

# THE WONDERS OF CHRISTMAS MONSTERLAND

*The PM Saga, Book XVI*  
by Susan Kirby



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**CHRONICLER ADVENTURES PRESENTS**

**The  
First Day-Before-the-Day-Before-Christmas  
Christmas Monsterland Tour**

*The experience of a lifetime! Journey to the most remote region of the planet. Visit the birthplace and home town of the magnificent Christmas critter, Purple Monster. Meet her family and friends. Discover the history and legends, culture and art of this magical, mythological world.*

*Extra bonus! A sleigh ride to the North Pole for a rare glimpse of Santa's workshop.*

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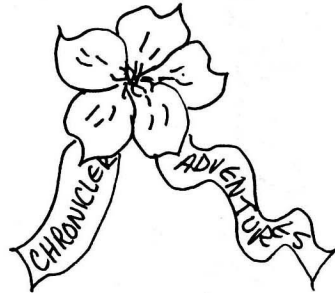
### THE SEASON'S GREETING

Hi! Watch your step getting off the spaceship. Good to see you. It's mighty chilly out, -50° F. windchill, so hurry into the Town Igloo just behind me and join the others who've already arrived. Great! Lapis and Geranium have BOING!ed in with some of the New-York-and-environs crowd. I was afraid you'd get cold feet, or hooves, or paws, or whatever, at the last minute (of course you'll get cold feet, hooves, or paws, or whatever here, but never mind). Isn't teletransporting fun?

Excuse me a moment. Uh, Lapis and Geranium, don't unlink your tails yet. Brendan Boxer hasn't fully materialized. Didn't I ask you to make two trips?

"Yup. But we have errands to run for Grandma Maraschino, and we just knew we could do it in one blink."

Geranium, let's just say you were lucky. Aren't PM's seven-year-olds delightful? Give your name to Clyde Elf at the door. Elvira Fernhat has Christmas Roses to pin on to identify you as a member of the tour (not that anyone would mistake any of you--except perhaps Albert the Alpaca--for a Christmas Monster). Warm up with some hot apple cider.



There's the sleigh with the Missouri pickup. Hi, Mom! Yo, Sis — our other sibling's already arrived. She's conferring with Dr. Arké and the other veterinarians. They're devising a way to justify this as a tax deduction. Max, good to finally meet you. Buon giorno, dear Friends! And Cousins! And Aunts! Good of you to come!

Clyde, is that everyone? Let's see . . . Israel?

"Check."

Colorado?

"Check."

Arizona? California? Florida? Maine? Pennsylvania? Texas? Canada?

"Check, check, check, check, check, okey-dokey, check."

Oh my goodness, where are The New York Timesers? Don't tell me I forgot The Times? Whew, here they are, just BOING!ed in with PM. Go on in.

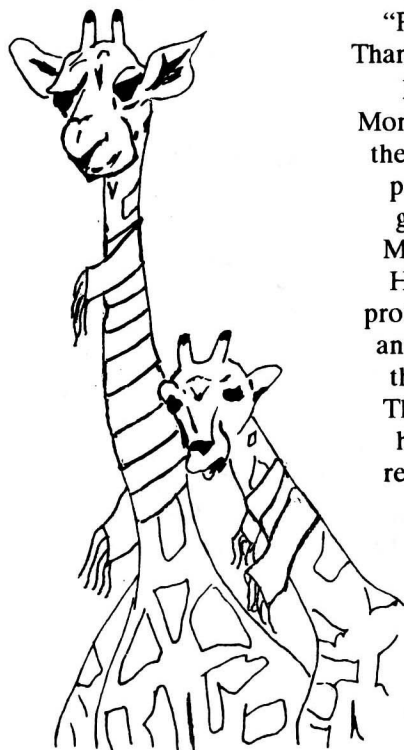
PM, this is going very, very well, isn't it?

"Yes, my scribbling Scribe. Tarry not, your travelers await."



### INTRODUCTION

Welcome, all, to Christmas Monsterland! We have a swell day planned for you. As you probably know, I am the Chronicler. Before we begin, I want to introduce my chroniclee, the star of the past fifteen *Sagas*, Santa's lead sleigh puller and the North Pole Ambassador – herself alone worth the exorbitant price of admission – my fuchsia-furred confidante, the multit talented PM!



"It's jolly to see all of you. Gerald and Geoffrey Giraffe, great mufflers!"

"Calico Kitty crocheted them for us."

"Penelope Pigeon, haven't seen you since the Thanksgiving Parade."

Most of you are familiar with Christmas Monsterland already, having perused the epistles I've penned and pecked previously. I hope you had fun getting here. To orient you, Christmas Monsterland is somewhat east of Hollywood and north of Broadway. It is protected by an invisible protective shield, and you've been brought here by the only three methods of ingress and egress. Those who teletransported with PM or her twins, your molecules will fully reassemble in a few more minutes.

Those who whirled in on Relicta's spaceship, I hope you appreciated the Dramamine I stocked on board the extraterrestrial intergalactic traveler's spinning midasmetal orb. Those who sleighed in courtesy of Rudolph's navigation will, I'm sure, always cherish the memory of soaring above the clouds, with the stratospheric wind shears whipping through your waistcoats.

Gratitude to my friends here and at the North Pole for opening their hearts and homes to such a large gathering. They graciously agreed to this tour when I explained that I was as broke as an ornament dropped from the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and that since Santa still hasn't renewed my contract and hasn't authorized a raise, the income from all your tickets will help pay the expenses of this year's story. Did you have something to add, PM?

"If memory serves, the blackmail demand was more like, 'If you don't let me run this tour, there's not a snowball's chance in Hades there will be a Christmas *Saga*.'"

Thank you for correcting the record. (Endeavor not to embarrass me again, Ms. Mauvette Minister. Our guests will lose confidence in me.)

Speaking of records, as we go along I'll be taking notes, and at the end of your trip you'll receive a transcript of your experiences, complete with illustrations and a glittering, glorious hand-painted cover.

Don't you feel the anticipatory tingle of Noëllic goosebumps UP HERE, so close to the North Pole? You are going to meet some of the most delightful Christmas characters. They are warm, caring, and highly intelligent, but can get irritable when irked, so try not to irk them.

Christmas Monsterland is inhabited by a vast number of red Monsters, a goodly population of green Monsters, quite a few green and red Monsters, many, many red and green Monsters, one purple Monster –

"That's me."

I think they've already deduced that, PM. There is also one white Monster with a silver mane –

"Alabaster, my hubby."

There's one young purple Monster with a red mane –

"My daughter, Geranium Amethyst."

PM, we're never going to get through this if I have to name them all. One white Monster with a blue mane – all right, all right, Lapis Snowflake, PM's

son. In addition to the Monsters, inhabitants include one alien (Relicta), one ex-SEGWACian (her husband, Dove), one almost-a-year-old combination alien-ex-SEGWACian (their daughter, Crystal Camellia), and an assortment of reindeer, penguins, polar bears, and elves who are free to dwell here whenever they want.



The economy of Christmas Monsterland is, of course, Christmas-based. Monsters were at one time hunter-gatherers, scratchers and scroungers, but Santa Claus has through the centuries converted their source of income to holiday-oriented industries. Although there are no white-collar or blue-collar workers here – since Monsters don't wear clothes, except when they want to, which isn't often – over the years CM has developed into a sophisticated society, with lawyers, doctors, cooks, accountants, teachers, and other necessary service professionals. There is also a strong manufacturing base. Christmas Monsterland produces much-admired garments made from the incredibly soft Monster fur, which is gathered at shedding time in the spring and knitted into cable-stitch cardigans and tatted

into turtlenecks. Here also are a profitable popcorn-stringing business and a thriving tinsel-untangling enterprise. Christmas Monsterland is a bustling town, and you will find the inhabitants eager to show you their work and their play.

But of course, the activity most associated with Christmas Monsterland is that of the thirteen world-renowned Christmas Monsters who pull Santa's sleigh. Yes, Rudy?

