



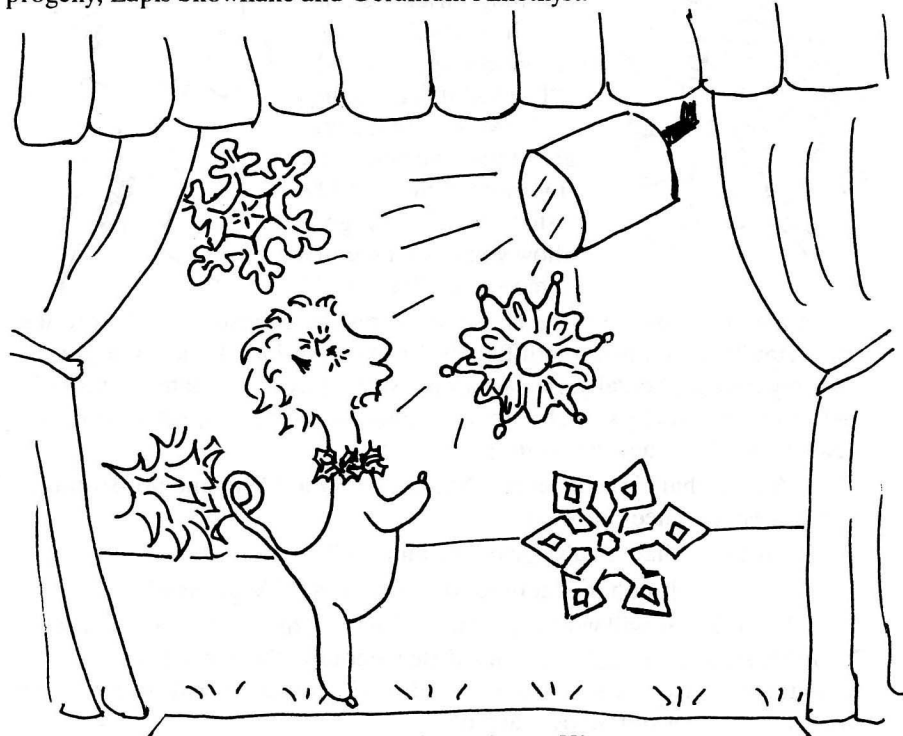
## LIGHTS! CAMERA! CHRISTMAS!!!

*The PM Saga, Book XVII*

by Susan Kirby

It was a little after the "Snowflakes" number. PM had just pliéed, cabrioles escarté-ed and pirouetted stage right to change from her Snow Fairy costume to her Sugar Plum duds. Relicta was tinkling away at her celesta, limbering up her digits for Tchaikovsky's delightful waltz.

For the tenth time I checked the film in Peppermint Paunch's camera. Of course there was no need to urge Dove to change the tape in his camcorder, since he had it perpetually trained on little Crystal Camellia, his almost-two-year-old daughter, who was giggling at the antics of PM's progeny, Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst.



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I must admit I almost missed it, for I was checking the script with Clyde Elf and whispering an order for egg nog to my assistant, Elvira Fernhat. I was so happy for this brief respite in rehearsals that at first I failed to look up, and when I finally did look up, I wasn't happy. I couldn't believe it. You won't either, when you see the movie.

\*

What movie? Why, the supercolossal masterpiece I've been directing all year. It all started New Year's Day, when PM popped into my humble hovel and raked me over the coals for the disastrous tour I'd just conducted. (I understand some of my dear Readers are still wandering around Christmas Monsterland looking for the way home, but that's not my fault! I'm not responsible – read the fine print in the contract.)

You know PM as Santa's lovable lead sleigh puller and North Pole Ambassador, and lovable indeed she is. But I assure you that Purple Monster's got a temper that would wilt Christmas roses, and that day in my abode she was lavender livid.



"Chronicler," she shrieked a paint-chipping shriek (as if my ceiling wasn't falling down enough already), "I've had it. That's the last PM Saga that's not about me. I've become a footnote in my own life story. I will no longer allow you to cast me in a cameo role. I'm a *star*!"



Cameo . . . role . . . star. Those words resonated resoundingly through the earmuffs I'd donned to muffle her shrieks. "Ah-ha!" I cried, jumping from my couch. (Actually, the last spring sprung from the frame of my sofa and propelled me skyward, but that's extraneous detail. I've since gotten a new couch. That's another story.)

"Ah-ha what?" the mauvette Minister of Good Will and not-so-much-post-Christmas cheer growled.

"Ah-ha, ah-ha! You've given me an idea."

"Oh no, unh-unh, not another of your ideas," PM groaned.

