm, BANG! BANG! BANG!

All is bright. And it was, for fantastic fireworks were flashing and flickering, radiant against the starlit sky. It was such a glorious display that the obsessed Christmas characters could not suppress their cheers and claps.

"Super, Relicta," I complimented when the spaceship returned.

"Thrilling, wasn't it?" the extraterrestrial enthused. "But there's only two hours until the concert." She returned to her computer. "The radiation



is gone!" she announced in triumph. "Now if only the effects wear off in time."

"What spread do you want?"

We waited, and waited, and waited. We waited some more, but there was no improvement in our friends.

I was attempting to engage Lapis, now perched on my shoulder, in a cranberry-a-point game of backgammon when Clyde approached me, waving a handful of forms. "Ms. Chronicler, we must discuss these expense account requests. How can you expect us to pay for your Christmas wreath?"

"It's a legitimate business expense. It's a model for the card cover," I justified.

"Aw, what the heck, we'll pay. It's Christmas, and changing it just means more work for me." Clyde tore up the paperwork.

I looked at Relicta. She looked at me. "Remission?" we unisoned.

"Double or nothing it is!" I declared. We dared to hope, and split up to check it out.

I found Mrs. Claus in the kitchen, brooding over an empty pot. "What if I burn the fudge and it sets fire to the kitchen? Fa-la-la, that's what fire extinguishers are for! Hand me the sugar." And she was off and cooking.

When Relicta spotted Elvira, the enticing elf had cornered Clyde and was nibbling his ear to pensive protestations. She abruptly halted, looked down at her knobby knees, and ran to wrap herself in a robe.

Lapis was still clutching my shoulder when, BOING! he took off to his sister's side. "Let's get in trouble," he said. "No way," Geranium pouted, then "Okay," and they began to play.

PM snarled when I drew near, and bared her fangs. But instead of a nick from my neck, I got a peck on the cheek. "Chronicler, Merry Christmas!" she said and ran off to Al's side.

Al was preening and primping, when he suddenly put down the mirror and announced, "PM, Plum Puddin', I'm gonna wash this mousse right out of my mane. Shall we go home and gather my drumsticks?"

"Oh, Sugar Lump," PM cooed, and off they went.

Peppermint Paunch was performing for anyone who'd listen. "Why does Batman bat left handed?" But he forgot the punchline, and picked up his guitar and started strumming. "Hey, gang, we've got thirty minutes of practice time before we have to leave!" he sang out. "Let's get jamming!"

"Rudolph is munching bark again," I reported to Relicta, who I found resting quietly by Dove's side.

"I almost wish Dove doesn't change," she said. "He seems so calm." In the midst of his mantra Dove stopped mid-"moo-o-o" and fell asleep.

"I think all our friends will re-explore and come to terms with what's happened here," I predicted.

PM and her hugging hubby returned from Christmas Monsterland with Rosette, Alizarin, and Brick, and soon Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives were rehearsing their jumping version of "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

Once again the tink, tink, clink of tiny hammers was heard in the workshop as the elves put finishing touches on the toys they'd abandoned the day before. The smell of cookies wafted from the kitchen.

It was time to find Santa.

He had returned to his study and was once more going over the letters.

"Santa," I ventured hesitantly, "any chance you're in a better mood?"

"No, no, no," he frowned. Then with a twinkle he cried, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Fooled ya. Thanks for your pep talk. Look at the time! Shouldn't the band be bound for the Big A? And don't you have a fable to finish?"

I helped pack instruments in the spaceship, then jumped in beside Dove and his mate. PM teletransported the rest of the band members to Madison Square Garden. Santa and Mrs. C. saw us off, smiling broadly.

"It's remarkable that I wasn't affected by the microwaves," I said to Relicta. "Odds are it's because I have no bad characteristics I try to suppress," I concluded.

"But I bet you have at least one you need to!" Relicta laughed.

*

It's now three in the morning, Christmas Eve. I'm waiting for Relicta to pick me up at my apartment. She's promised to deposit me in my mother's rose garden in Saint Louis.

For the record, the rock show was rousing, but the special effects couldn't match Relicta's pyrotechnics. The presence of sinister SEGWACian spies in the audience prompted me to ask Relicta if I should distribute my dispatch. "Won't SEGWAC know their method worked?" I worried.

"Maybe. But advise the Society to try again in five centuries," Relicta said. "My calculations indicate that's how long the neutralizing elements will remain in the North Pole atmosphere. Publish, Chronicler. We won't perish!"

The buzzer is buzzing, so I'd better go. I've promised myself that I won't gamble again until my February pilgrimage to Las Vegas. But before I punctuate this report with the final exclamation point, I can't resist one last wager. I'll bet if you open your hearts and imaginations (and your chimney flues), the odds are exceptional that you'll win the jackpot:

A VERY MERRY CHRISTMAS
and a JOYOUS NEW YEAR!