"You promised if I picked up the tour group . . ."



So I did. Rudolph has reminding me that I owe him an apology. In the first book of the *PM Saga*, I noted the fact that Christmas Monsters, not reindeer, pull Santa's sleigh. I also said reindeer had been given the credit because they had better ad men and PR. I tactlessly typed that many years ago these antlered animals launched an effective media blitz to change the SC sleigh-puller contract, abetted by the introduction of such

fictional tripe as *The Night Before Christmas* and – here's the sensitive part – "the machinations of a red-nosed opportunist named Rudolph." I have been asked to apologize. I wasn't acquainted with Rudy at the time and used my literary license to plump up the word count. If I offended any reindeer, I apologize.

"You offended *me*!"

O.K., then, well, sorry, Rudy. Won't happen again.

"Reindeer do *too* pull Santa's sleigh."

Yes they do, I know that now, but you must admit that while reindeer take care of the short hops throughout the year, only Christmas Monsters have the stamina required for the long Christmas streak over Siberia. It's a fact, and you know it. You're short-circuiting again, Rudolph.

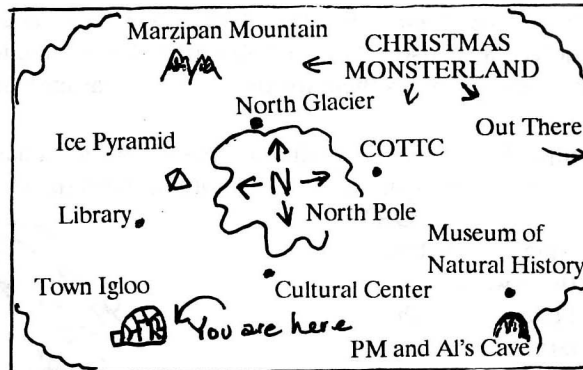
"We – I – we – if you think I'm gonna return your group OUT THERE after their visit UP HERE if you treat me like this, you've got another (blink-blink-blink) coming."

I said I'm sorry. Don't overload your batteries. Reindeer are delightful, hard-working members of Santa's team and Christmas wouldn't be the same without them. How did I get so sidetracked? Where was I? Rewind.

We've a full day planned for you. Before we go, Peppermint Paunch, chief detective and security expert in CM, would like to review the rules.

"Salutations. A few do's and don't's to make your visit safe. First, stay together. Christmas Monsterland's a vast, frigid place. I can't guarantee your safety if you wander off. Clyde's handed you a map, just in case. For security

reasons, no photos or telephone calls. Stash your cellu-lars and cameras at the door. There's too much danger of spies from the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas as it is."



Peppermint, sorry to break in, but I can assure you *none* of these wonderful travelers could be SEGWACians. Or at least I don't think so. There is one I have my doubts about, but you know who that is.

"We gotta be careful. I still don't think this is a good idea, Chronicler."

My striped Sherlockian associate, we agreed that you'd get your picture on the cover again if you helped me out. Just do your job. A few more words from Clyde, then we're off.

"oH-Ho, Ho-oH! Hic."

Clyde gets excited in front of large audiences. Try again, pixie.

"H-h-ulloo. Regarding the environment: Christmas Monsters are very sens'tive about fur coats, so they're prohib-b-b, not allowed. We've got some extra fiberfill parkas if you need them. Under your seats are special boots, which we cobbled for you at the Pole. They're extra warm and designed to protect the fragile tundra. Please, no littering."

Thank you, Clyde. Bundle up, for our one-reindeer open sleighs await. Shiver and shake, off we go!



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### THE CHRISTMAS MONSTERLAND MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Did we lose anyone? One, two, three . . . Good, you all made it. I think. This is the Christmas Monsterland Museum of Natural History. PM, would you introduce our local guide?

"You may already be familiar with this distinguished Monster from Book X of the *PM Saga*. I am proud to introduce Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd. He will show you around and give you a condensed version of THE READING OF THE STORY, the yearly Christmas Eve ritual for our obnoxious one-year-old Monsters that introduces them to the history of our homeland and prepares them for their existence as empathic Christmas critters."

"Hr-r-r-mph. Don't know why after all these years gotta have tourists. But you look harmless 'nough. Can't be no more harmful than the crowd I grew up with. But to the STORY:

Once upon a time, long before history even, there was a vast, chillingly cold place up north. It had no boundaries, just stretched on and on. This place was called Monsterland, and was inhabited by a bunch of beasties known as Monsters. These was my ancestors, quite nasty creatures with no carin' or concern about them.

"Now these critters had every terrible trait one could imagine, and no redeemin' ones. They was also incapable of bein'



badly injured but – this may be hard for you to imagine – they was also incapable of dyin'. So they constantly bickered, beatin' and pummelin' the heck out of each other. You'd knock one of them varmints down and he'd just get right up again and knock you down. Throughout the centuries, nay, throughout the millennia, they battled and fought, fought and battled, 'til they'd separated into two factions, one red with rage, the other green with envy. The Red Monsters took over the east side of Monsterland and proceeded to whup the Green ones to the west. Then they erected a high fence between 'em.



"One day, can't say zactly when 'cause we didn't have calendars, POOF!--an old geezer in a red suit, his mate, a whole mess of teeny-weeny

green-garbed leprechauns, a herd of caribou, a sled, and a workshop just appeared where that fence had been.

"It irked the heck out of the Green Monsters and the Red Monsters that some intruder had plunked himself down in the middle of their feudin'. They forgot their own squabblin' long enough to set about peltin' this white-whiskered gent with every sharp and blunt instrument they could lay their paws on. But the old codger and his crew just smiled, and the blows bounced right off them.

"Unable to evict this usurper by force, the Monster factions sent representatives to confront the trespasser. Jade Green (my papa) and Madder Red met in the center of the old dude's house, glared at one another, then glowered at the grizzled gaffer.

" 'Who is you?' demanded Jade.

" 'I'm Santa Claus, and this is Mrs. Claus,' the jolly old man replied, shakin' his belly like it was a tub of strawberry jam or somethin'.

" 'Where you come from?' commanded Madder.

"Ol' Santa pondered that question, then said, 'How do I explain? One day, one glorious day, someone OUT THERE imagined us, and we *became*.'

"This existential explanation didn't satisfy my furry forefathers. 'Whatcha doin' in our territory?' Madder menaced. Jade, not to be outdone, jabbed, 'Whatcha here for?'

" 'I'm here to spread the spirit of Christmas to the People OUT THERE,' Mr. Claus politely responded.

"Jade and Madder didn't know the meanin' of them words – Christmas, People, or OUT THERE, for that matter – so away they stomped with a bad-tempered 'Beat it buster, or else!' But no matter what them Monsters tried, they couldn't budge the bearded fat man off their property. And when Mr. Claus put up a big sign in front that declared 'Welcome to the North Pole,' there was no mistakin' his intentions: he was gonna stay.

"The ol' guy never gave up tryin' to be neighborly. He'd send his elves with mint jelly to Red Monsterland and his reindeer with candy canes to Green Monsterland. But these presents, though voraciously englutted, was never 'preciated.

"One day each winter, Mr. Claus packed his sled, took off, and returned the next revolution of the sun 'round the earth (this was before Copernicus and Galileo, mind you). After a while the People population had billowed so big that ol' Santa realized he didn't have enough resources to keep supplyin' new toys. He concocted a new strategy: He'd re-cycle the old toys, ones that had been grown out of, lost, or just plain tossed aside. His helpers began diggin' through trashcans and garbage dumps, brought the broken toys to the North Pole, and rebuilt them for the next year.



“Santa’s new system seemed to work – at first. But there was this one toy – a cloth doll with button eyes and a stitched smile – who, despite Mrs. C’s loving renovations, kept coming back to the North Pole each year lookin’ worse for wear. Her cheeks would be tearstained, the corners of her mouth needed turnin’ up, and her eyes got sadder and sadder. It nearly broke the kindly gray-haired lady’s heart, so she asked her, ‘Little doll, you keep comin’ back lookin’ worse and worse for wear. Tell us about it, maybe we can help.’