"But this one will work," I argued. "Picture this – a motion picture! Your life story, on celluloid, with a little videotape thrown in for good measure. I'll write the screenplay! I'll direct! Audiences will flock to see it. We'll make you a star all over again!"

"Mmmm," murmured PM. "It's frightens me to say it, but I like it. After all, my hubby's life story was a cinematic success. It's only fitting I be commemorated as well."

"Alabaster's *My Life In the Zoo: Five Years as an 'Alpaca?'* was a tremendous flick. But *your* story will take Tinseltown by storm! What a concept – your early days to now – a truly mind-boggling undertaking of epic proportions!"

"What'll we call it?" PM's lilac irises glistened with delight at the prospect.

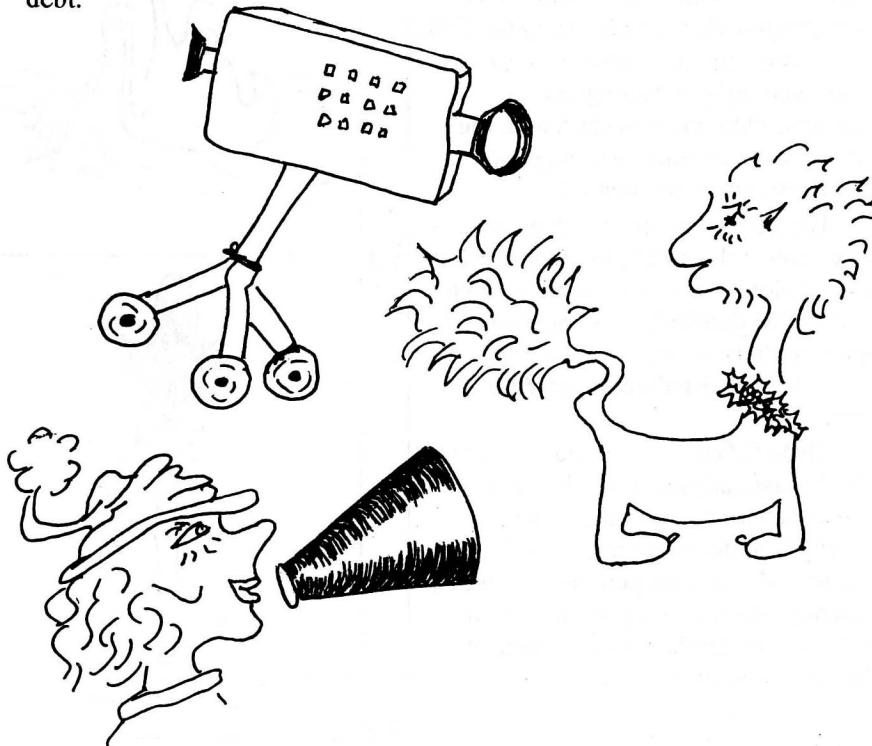
"How 'bout *The Perils of PM?*" I suggested, warming up to my task.

"Nope, too obvious," my friend criticized. "How 'bout *The Remains of Christmas Day?*"

"Too obscure, and too derivative," I critiqued. "We'll use *The PM Saga: The Movie* as a working title, and we'll open it Christmas Day in theaters everywhere!"

\*

Visions of profits danced in my head. Distribution income, screenwriter fees, director salary. This flick would make me a bundle. Videocassettes. Foreign rights. Broadcast rights. HBO, Showtime, Cinemax. Finally, I'd come up with the scheme that would get me out of debt.





Work began immediately. I mapped out an outline, scheduled production meetings and began a painstaking search through the North Pole and Christmas Monsterland film and video archives for footage to use in the docufantasy.

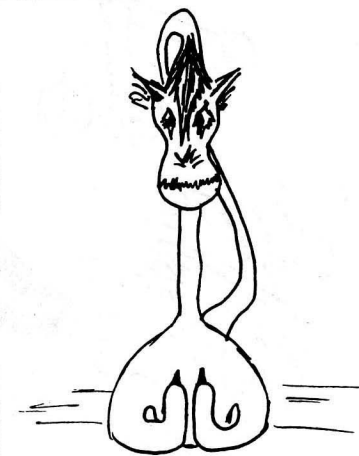
Of course the film would open with the immortal first words of the *PM Saga, Book I*. I'd provide the voice overs (at union scale, another few gumdrops for my coffers). I taped the opening, to run over an establishing shot of Christmas Monsterland, then a zoom into the star's birthplace:

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

"Since Christmas Monsterland was inhabited only by red and green Monsters, PM tended to clash with the rest of the community, causing great embarrassment to her family."

The Monsters' attic yielded some dusty 8mm reels of PM practicing for her first audition to be one of Santa's sleigh pullers. PM flinched at the inclusion of footage of herself as a "two-ton musical grape," but I insisted on this *cinéma vérité*.