“After an encouraging nod from Santa, the doll whispered, ‘I’m sorry. But the children you give me to make me so sad.’ It seems this li’l doll had been given to abused, handicapped, sick, poor, or hungry children, and these tots would tell their troubles to the doll. She gave all the love she had, and shared all the sadness she could. Now she was tired.

“That’s when Santa decided to try an experiment. With the li’l doll’s agreement, one Christmas Eve he hitched up his sleigh, drove it west, and rang Jade Green’s bell. ‘I have a gift for your one-year-old,’ St. Nick announced when Papa opened the door. Santa handed the doll with the sad eyes to me, and I took it, shook it, bit its arm, and pulled its straggly hair. Santa bribed my pa with two cases of candy canes to make me sleep with this doll every night for a month.

“Now I was a real cantankerous critter in those days. I tried to get rid of the doll – crammed it in the coal bin – but Papa found it and threatened to lock me in the cellar if I didn’t obey, so that night I put the doll next to me and went to sleep. Next mornin’ I woke up feelin’ different. When a neighbor pup beat on me, I whacked at him all right, but when I clobbered him I felt worse ’stead of better. After the next night, I began to *act* strange too. Two of my pals were whackin’ each other over the head, an event that usually made me crow with glee. But this day I stuck my neck ’tween ’em and stopped the fight. Instead of enjoyin’ the brawl – here’s the kicker – I felt sad.

“This continued the rest of the month. To speed up this tale, I’ll just tell you by the time I made the journey to the North Pole to return the doll I was huggin’ it tightly. When I handed it over to St. Nick, I did something no Monster had ever done before. I cried. And funny thing, the li’l doll, it didn’t look quite as sad as it had when Santa first brung it to me.

“When our neighbors caught sight of me luggin’ them two crates of candy canes home, they rushed to the North Pole to get their share. Santa started handin’ out other sad-eyed dolls to their younguns, with the same condition.

“Unknownst to us Green Monsters, Mrs. Kringle had struck the same bargain (only with mint jelly) with Madder Red. Puny Pomegranate Red carried her doll ’round for a month, same result. Madder’s neighbors got dolls and their kids carried ’em around too, and so it went. Slowly Green

Monsterland began to change. We stopped beatin' each other up, 'cept occasionally, and when we did hit someone, we didn't enjoy it.

"One by one we started knockin' on Santa's door just to say 'hi,' somethin' no self-respectin' Monster would have dreamt of before, and Santa'd tell the story of Christmas. But in Monsterland, since clawin' and clubbin' wasn't as fun as it used to be, we got bored. Some Monsters volunteered to help Santa with his Christmas doin's. Eventually a few of our more coordinated members began climbin' in the harness to haul St. Nick on Christmas Eve. We began callin' ourselves Christmas Monsters, not Red or Green Monsters, since our two warrin' sides weren't warrin' any more.

"One day, when I was a youth (a strikin' cuss, if I do say so), I visited Mr. Claus, and who should I see but Pomegranate Red, all grown up. What a beautiful Monster! My libido being lecherous, I introduced myself, wooed and won that gal. We had the weddin' smack in the center of the North Pole. And durin' our matin' season, which corresponds with Christmas Day, we, well, we . . . might as well say it straight – we sneekled. Tiny Paprika Pistache was born the followin' Christmas Eve. We hoped that our new-found feelin's would carry over to the next generation. But though Paprika was just as bright and smart and cute as could be, he was a terror – greedy, avaricious, and just plain ego-centered. We conjectured, discussin' the situation with Santa, that maybe the first year of development for a Monster was so rapid, intellectually, that the expandin' brain couldn't absorb good manners. It's difficult enough learnin' to stand, given the eccentricity of our anatomy. We also gotta conquer walkin', talkin', readin', and writin', all in our first year. So the following Christmas Eve Pomegranate and I got the doll with the saddest eyes from the North Pole and passed it on to Paprika. Wonder of wonders, it worked! Paprika became a good little Christmas Monster, in even less time than his ma and pa. Thus began the tradition of the Doll with the Sad Eyes, which continues 'til today."

Thank you so much, Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd. That was an inspirational rendition. But we're running behind schedule, so if you would please hurry through the museum, we'll be on to our next stop.

"Chronicler, you got no patience. I'm too old to hurry. This here's my club from those ol' days. We display it to remind ourselves we are by nature Monsters. This here's a photo of the first Doll with the Sad Eyes."

"Why don't you have the original here?"



“Well, young Person, that’s ’cause she didn’t want to be a museum piece. She wants to keep going out to li’l kids each year. Now this room has some of our local flora and fauna. This here is a papier mâché replica of one of the early Mastodons, which some of the Monsterland anthropologists believe were our ancestors. And this here is a scale model of Monsterland Forest, which is shrinkin’ because of ozone depletion. This is an exhibit of some of our local plant life. There’s spruce and fir trees, of course – they’re indigenous to Monsterland. But some of the plants we had to import and learn to grow under special conditions. Pomegranate – my wife, may she freeze in love and peace – was the first to design a hothouse to grow poinsettias, mistletoe, and Christmas roses. She had quite a green paw for a Red Monster. This here room contains a display of stones.”

“Gemstones?”

“Nope, young Feller. Just rocks. There may be what you’d call valuable stones under the ice UP HERE, but we don’t dig for ’em. Don’t need them. Nope, this is just a room where Monsters can bring a nifty boulder or two to show it off.”

Oh, my, look at the time, better be off for our next stop. Thank you so much, G-G-G-G Grandpapa Smaragd. I’m sure you need to rest your voice before tomorrow’s READING.

“Yep, got some real nasty li’l brats this year.”

Collect your coats, clamp on your earmuffs, and let’s move along. We’re late for our next stop.

That went pretty well, PM, don’t you think?

“Switch to high gear, Chronicler. I’ve got to get to rehearsal.”

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### **THE CHRISTMAS MONSTERLAND CULTURAL CENTER**

Did we lose anyone? Can’t tell. What’s that, Penelope? You’ve got frostbeak? Dr. Arké will wrap it for you.

Here we are at the Christmas Monsterland Cultural Center. Gather into the theater. PM, curtain’s up!

“This is our outdoor amphitheater. Please be very quiet, because the final elimination round for tomorrow’s annual sleigh puller contest is being held on stage, and the acoustics here are superb. This theater was designed in polished ice after an early Greek theater. Oh, wasn’t that a lovely rendition of a reggae ‘Rock Around the Christmas Tree’? Limette Berylline is one of my students, quite talented. This place is very emotional for me, since I was disqualified in the finals when I auditioned.”

Yes, PM, we know that, it’s in Book I, when they told you you weren’t Christmas because you were purple, and you cried, but Santa came by the next day and heard your lilting lilac voice wafting from your room and took

you on. And you've been lead sleigh puller ever since. You'll notice, group, that Clyde has been promoted to chief elfin judge.

"Sh-h-h-h! Chronicler, you're disturbing the performances. We have an empty slot to fill, plus two alternates, and Santa's counting on me to choose the best for him to see tomorrow. How can they audition with you jabbering?"

Sorry, Clyde. PM, maybe we should go inside. Mom's nose is turning blue.

"Follow me. . . . You should be warmed by the glow of Christmas melodies in here. This is our rehearsal room, and Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives are practicing for tonight's Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert in Gotham to benefit Save the Children and GMHC's AIDS programs. I hope you all bought tickets, it's a worthy cause. I'm needed for the opening song. Why don't you have a seat and thaw your toes while we sing?"



That was marvelous. Can't wait to hear the complete set. Step lively, crowd. PM, catch up with us when you're through.

This is the dance studio, where Rosette, PM's niece, is teaching the 'Snowflake' number to young Monsters. Lovely grand jeté, Geranium! Brilliant pirouette – six revolutions! Enough ballet for now, gotta run.