Clyde Elf dug out the fading footage of PM's first audition, when PM was disqualified for being purple. What anger! What disappointment! What pathos! I was already penning acceptance speeches. We hit a snag when no film could be found of Santa's discovery of PM's star potential, so I decided to



re-create it: Santa drove by PM's room in his sleigh. PM wafted her voice through the window once again.

"Whoa!" Santa cried once again, as the cameras rolled. "Who's that? The voice is divine. Why didn't I see that one?"

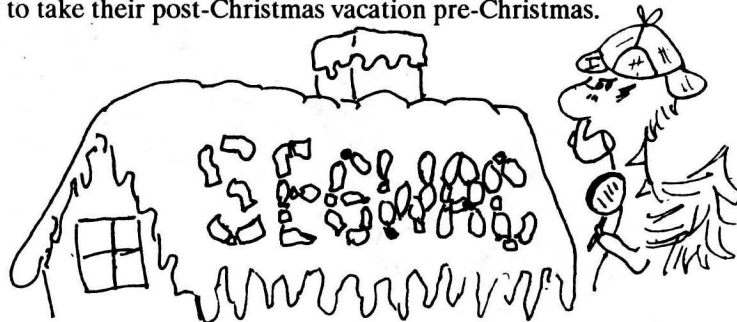
(That took two takes after I insisted that Santa not improvise. The line, according to the script, is "I LOVE the voice. Why didn't I see *her*?" )

And I knew there'd not be a dry eye in the theater when Santa rendered the moral to the first Christmas Fable:

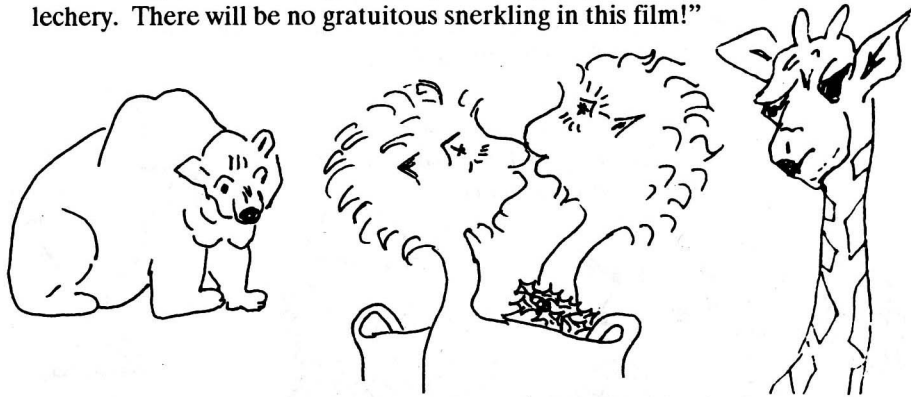
*If you are Purple, don't be Blue.  
A Merry Christmas will come to you.  
For Santa Claus, both wise and kind,  
Is also very color-blind.*



I decided on a photo montage to cover PM's life during the early Sagas: Santa stuffed in the chimney, succumbing to Apathia Sowhata, with PM's taped exhortation to Christmas cheer and her triumphant "Basically Christmas is the miracle of loving and giving which overcomes the merchandising and media" spiel. A shot of Peppermint discovering the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas footprints on Santa's roof the year the North Pole crew were hoodwinked with hallucinogens to take their post-Christmas vacation pre-Christmas.



There was no need to look for romance. I got Fir to compose some lyrical, swelling music, reminiscent of Rachmaninov, for a re-creation of the moment when PM first set eyes on her green-eyed Monster mate-to-be, Alabaster Eggshell, in the San Diego Zoo. However, PM balked when I begged to include a wedding night scene: "You are not literarily – or dramatically – licensed to promote pandering or prurience, licentiousness or lechery. There will be no gratuitous sneerling in this film!"



We located footage of Santa's trial in front of the Un-Christmas Activities Committee and scenes of Clyde Elf's debauchery from "The Prodigal Elf." We were forced to spend a lot of time (and money) building a set and shooting the crash landing of Relicta's spaceship into Mrs. C's kitchen when Mrs. Santa refused to let me film on location. But PM's dialogue is incredibly heart-warming when she explains the meaning of Christmas to the extraterrestrial intergalactic traveler.

I wanted an international flavor to the epic, so in April we went on location in Italy, filming PM serenading her fans in a gondola in Venice, and lighting candles and warbling "Ave Maria" in Chiesa S. Maria Maddelena in Rome. While Vatican authorities would not allow us to record PM's meeting in Saint Peter's, I was able to highlight the North Pole Ambassador's diplomatic skills at the famous Mideast handshake ceremony in Washington. (If you look closely you can see PM just behind the President, seated in a place of honor next to Socks.)





- 7 -

November in Paris, where we filmed PM putting up decorations at Galeries Lafayette, strolling the Champs-Élysées, singing "O Holy Night" to an organ accompaniment, framed by the Rose Window in Notre Dame, and posing with a gargoyle on one of the towers. The sunset shots of PM distributing bonbons and good cheer to children at the Eiffel Tower will bring oohs and ahhs from the audience, I assure you.

Of course we captured PM's appearance at the Thanksgiving Day parade, and used the time in the Big Apple to stage the negotiations in my hovel between SEGWAC and the Christmas Crew for the Summit at the North Pole (Dove, with a mole on his nose, portrayed his twin brother Parasite).



\*

So here we were, two days before the day before Christmas, at the dress rehearsal for the ballet numbers for the next night's concert, getting some final musical numbers on tape.

I took satisfaction in a job well done (and done well before deadline!). The rushes were great, Clyde's editing spectacular. The soundtrack was evocative, Fir's soaring melodies punctuated by wind chimes and Rudy's jingle bells. I was confident that after the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert shots were in the can, we'd have one heck of a movie – my crowning glory as a Chronicler. So what if there wasn't a Crisis, for once? PM's life story was drama enough.

That's when the hubbub happened, followed by cries of "What's happening?" and my anticipatory "Oh no, not again," sure that once again disaster was imminent. I looked up. High above our heads, floating and turning somersaults near the auditorium's chandelier, was little Crystal Camellia, her antennae quivering wildly and emitting electric blue sparks.

Relicta wailed "PM, help!" Purple Monster flew across the stage, sugar plums flying from her mane, and grand jeté to grab the little alien.

"Get her down!" Dove screamed, tossing his camera in the air. Fortunately I caught it and filmed the ensuing melée (I know a good photo op when I see one).



"You never told me your species could fly," Dove whispered to his beloved extraterrestrial mate.

Rudolph's nose was flickering red in amazement. "I've taken her for rides, but I didn't teach her to fly!" he protested.

"Whatever happened, it's not from my side of the family," Dove insisted. "No SEGWACian I know can fly."

"Yfxfxi" Dove tried to repeat, but couldn't quite make the same sounds (he had trouble with the x's). "What did she say?"

"What's it mean?" queried Peppermint, true detective to the core.

"YfYfii," Camellia squeaked again, then reduplicated for good measure, "YfYfii YfYfii!!!"

Relicta's frown was more intense. She kept her eyes on her daughter as she extended her own antennae. There were creaks and crackles as her two protuberances elongated further and began to vibrate.

"~~Yfzfzjz!!!~~" she cried in wonderment. "It's very weak, but I hear it, too! Camellia's picking up the a distress call! But how . . . ?"

"Wasn't your planet and all its inhabitants <sup>blown up</sup>?" inquired Alabaster.

"I thought they were," Relicta said, her voice atremble. "The last time I picked up this was right before my world exploded. In my years of celestial wanderings I picked up naught until I entered your airwaves and started receiving 'Let's Make a Deal,' which is the closest thing I've heard to a distress call since. After years on your planet my antennae have gotten a bit rusty. But Camellia's are hypersensitive, I guess because she's so young."

"So what do we do?" Dove asked, still staring at the quivering, crackling antennae of his spouse and daughter.

PM mused and mused, then said, "What we always do when we've a conundrum. We take the mystery to Santa."

So off we went, via sled, spaceship, and teletransportation, to the North Pole.

\*

Santa was pleased to see us, as usual, although my attempts at close-ups of his jelly belly did not amuse him. While we told our tale Mrs. Santa held Camellia, the old gal's gray hair occasionally rising on end from the static electricity.

"Do you think there could be another survivor from my planet?" Relicta asked St. Nick.

"Could be. But there is another possibility. As you know, SEGWAC is quite capable of concocting disruptive signals – remember their microwaves and the force field? This may be an attempt to trick your receptors."

Dove scratched his beaky nose thoughtfully. "I wouldn't put it past Viper or Parasite, not to mention Uncle Virus, to try something like that. My family's still unhappy about Relicta and my marriage. Our work for the Salvation Army irks them no end. I agree, this is despicable enough to be a SEGWAC plot. But how can we find out?"

Alabaster asked, "Isn't it about time for your yearly attempt to see your parents, Dove?"



"Yep. We tried last year, but they slammed the door in our face. They'll never forgive me being the only good SEGWACian and for joining the Christmas Crew. But why go after Camellia? They haven't even seen her yet."