"Slow down, Chronicler, you walk too fast."

Sorry, Aunt, but there's so much to see! This is one of the highlights of our tour. I'd like to introduce you to Titian Red Monster, curator of the Christmas Monsterland Art Museum. You're gonna love this place. It rivals the Ufizzi in Florence for its glorious works of art.

"It surpasses the Ufizzi! I oversee the finest gallery in the Northern Hemisphere, and the Southern. We have some of the finest examples of primitive, medieval, Renaissance, and modern art. Christmas Monsters have always been creative. Monster artists have an honored place in our land, unlike certain cultures OUT THERE.



"This sculpture is by Donato Bardi, or Donatello. At first he was convinced he was having a bad dream when Santa brought Redwood Monster to meet him. But after Redwood lugged some Christmas Monsterland yule logs to Florence for Donny's St. John the Baptist, he agreed to produce a wooden statue of Red. Santa was especially fond of the artist, not only because of Donatello's great vision, but because he was so generous. He suspended a basket from the ceiling and stored his money in it, letting his pupils and friends grab what they needed.

"In our first gallery are some early line drawings. Note the primitive depiction of Monster features. As you will see in our next room, Monsters gained perspective and expressed it in their work. After Santa's arrival, Monsters began to travel – incognito, of course, costumed as camels or llamas – throughout the Mideast, Greece, Rome, Florence, Venice, and France, studying with the great masters. Not only did they paint and sculpt themselves, they inspired world-famous artists to come to Monsterland to experiment.



“Leonardo da Vinci was quite taken with Christmas Monsters, since he was fascinated with flight. He painted ‘Monster Lisa,’ with the enigmatic smile, in return for a ride in Santa’s sleigh and a brief discourse from PM’s great-great-great grandmother on the anatomical requirements for good lift-offs.



“Here is one of our masterpieces, the ‘Monster David.’ Santa was a big fan of Michelangelo, and flew him to a workshop UP HERE once when the artist wanted to practice carving some ice blocks before tackling a slab of Carrara marble. He left behind this magnificent sculpture. Madame, *please!* Do not *lick* it. It is not a Popsickle!

“It is said that a Monster’s tail was the model for the beard on Michelangelo’s Moses statue. And there are those who claim if you look closely at his ‘Last Judgment’ in the Sistine Chapel, you see a resemblance to Madder Red in an upper corner.”

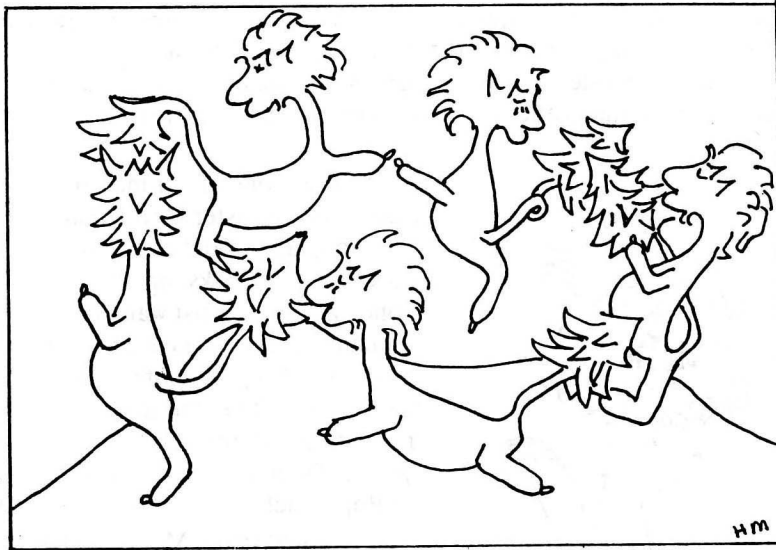
This is all very interesting, Titian, but speed it up. We’ve got more places to go, things to see.

“*Really*, Chronicler. Great works should be contemplated, appreciated, *savored*. This

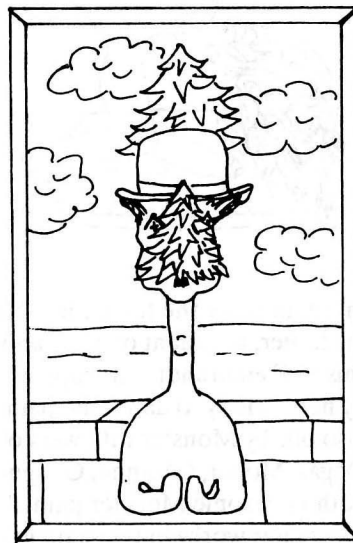
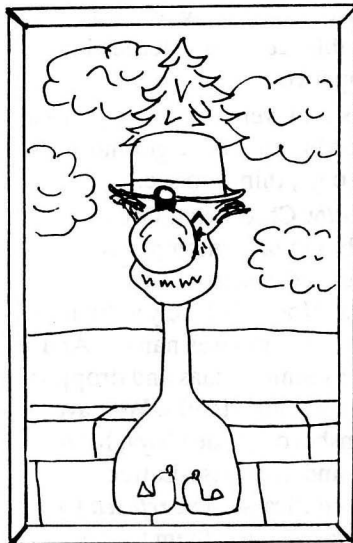
museum is *not* the track for the 100-meter dash! Now this lovely work is by my father, a student of a Tiziano Veccellio, after whom I was named. And this by Rembrandt van Rujn, who knew Santa as Sinter Klaas and dropped by here briefly to dab some paint on a canvas in the mid-1650’s. We have also oils by Monster followers of Rubens, Gainsborough, de Goya, Manet, Degas, Monet, Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Toulouse-Latrec. Although some Monster painters have mimicked Picasso, I’ve *refused* to hang their works in the main galleries, and have relegated them to the comfort stations.

“Now here are some true masterpieces. It is said that Henri Matisse was so inspired when he saw this ‘Monster Dance’ by Hollyberry Monster that he was compelled to create not just one, but *two*, large canvases to capture its graceful movement and rhythmic vibrancy.





“And these two Magrittes were requested for the retrospective now touring the States, but since he painted them with icing on large pans of gingerbread, I felt they were too fragile to ship.”



I hear Prancer's hooves outside pacing his impatience. Thanks, thanks, and thanks again, Titian, for all your help. We'd better slide away.

“Don't forget our agreement, Chronicler. You said you'd donate an original JB bovine print and a phantasmagoric NJ watercolor to the museum.”

It's in my will.

"I can't wait."

You'll have to.

"Chronicler, you promised us lunch."

Didn't you eat before you came? Here's a sugar-free breath mint to tide you over. One more stop, then your feast. Great, PM's rejoined us. Move along now, move along.

This is going semi-smoothly, so far, right, PM? They're not too restless yet, are they?

"No comment. Hurry ahead. They're moving in a herd, with no idea where they're going. I think you're missing a couple of guests."

Really? Oh well, they've got a map.

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### THE CHRISTMAS MONSTERLAND LIBRARY

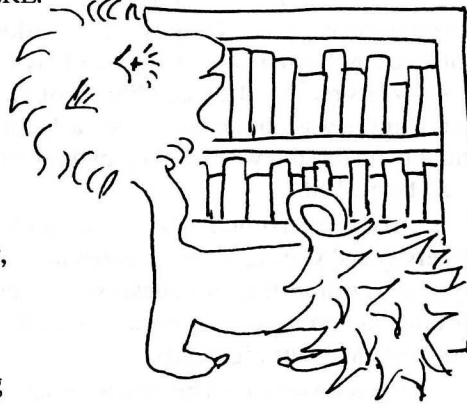
We are fortunate to have Alabaster Eggshell, PM's beloved multi-Ph.D.'ed husband, to guide us through the Library. We've time only for the highlights, Al, so cut to the chase.

"This building is the repository of the great literary masterpieces of Christmas Monsterland, as well as a large collection of books and manuscripts by People OUT THERE.

"This is our rare books room. It contains great epic poems of early Monsterland, including the *Odyssey of Verdant Monster* and fragments of the Arctic Sea scrolls, discovered recently when an ice floe detached from the North Glacier, revealing a hitherto unknown cave and a collection of hieroglyphicked papyrus parchments. We are still working on the translation from Olde

Monsterishe. As you see, there is also a splendid collection of manuscripts by Monk Monsters who gilded these pages in the medieval monasteries that multiplied in mid-Monsterland many moons ago.

"This exhibit contains more recent rare books, including the first draft of my autobiography, *My Life in the Zoo: Five Years as an Alpaca?* You'll note that it was written on gum and candy wrappers tossed into my enclosure while I was incarcerated in the San Diego Zoo. Now you will certainly recognize these books. They are a complete set of the *PM Saga, Books I through XV.*"



How come there's no room for any more stories in the case, Al? PM, should I be looking for meaning in this? Are you convinced my pool of ideas has evaporated, that there won't be a story this year? I saw you rapping with my journalistic colleagues. Are you interviewing for a replacement? If those reportorial rats even *try* to encroach on my beat, I'll arrange for ATEX to *really* make their lives miserable. I'll program the program so that type comes out sideways. I'll make a five-inch editorial multiply to twenty-five inches right at deadline! I'll delete the commas. I'll . . .

"Chronicler, can it! You're paranoid. Peppermint and Al are carving a new display case for Volume XVI and beyond."

Sorry, PM, it's just that it's getting so late and I haven't penned a word, and – go on, Al.

"Speaking of newspapers, this is our reading room. We have computerized subscriptions to all the major newspapers, magazines and journals, in all languages, and can retrieve them instantaneously via satellite. In the next room you can see our researchers, who scour the pages of periodicals for the latest information on who's been good and bad. The abstracted material is forwarded to Clyde Elf at the Pole, who compiles the final list for Santa. Because of this almost-instantaneous news reviewing capability – which we supplement with 24-hour-a-day CNN and wire services – we were able rapidly to let Santa know that Senator Packwood must be moved from 'Nice' to 'Naughty,' that Madonna should be kept as 'Bad' and footnoted as 'boring,' and that Dan Quayle, a definite 'Not Nice' should nevertheless receive the video library of *Murphy Brown* in his stocking this year. Clinton was on the Good list early this year, then transferred to the Naughty roster, but we ended up moving him back to Nice – mainly for the Hope he evoked."

Sorry to interrupt, Al, but we've got to move along. I know a tour of the university and your modern research facilities was on the itinerary – I was especially anxious that our guests see the laboratory where you've been working on developing a non-caloric truffle – but if we don't leave now we'll miss the other tour highlights.

"When do we eat? The brochure scheduled dining for two hours ago."

Now. We eat now. Al, could you lead the group back to the Town Igloo, where lunch awaits? I'll be skipping the meal to start the commemorative journal. See you all after you've noshed.

PM, do you think they're getting a little agitated? And what about a catastrophe? They've read your *Sagas* and I fear they'll be expecting a Crisis That Threatens to Destroy Christmas, and I don't have a CTTDC.

"Courage, Chron. I must lope off now, I've got much to do. Presents to wrap, stockings to stuff, and a quick trip OUT THERE to visit the troops and workers in Somalia and deliver food. I'll be back to pick up my contingent for the return to New York just before we have to leave for the concert."

Don't abandon me! My Readers expect you to go with us to the North Pole.

"Don't have the time. I'm off."

I'll give you the Godivas I got for Mom.

"Ummm – no, not enough."

The ones for Marty?

"Ummm."

Jane's too?

"Sold – I'll meet you at the Igloo by 4:30. Bye."



Oh dear, Mom will never forgive me. It's the third year – or is it the fourth? I've lost count – PM's eaten her chocolates. Where's my laptop? I never leave home without it. I'm a writer. It's what I do. Who I am. Better write. Gotta compose the commemorative souvenir booklet. Where's my floppy disk? Gotta write right away. Oh dear, oh dear.

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#### POST-PRANDIAL DOINGS

"Chronicler, what *was* that glop you served for lunch? You promised a full-course Italian meal, and we got half a cup of Velveeta Shells and Cheese, followed by two unpitted olives."

Did I specify ravioli? No. Did I proffer lasagna? I did not. Did I in any way lead you to expect cannelloni, fettucine, tortellini, or panzarottini? No, I did not. Pasta is pasta.

"What about the thimbleful of watered-down wine?"

Is it my fault that so many Christmas Monsters are planning Christmas Super Snerkles? Is it my fault that they drank all the champagne I shipped here before you arrived? Is it my fault that Clyde would only agree to collate my calculations for the Naughty and Nice list – I was late again this year – if I contributed a case of Chianti to his wine cellar? It's not my fault! This is not going very well. What's wrong, Elvira?

"Better come with me. Your Mom fell getting on the sleigh and cut her leg."

Oh no! Is she all right?

"Yup. Dr. Arké bandaged it after she sat up, begged and barked a huskie 'woof.' She's resting, with her leg propped up, but she wants to go on."

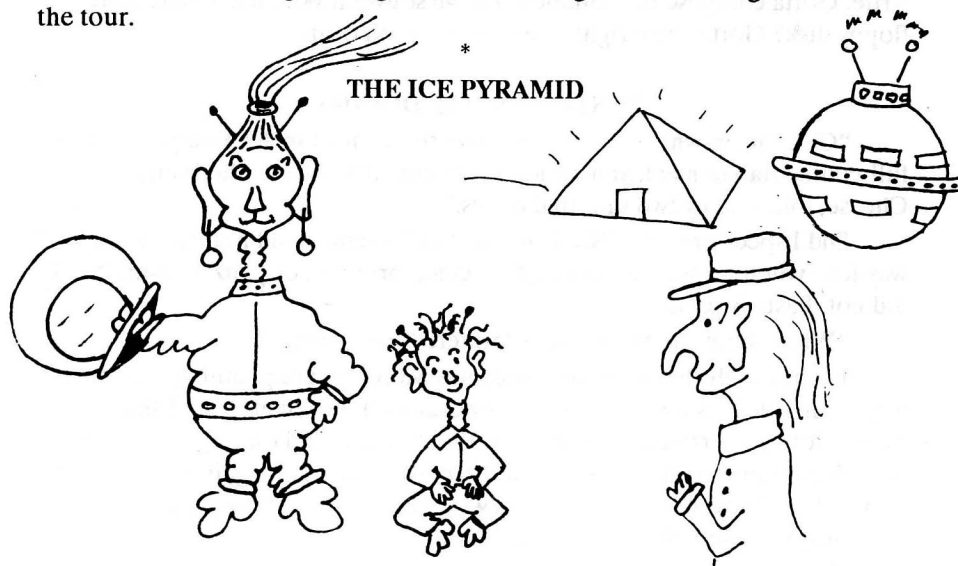
I'll be right there. What now, Peppermint?

"Problems. Lots of problems. You've got lots and lots of problems. Dear Chronicler, would you be so kind, and fill my requests and take charge of your guests! Penelope Pigeon and Peripat Penguin have developed food poisoning and have been rushed to the hospital."

Peripat left? He was supposed to serve dessert.

"There was no dessert to serve. The bon bons you stocked up disappeared from the kitchen – I suspect a plot by Monster mothers-to-be – and the gelato was insufficient to feed the whole crowd, so I ate it to avoid discontent."

What else could go wrong? There's nothing left to do but get on with the tour.



A stop I know you've all anticipated with great anticipation – the ice pyramid, one of the man-made wonders of Christmas Monsterland. See how it sparkles as the sun begins to set. Setting sun? Uh oh, we're never going to get back on time.

This is Dove, previously known as Vulture Carrion, now married to Relicta. Many of you met Relicta when she piloted you here on her spacecraft. And this beautiful little girl – my, how she's grown – is Crystal Camellia, who will celebrate her first birthday tomorrow. Dove, you're on.