"Anaconda Adder has," PM reminded him.

Peppermint puffed, "That's right. He snuck into the tour last year because of Chronicler's lax security."

"It wasn't my fault!" I whined yet again, "it was a confusion over faxes that got him an invite."

"But he did see Camellia and saw her antennae," PM ignored me, "and he surely reported back. So, Santa, what do you recommend?"

The old man stroked his beard and waved my camcorder from under his nose. "Why not take Camellia and try once again? If the vibes are stronger there, you'll know they're behind this phenomenon. If not, you'll give Camellia's grandparents another opportunity to meet their granddaughter."

"I'll come along," PM said. "It'll be faster if I teletransport you."

I flipped off the camcorder. "I'll tag along too," I offered. "It's part of the record."

\*

We popped OUT THERE and rematerialized above the sewer grate entrance to the dank and dark dungeon that the Viper Carrions now called home. Viper's position as head of North American SEGWAC had been tottering recently, given his inability to take a bite out of Christmas cheer. The air was putrid, the seeping septic stench horrible. I switched to black and white film to capture the mood.

The grate groaned as Dove lifted it. We descended. "Any increase in vibrations?" PM whispered to Relicta as we tread softly into the gloom. The metal steps creaked. Rats scurried below us in the rancid water dripping into the tunnel.

Relicta twitched her antennae and then checked out Camellia's. "Nope, in fact they're getting weaker," she whispered back. "My friend, you'd better not come any further," she told PM. "You know how Viper hates you."

"O.K.," PM agreed. "But call if you need help and I'll blink you out of here tout de suite. Speaking of sweets, you got any Godivas for me to munch on while I wait, Chronicler?"

Yet again Mom's Godivas found their way into PM's tummy, and once again I'll have to explain their absence under the yule tree this Christmas. But Mom will understand. Maybe.

I followed the ex-SEGWACian, his alien wife and the progeny of their union through the tunnel to another grate. I switched to my night scope. This was *film noir* at its *noirest*.

We reached a rusting metal door with hand-lettered signs taped across it: "Only you can start X-mas tree fires. Use SEGWAC lights – for the best pop and flame on a plug!"; "Beware ye who enter and utter the L-word"; and a hand-lettered "Bah Humbug."

Dove gingerly tapped on the door, then wiped the mold on his handkerchief.

We heard slithering from inside and the door slid open a crack. "Whaddya want?" snarled Anaconda Adder.

"Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells," I whistled, though from an urge to irritate Anaconda or from terror I couldn't tell you.

"Chronicler, get that camera outta my fac-c-ce," he sneered.

Dove pushed gently on the door. "Are my parents at home?" he asked, then stepped by Anaconda into the dungeon when he heard the growling "Who's-s-s-s there, Anaconda?" emanating from the gloom beyond.

You'll see the inside of the Carrion abode when the movie's released, but suffice it to say that it was in the worst taste imaginable. Various dastardly weapons were stacked along the corridor. Cobwebs and spiders dangled from the ceiling. A map of SEGWAC's current operations – with Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, and other hot spots highlighted – was hung by the torture chamber with care. Landscapes of clear-cut woods and burned-out rain forests lined the wall.

Bats brushed our cheeks and chewed on our ears. Relicta, cradling Camellia, and I tiptoed behind Dove toward the inner chamber. Lucretia Carrion, Dove's mom, languidly reclining on a bed of nails, dropped the brush she'd been using to apply scarlet enamel to her talons. Parasite hurled his N.R.A magazine at us. Viper ceased stirring a cauldron of bubbling cockroaches over a sooty fire and waved his ladle menacingly.





"Get outta here, traitor!" Parasite threatened.

"Unless-s-s-s-s you've come to tell me you've blown up the North Pole, I don't wanna s-s-s-s-see you, Vulture" Viper vituperated (referring to Dove's birth moniker), and hissed a hellish hiss.

Dove and Relicta inched further toward Lucretia. "Mother," Dove spoke softly, "I've brought your granddaughter. This is Crystal Camellia."

Lucretia stared out from under her petroleum-soaked eyelashes at the child. "She's-s-s cute. We *hate* cute. There will be *NO CUTE* in this house! Begone! Chronicler, you witch, take that camera OUT OF MY FACE!"

We retreated post-haste, for Anaconda was bearing down on us with a machete. "I'm leaving your present in the hall!" Dove called over his shoulder as we began to run, for now Parasite was swooping after us, a hang-man's noose swirling above his head like a lasso.

"What did you get them?" I asked as we galloped and galumphed through the sewer. (I'm going to dub in Rossini's "William Tell Overture" for this scene.)

"*See, I Told You So*, by Rush Limbaugh" Dove chortled as we joined PM.