“Greetings. This area outside the door was the site last year of the miracle of the Christmas crystal garden. If you will step inside, you will discover our meditation center, dedicated to the contemplation of charity and hope. Relicta and I divide our time between our home and OUT THERE, where we are members of the Salvation Army and work at homeless shelters and food centers. Chronicler has asked me to talk about SEGWAC, which I know very well since I am the son of Viper Carrion, the head of the American Society branch.

“SEGWAC has been around since the beginning of time. It was originally known as the Society for the Elimination of Good Will, and the And Christmas was appended when People began celebrating Christ’s birth. Wherever there has been evil and greed, intolerance and cruelty, strife and turmoil, you can be sure that if a SEGWACian didn’t initiate it, a SEGWACian certainly fueled it and manipulated it to the Society’s advantage.”

“Why is SEGWAC so obsessed with destroying Santa Claus?”

“Well, Gerald – sorry you’ve got to stoop, but if you go into the center of the pyramid, you’ll have more room and the vibes are better there – anyway, SEGWAC believes that if Santa disappears, so will much of the joy of Christmas. And it’s true. Even though Mr. Claus doesn’t claim to *be* Christmas, he’s an integral part of the celebration. He’s imagination and fun, love and laughter, all anathema to SEGWAC.

“My father is especially appalled by the jolly fat man’s popularity. He winces at St. Nick’s name. To understand why, we’d best review a little history. Before Santa was Santa, before he became Kris Kringle, he existed as Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, which was the capital of Lycia in Asia Minor in the fourth century. Before Nicholas became a bishop, he dwelled in Patara, a town in Lycia. A man lived there who had lost all his money and had nothing to give as dowries for his three daughters, so he was going to give them over to prostitution. When Nicholas heard about this, he snuck around this man’s house at night and threw a bag of gold through the window, which landed in a sock hanging by the chimney to dry. This gold became the dowry for the eldest daughter and she got married. Later Nicholas did the same for the other two daughters.

“Now it has come through my family’s lore that one of my forefathers was the equivalent of a Patara pimp at this time, and was therefore denied the income that the three daughters would have provided if not for Saint Nicholas. At least that’s the story, and whether true or not, it’s stoked the flames of my ancestors’ resentment. As we’ve seen in Serbia and Bosnia, in Somalia and Los Angeles, in all the places where hate and cruelty have reigned over reason and consideration for our neighbors, it’s not so much the truth that matters as the spin that’s put on it. History or religion can be selectively or inaccurately evoked to provoke violence and rage. All the



wrongs of the past are wrung out and displayed to urge self-righteous retribution; the Bible or the Torah or the Koran are quoted to justify cruelty and violence. 'Ethnic cleansing' or 'family values' – it's all in the packaging. SEGWAC ghost-writes many of the press releases. I do not doubt that SEGWAC helped write Pat Robertson's speech for the Republican Convention and helped fund his coalition that pushed through the anti-gay amendment that passed in Colorado and the one that almost succeeded in Oregon. If SEGWAC didn't stir the rivalry between the clans in Somalia, I'm sure it helped arm them. SEGWAC's fax machines spew out venom daily, under various letterheads, urging the world to delay confronting the atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

"I thought, reading the *Sagas*, that SEGWAC was inept, Mr. Carrion. The yearly Crises are so easily overcome that SEGWAC shouldn't be taken seriously."

I'll answer that, Dove, if I may. The purpose of the *Sagas* is to glorify the triumph of Good over Evil, which I endeavor to do with humor and good cheer. The misadventures, if you will, of *some* inept members of SEGWAC are not representative of the sickening stench of SEGWAC that has permeated so many parts of the planet. My stories are allegories, if you will; if you want to see examples of SEGWAC's efficiency, you need only skim the front page of our newspapers and catch the evening news.

"Chronicler."

Yes, Relicta?

"Santa called, wondered where you were, you're hours behind schedule. PM said she'd see you at the concert. I've got an Alexander lesson, Dove's got to load equipment and drop Crystal off with Maraschino, then we're both serving dinner at the S.A. soup kitchen. It's snowing pretty heavily now, and you know Blitzen can't see too well in a storm. You'd better get moving."

You heard her. It's off to the Pole! Then on to the concert, and we'll conclude our tour. It's not going that badly, is it?

"Where's the Crisis?"

C'mon. For once, can't there be a Crisis-less Christmas?

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### LOST IN CHRISTMAS MONSTERLAND

"What was that?"

"I heard a big thud!"

"Chronicler, what's going on?"

I don't know. Where are you, Prancer? The precipitation's so thick I can't see my nose in front of me.

"Fooey, my sleigh hit a rock. I think the runner's broken. You're gonna have to double up in the second sleigh."

Blitzen, where are we? We've been riding around a long time, we should have been at Santa's by now. I don't recognize this place, what little I can see of it.

"Gulp. I don't know. I followed that detour sign a few hours back at Marzipan Mountain. It said 'This Way to North Glacier.' But I don't recognize any of the landmarks."



Let me see that map again. Here's the ice pyramid, here's the Marzipan Mountain, so just ahead should be the glacier. But there's no glacier. Why not use your compass?

"You forget, Chronicler, this is the North Pole, or its vicinity. UP HERE, there is only NORTH. And the blizzard's so blinding I can't use the stars for guidance."

"Chronicler?"

Yes, Auggie?

"It's past eight o'clock. Shouldn't we have left for the concert by now? In fact, hasn't the concert started?"

True, what you say is true. Dear Tourists, I have an announcement to make. We're lost. Don't panic, I'm sure we'll be found soon. Or at least after PM and Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives take their bows and hurry back to form a search party. As you know from *Sagas* past, if a Christmas character – and I'm a Christmas character – gets lost, no stone is left unturned until he or she is found.

"That's if they know we're missing."

What's that, Brewster?

"What if Mr. Claus thought we didn't visit him 'cuz we were late for the concert, and PM thought we didn't go to the concert 'cuz we were still supping with Santa?"

You're a barrel of joy, my brown-bear buddy.

"Chronicler, I want my money back!"

"Scribbler, it's almost Christmas Eve, I want to go home!"

"We're going to miss Santa!"

"We're going to miss *Christmas*!"

Hold it! I'm sure if we just start wandering around a little, following a trail here or hiking through the woods there, we'll eventually wander out.

"If we don't freeze first."

Squeeze as many as you can into Blitzen's sleigh, the rest strap on some snow shoes. We'll try to find our way back to the Town Igloo – or the North

Pole – or some semblance of civilization. We'll get home. PM won't desert us. Santa Claus will find us. I believe, I believe.

"I *don't* believe. There is-s-s no S-S-Santa Claus-s-s. It's-s-s all a big lie, to lure u-s-s-s to this-s-s teeth-chattering tundra where Jack Fros-s-st couldn't find u-s-s-s and freeze and s-s-s-starve us-s-s-s to death."

Who said that?

"No Santa Claus?"

"What?"

"He could be right. We should have met Santa by now, but instead we're stranded. Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, *no Santa Claus!*"

("Growl . . . grumble . . . growl . . . grumble . . . grouse, grouse, grouse.")

Hush! Hush! There is *too* a Santa Claus, we're just not on the same wavelength right now.

"Don't believe her. Have you s-s-seen him? Can you prove it? Did you dopes-s-s really think the Chronicler could get you to the North Pole and back? S-s-simpering s-s-simpleteons! *THERE IS-S-S-S NO S-S-S-SANTA CLAUS-S-S-S!*"

Where did that voice come from? I recognize that terrifying, tinny tone. So it's *YOU*. Why didn't I recognize you at the start? Why didn't I hear the hiss? I wondered why you lurked in the shadows all day and were so quiet. You've been surgically altered so your scowl is concealed. Heed not this SEGWACian saboteur, my friends. It's Anaconda Adder, Viper Carrion's henchman! Something seemed amiss when a colleague faxed me that she couldn't attend, but wanted an acquaintance to go in her place. You must have intercepted the invitation and forged a fake transmission. It was you who put up the detour sign?

"Yup, so I'd ruin all your holidays-s-s. You're all s-s-stranded, you'll never get out, and you'll be buried under fifty feet of white s-s-stuff. S-S-Santa won't ceas-s-se looking 'til he finds-s-s you, so there'll be no ride tomorrow night! And even if you do s-s-survive, you'll have made your loyal Readers-s-s miss-s-s Chris-s-stmas-s-s-s, they'll never want to read about PM and the other s-s-sniveling helpers-s-s again, you'll s-s-stop writing, and S-S-SEGWAC will never, ever, ever again have to hear of Chris-s-stmas Mons-s-sterland from your ins-s-sipid *S-S-Sagas*."

That may be true, Anaconda, but remember, you're just as lost as we are, and you can't get out of Christmas Monsterland without help! So there.

"Bah! I've been dropping gumballs along the way. All I have to do is follow the trail and I'll get out!"

"Mr. Adder, I think these are yours. I was behind you, thought you had a hole in your pocket, and assumed you'd lost your marbles. I picked them up for you."

"Oh no-o-o! You s-s-sneaky do-g-g-gooder."

"I was only trying to help."

"Let's tie up the SEGWACian spy and smite him with snowballs!"

"We'll wipe that sneer off his puss."

Friends! Friends! That is not the Christmas way! We must stick together and try to find our way to the Pole.



"You're going to let him off the hook?"

Nope. We're going to make him *miserable*. Everyone, huddle close, hum an 'A flat', and we'll sing as we march along. *Jingle bells, jingle bells . . .*

*"On the first day of Christmas . . ."*

That's the spirit! How 'bout *Hark the herald angels sing . . .* Anaconda, feel free to join in.

"Never! Don't be cruel, Chronicler."

I am cruel only to be kind, Adder. Look how the spirits of my guests have lifted! Rachel and Arthur, don't stray too far. We'll only make it if we stick together! *Granma got run over by a reindeer . . .* You do the chorus, Blitzen!

"Ahoy! Up ahead! I see the glint of golden doors! Chronicler, I think its the entrance to a polar cavern!"

Forward, march! Wow, they look like Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise! Nah, we couldn't have made it to the Duomo in Florence. Prancer, shake your sleighbells. Maybe it'll be warm inside. Maybe there's a phone. Maybe we're saved. Maybe Christmas is saved!

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### THE CAVE OF THE TIME TO COME

"You rang?"

Who are you?

"Who are you?"

I'm the Chronicler, and these are my Readers. We're on a tour of Christmas Monsterland.

I'm Toluidine Troglodyte, the Keeper of the Cave Monster. You're all shivering and shaking. Come inside and warm up.

Where are we? I don't remember this place on our map.

"Let me see it. Look, here, COTTTC - Cave Of The Time To Come, right on the border of the North Pole."

So *that's* what that meant. Do you have a phone? I need to call the Pole. And the time? The battery in my watch has frozen.

"No phone, but I've a signal beeper. I'll send an S O S. And it's – let me check the hourglass – it's roughly, give or take an hour or two, 12:01 Christmas Eve morning."

Oh dear, we missed the concert.

"Mr. Troglodyte, what are all these drawings etched in the ice on the wall?"

"Have you ever wondered where Christmas Monsters go after they've reached the State of Sublime and want to enter the State of Serenity and Bliss? Monsters don't die, you know."

"I was wondering about that. Chronicler never explained. Given the amount of *snerkling* going on in Monsterland, there must have been millions of Monsters throughout the millennia. But there aren't that many Monsters now in Monsterland. What happened to them?"

That's a true editor's query. Don't know why I didn't discuss this with PM before. It is a mystery. Can you fill us in while we wait for rescue?

"I'll tell the Tale of the Oldest Monster. Long ago, many, many years after Santa came and Monsters became Christmas Monsters, the Oldest Monster figured out that as long as Christmas Monsters obeyed the laws of their nature, *snerkled*, and had little Monsters, one day Monsterland would get so crowded there'd be no room to move. He was getting older and older, and although he knew he could live forever, he was aging. His fur was falling out little by little, his walk was slower and unsteady, he had aches and pains no salve could soothe, his voice quivered when he talked, and he was going deaf. No medicine administered by Monster could stop the process.

"Above all, the Oldest Monster was getting tired. He thought and thought. He'd done everything he'd wanted to do and had loved and cared for his children and his children's children and their children and on down the line. He had great faith in the promise of the life after life, and he wanted to rest in the interval.

"This Monster wasn't depressed, he wasn't morose, he didn't want to die, but he just didn't want to participate in day-to-day activities anymore. He could have gone to the border of Christmas Monsterland and OUT THERE, walked across and waited for nature or People to end it for him. But that wasn't the Monster way. Instead, he decided to trek to the border of the North Pole. He had heard from a spelunker Monster that there was a cave here that had no end. You just kept going down and down and in and in, and it kept getting colder and colder so that even a Christmas Monster's fur couldn't keep a Monster warm. But as the cave got colder and colder, it also got more and more beautiful, glowing with a phosphorescence that warmed the heart, despite the falling temperature.

"The Oldest Monster gathered his loved ones around and said, 'You know, dear ones, we don't die. But I'm pooped. I've been thinking, I'd just as soon go to sleep and wake up in the Time to Come, which is promised by Christmas. I'd like to sleep until the world is at peace, when Love rules, when People care for People and don't seek the cruelest ways to hurt one another. I believe that that time will come, and I know all of you will keep me alive in your hearts. But I can do no more now, and I want to go.'

"The Monster and a procession of his loved ones trudged slowly, solemnly, but with joy to the edge of this great cave. Singing glad tidings and holding each other's paws, the Oldest Monster's family accompanied him as far into this glorious cave as they could. And when they were shivering and knew that they could go no further, they hugged the Oldest Monster close and watched as he ventured slowly and with great faith further into the cave. And the Oldest Monster was never seen again.

"With the sadness that comes of saying goodbye, but convinced they would see the Oldest Monster again one day and have so much to tell, his friends and family left the cave and went home, singing Hosanna, Hosanna as they went.

"The Oldest Monster's radiance as he left them remained in their memory, and as they aged and grew tired, one by one other Monsters made the journey to the cave. No Monster was ever encouraged to go, and many Monsters who were depressed or disappointed were discouraged from going. In truth, most Monsters as they grew older chose to stay around and play around Christmas Monsterland, sharing their wealth of experience, for here we revere our elders. But every so often some Monster chooses to go the way of the Cave. And there they remain."

And this is the entrance? How do you know they're all okay in there?

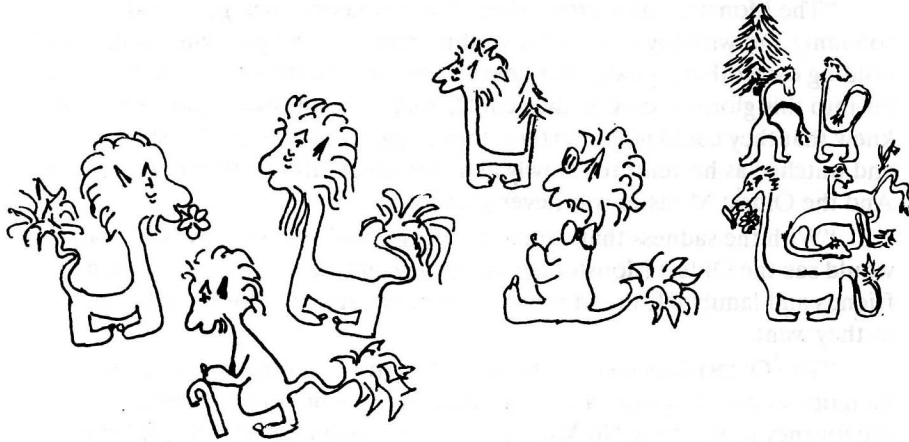
"Up to ten years ago, the only answer I could give was 'faith.' But then science progressed, insulated jackets were perfected, and one of the great Explorer Monsters, Cinnabar Celadon, determined to see how far into the cave she could go with the new warmer outerwear. So she donned her down apparel, grabbed a couple of long-life-batteried flashlights, and headed fearlessly into the cave. Don't get me wrong, she wasn't ready to join her ancestors, but she was compelled to certify that the Monsters who had gone before were all right. It wasn't that her faith was shaky; it's more that her





curiosity overcame her common sense. We Christmas Monsters are questioning beings.