"I think SEGWAC published that," PM laughed. "That's a present they'll probably keep!" She whisked us to the North Pole, Viper's yells echoing a not-so-very-fond farewell.

\*

We popped back into Santa's toasty kitchen, where we found the Christmas Crew anxiously awaiting our return.

"Any answers?" Santa asked.

Camellia whimpered a plaintive "~~Yf~~~~Yf~~~~Yf~~li," and once again began to wail.

"I don't think SEGWAC's behind this," Relicta replied, soothing her infant. "The signal is stronger UP HERE. I believe it's coming from OUT THERE."

"But we got just back from OUT THERE," I objected.

PM mused. "I think Relicta means not the small OUT THERE that is the rest of Earth, but the big **OUT THERE** – the cosmos."

"Yes," said Relicta. "The signal is stronger UP HERE, probably because we're closer to the ozone hole. We have to do something. As long as Camellia is picking up the signal, she won't be able to think about anything else. Nor will I. The alien in me must know who's calling us. We must find out where the signal is coming from, and who's sending it."

"How are you going to do that?" Dove asked, a hint of trepidation in his voice. "Can't you just ignore it? Couldn't you and Crystal just retract your antennae, or something?"



"No. I have to search for the source," Relicta stated matter-of-factly. "If one of my species is **OUT THERE** and needs my help, I must go."

"I'll take you," Santa volunteered. "My sleigh's never gone that far before, but it's worth a try."

Mrs. Santa, Peppermint, Clyde Elf and Rudolph chirped agreement. "We'll all go. We always help our friends."

Relicta shook her head. "Thank you all, but no. I could be gone for days, or weeks, or months. You've still got Christmas preparations to do, there's the Christmas concert tomorrow night, and then there's the ride. Remember, there's always the possibility that this *is* a SEGWAC plot to make you miss Christmas."

"I'm coming," Dove insisted assertively.

Relicta kissed his nose. "Dear, this trip is not for you. You're needed here. One of us has to fix and serve the Christmas dinner for the homeless, and Peppermint needs you for SEGWAC-spotting security at the concert. Camellia and I will go alone."

PM glanced meaningfully at Alabaster, who was helping Lapis assemble a Mighty Morphin Power Ranger for Santa's gift bag. His silver mane glittered in the firelight when he nodded yes.

"I'm going with you," the fuchsia-furred friend insisted. "No arguments. If we don't get back in time, Rosette can take my place at the concert and as lead sleigh puller."

"But you can't leave Al and your children," Relicta argued anyway. "They'll worry sick about you."

"I'm going," PM repeated. "You might need my teletransportation abilities. We know that Lapis and Geranium once teletransported to the moon with no ill effects. You might need me to extricate you from a sticky spot."

"It's the parable of the lost lamb again," I mumbled, for no particular reason but to free associate. "PM, we've done that before – Book X of *The PM Saga*, remember."

Santa rolled his eyes and shrugged. "Chronicler, we recycle when we must."

"I'm going," I declared. "Whither PM goes, so goest her Chronicler. Besides, it's the chance of a lifetime – and think of the drama. It's *Star Wars* all over again, *Star Trek*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Close Encounter*."

Relicta pulled the Oscar out from under me. "Chronicler, I've only the one midasmetal spacesuit, remember? What will you wear? Besides, you get spacesick too easily."

"My last shopping spree was to a Former-Soviet-Union Garage Sale. I bought a used cosmonaut suit," I answered in triumph, determined to make the trip.

PM frowned chastisingly. "Why did you do that? You didn't need it. And you have enough debt as it is."

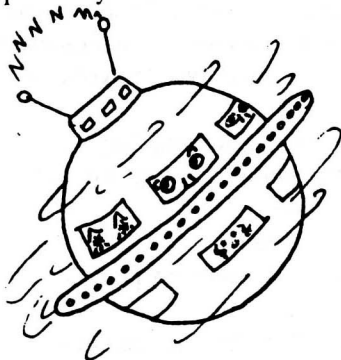
“Need? Who said anything about *need*? I *need* food, I *need* a roof over my head, I *need* the love of my family. I *wanted* the spacesuit. So I bought it.”

"Charged it, you mean," PM corrected.

“Whatever. Anyway, I’m going. I’m thinking of the possibilities – sort of a buddy movie, the four females hurtling through space – the *Thelma and Louise* of Christmas Monsterland. What a blockbuster!”

Clyde piped up, "Didn't Thelma and Louise hurtle over a cliff?"

"Whatever. I'm a journalist. I'll lose my Times I.D. if I miss an opportunity like this."



So it came to pass that Relicta, PM, Camellia, and I strapped ourselves in the extraterrestrial's spaceship and whirled off into outer space. Once past Jupiter, Relicta took two wires from her control console and placed one on her right antenna and the other on Camellia's left antenna. "This feeds the homing signal directly into the ship's automatic pilot," she explained as the spaceship began to spin double-speed and

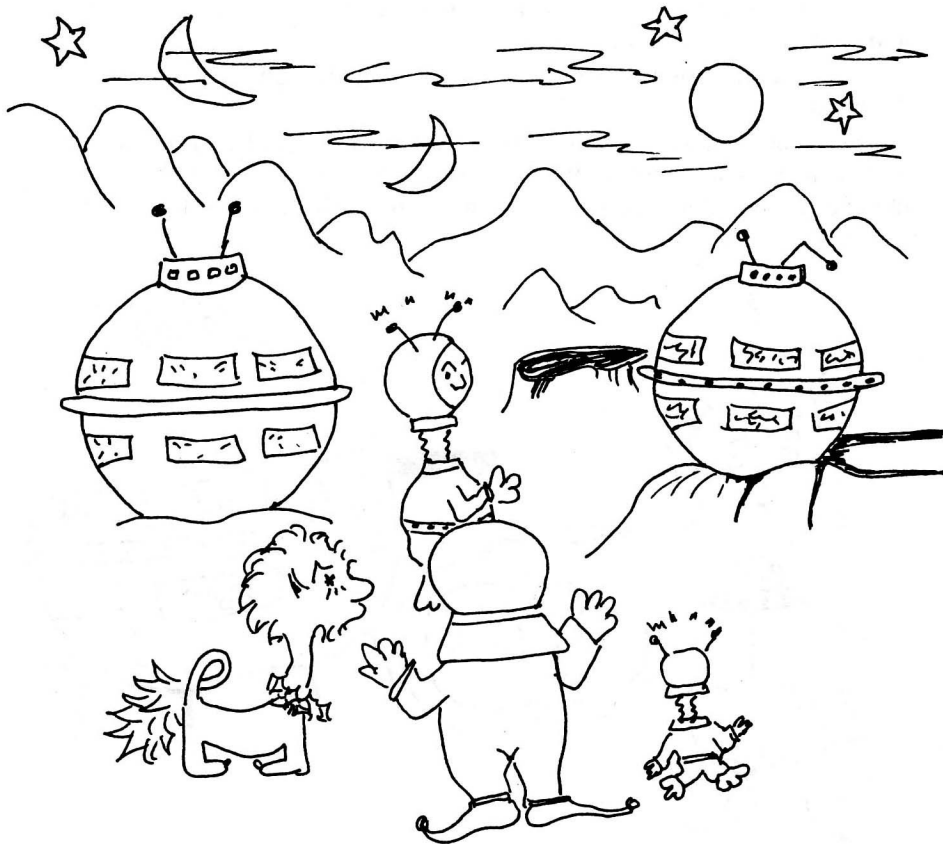
**WHOOSH!**ed into outer space, sailing beyond Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto to the outer reaches of the cosmos.

I filmed as much of the trip as I could in between Dramamines. Traveling faster than the speed of light is a dizzying experience.

My suggestion that we stop in the Milky Way for hot chocolate was summarily squashed. The spaceship hurtled on. Camellia continued to cry “~~Yyy~~ Yyy,” which got progressively louder and louder until,

“The signal is coming from here,” Relicta said. “The sensors show a strong concentration of midasmetal near the south pole, and I’m picking up a life form.”

We passed through a turquoise and ochre cloud and caught sight of a glittering spaceship almost identical to Relicta's perched on the rim of a huge crater. Relicta parked her ship next to the other craft and lowered the ramp. We unstrapped our seatbelts and deplaned, my camcorder's red light aglow.





"Hello!" Relicta called out.

"Halloo!" PM cried.

"Yoo-hoo," I contributed.

But it was Camellia's "Yiffy!" and her sparking antennae that caused the second spaceship's ramp to descend slowly, creaking and croaking as it opened. We waited expectantly at the base of the ramp. Nothing happened.

"Anyone home?" I called out.

No answer.

"We've come this far," PM said, "might as well see what's here," and she trotted up the ramp. We followed warily behind her.

The inside of the spaceship resembled Relicta's, but the lights were much dimmer and there were creepy shadows and thick layers of space dust everywhere.