"Cinnabar took one reverent step, then another, and another into the cave. She walked past the first commemorative portraits that you see here. (Each time a Monster went into the cave, his or her loved ones etched a pictorial record in the ice for remembrance – I'll shine my light for you to see some of the drawings.) Cinnabar explored further, then further still,



until there were no more pictures. It got chillier and chillier, and darker and darker. Something crunched beneath her booted paw, and she discovered frozen petals dropped to the ground from the flower bouquets these ancestors had carried with them. The passage got narrower and lower, so she stooped, then crawled to get through. She thought of giving up and turning back, but then a tiny light danced before her. She pushed forward, it sparkled brighter, and although her temperature gage had shattered from the cold, she felt strangely warm. When she finally reached the end of the tunnel, all she could see was the light. She wiggled through the hole and stood up in the biggest, grandest cavern she had ever seen in all her years of exploration.

"And what she saw made her whisper Hallelujah, for there stood, shimmering in glittering ice, our Monsterland Ancestors, frozen for the eras, their peaceful faces assuring her that they were where they wanted to be. She placed a poem by the paw of her now-icicled great-great-great grandmother, and with great calmness exited the Great Cave, believing with all her heart that these Monsters would rejoin us at the Time to Come.

"Cinnabar made the long journey out of the cavern, for she knew the time was not right for her to linger longer, and she returned to her friends in Christmas Monsterland to report what she had seen. It eased their hearts that their faith was confirmed (though of course true faith needs no confirmation)."

Wow. So through that hole there are thousands and thousands of frozen Christmas Monsters? Is that what Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd meant when he said "Pomegranate, may she freeze in love and peace"?

"Yep. As long as the greenhouse effect doesn't melt away the polar icecap, there's a good chance Christmas Monsters will remain cryogenically contained in the Great Cave until the Time to Come. I watch over the place, keeping them company. And once a year I go in as far as I can without too great discomfort and read them your *PM Saga*, to let them know what's going on. Maybe they hear, maybe they don't. I don't know. But I like to think they're listening."

Wow. Guess that puts a heap of responsibility on me.

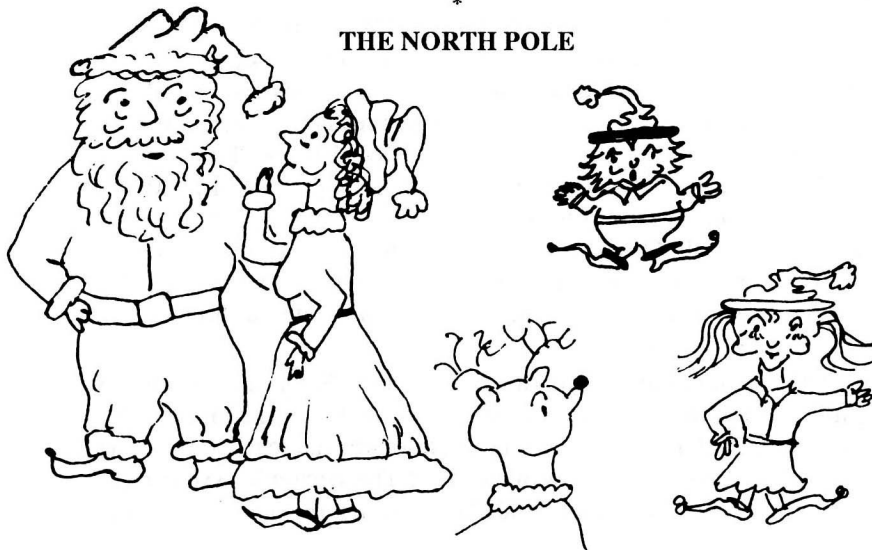
"I also read them the Monsterland Gazette and the North Pole News, so put it in perspective."

"Hallooo-oo-ooo-oo, tardy transients. Santa got your message and sent Rudolph to shine the way through the blizzard."

Elvira! And Rudy! Thanks for coming. All aboard! You're finally going to meet Santa.

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#### THE NORTH POLE



"Ho! Ho! Ho! Mer-r-r-ry Christmas Eve! I'm St. Nick. I know all of you by name, but it's nice to see your faces, red-nosed and frostbit though they are."

"Felicitations! I'm Mrs. St. Nick. Come in, come in, I've got some cookies and cocoa for you. Have a seat by the fire. The band is in Christmas Monsterland unloading their instruments, but will be back shortly to pick you up."

I told you there was a Santa Claus. And a Mrs. Claus. Anaconda Adder, where do you think you're going?

"I'm s-s-slithering out of here. I know when I'm not wanted."

Should we evict him, Santa?

"No, Chronicler. Anaconda, you've been to the Pole before, when Viper Carrion signed our peace treaty. And as Dove will tell you, even SEGWACians can enjoy Christmas if they shed their skins of resentment and anger. You have a choice – go outside, pout, and rattle about in the frigid early morning frost, or stay here with us and enjoy the warmth and kindness of our home."

"S-s-s-s-s."

Foiled again, weren't you, vile SEGWACian?

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#### AND TO ALL A SAFE FLIGHT

"You missed a rock'n'rollin' shindig last night, gang! Peppermint's arrangements were received with rousing ovations, and we collected a lot of money to feed the starving and comfort the sick. If you had tickets, the Chronicler will be happy to refund your money . . ."

Thanks a lot, PM, for nuthin'. I've already sent in the contributions.

"If you hadn't interrupted, I'd have added that I hope they'll donate the money. Here's the scoop, ladies and gentlemen, bipeds and quadripeds. Relicta's spaceship is hovering outside. She's ready to return anyone OUT THERE who needs to get back right away. Clyde Elf said the workshop is available for inspection – and maybe a little helpful hammering, if you're dextrous – should you want to stay. Lapis and Geranium will BOING! you back later, or I will. Or if you'd like to breathe in the aroma of Christmas candy canes, stir a few fudge pots, and hang around for tree decorating and the Christmas star ceremony, Santa'll drop you off at your homes when he takes off later tonight."

Thanks for coming. Fun, wasn't it? Sort of? See you soon. Give my regards to Broadway, I'm going to stay here and finish the journal. I'll send it on to you. Bye! Ta-ta! Ciao, bella! Mention my name in Marshall. Hang some mistletoe for me in Milwaukee. Yes? The kitchen's to your right, the workshop to your left. Donner and Cupid are serving hay outside, if you're hungry.

PM, I was afraid there for a while I'd never see you again. This didn't go at all like I expected. But I should have expected that. Nothing in my life has gone like I expected.

"Chronicler, every year it's the same thing – Crisis, solution, and a rush to print the cards. Why did you doubt the lessons of history?"

Oh cranberries, I was hoping to come out ahead for once. When I got this idea, it had all the wrappings of a good one. But what little profit I thought I'd get is gone, what with the bribes – what else can I call them? – I had to pay Clyde, the reindeer, Rudy, and the rest to participate, the food for the banquet-that-wasn't, the donations to the charities, plus the extra cost for gold paint and Australian crystal doodads for the cover of the commemorative journal. All in all, I'm probably more in debt than when I started.

“Hey, Chronicler, you are what you are. Type out the tale, recycle some old *Sagas*, then take a wee nap. I'll wake you in time to catch the sleigh to St. Louis.”

**MERRY CHRISTMAS, AND GREAT  
JOY IN THE NEW YEAR!!!**