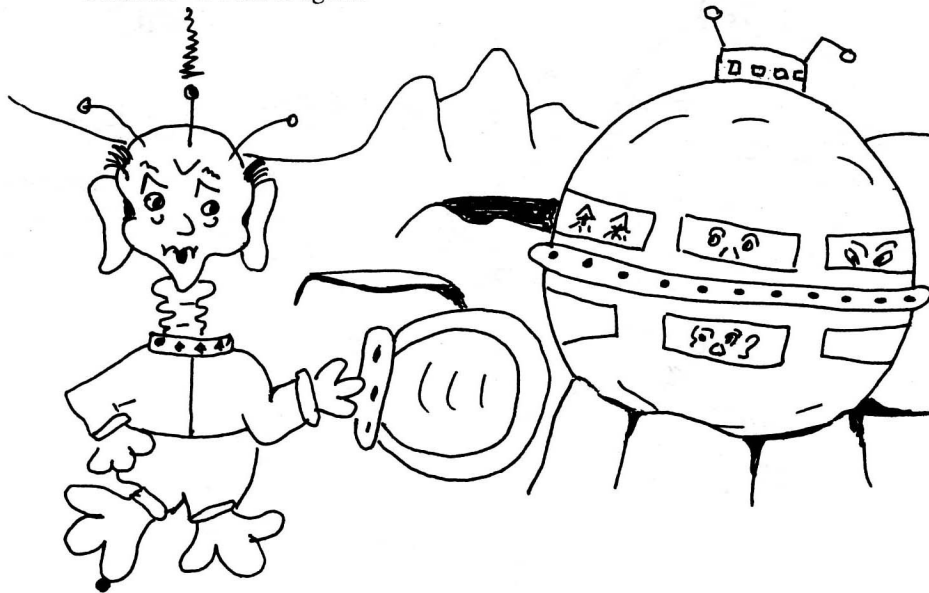
As Relicta called out another "Hallooo-o-o-o-o," the ramp suddenly flew up. We heard a key turn in a lock. We were trapped inside the alien ship.

"What's happening?" I asked (not original dialogue, but it's the best I could improvise at the time).

Camellia cried louder. We saw a light shining through the front windshield.

We groped our way toward the light, Relicta in the lead, and stared out. Staring back was another Relicta – sort of, for this creature had three antennae, not two, and a nasty expression on his (I think it was a male) face.

"Sentria? We meet again!"



"Do you know him?" I inquired (the best I could come up with on the spot – looking back, I could have asked "Knowest thou him?" but it wouldn't have been spontaneous).

Relicta's face was a seething chartreuse. "Lucifer Trinode!" she shouted, and in a reflexive action reached to her side for a weapon that wasn't there.

"Yes, 'tis I, Binode!" the stranger replied, chortling up at us. "I too escaped the destruction of our planet. I told you once that victory would be mine, and now it is!" he cried. "You two-antennae were never a match for us three-antennae. You're too weak – you could never resist rescuing a comrade. After I crashed here I sent out a signal on the chance one of you would come and give me a way out of here! Good-bye, sucker! May you rot forever on this desolate planet!"

"PM, do something!" I ordered authoritatively. "Teletransport out of here and bash him over the head or something!"

"No!" Relicta yelled, grabbing PM's tail. "Don't twitch it! His third antenna shoots isolator rays! The only protection is the midasmetal in this ship! I'll see if his ship's vaporizer is still working! I'll blast him to smithereens!"

PM shook her mane no. "Relicta, that's the old alien talking. Have you forgotten 'turn the other cheek'? We must find another way, a way with Love."

"Trinodes don't know about Love! They only know power, and hate, and deception. We must fight fire with fire!"

"That's not the Christmas way," PM counseled. We watched helplessly as the alien bounded and bounced boisterously toward Relicta's ship.

"Eternity . . . eternity! . . . eternity!!" the alien cackled maniacally as he slinked aboard. "It won't be long for you. I'm off to find a new world to conquer – the one you just left!"

The alien flipped on the lights and revved up the engines. Relicta's – and our – former means of transportation began to whirl and spin, and was soon out of sight.

There was silence in the old spacecraft. Relicta checked the instrument panel. "There's not enough fuel to get us off the planet," she sighed. "How are we ever going to get home?"

"~~Yfzfzfzfzf~~" squeaked Camellia, her antennae still sparking blue sparks.

Relicta pushed some buttons on the panel, and Camellia's antenna stopped quivering. "He was using the last of his generator's electricity to send out distress signals," Relicta explained. "Binode signals, Trinode signals, and the universal S O S for good measure. We thought we were on a rescue mission, and instead we fell into a trap."

PM comforted her companion compassionately. "You couldn't have known. You thought a fellow being was in need, and you tried to help. You're a true Christmas critter."

"Christmas!" I yelled. "We're stuck here on a deserted orb, with no food or water, light years from Earth. We don't even know what day it is! How will we ever make it home in time for Santa's ride? How will I edit these last tapes into the movie?"

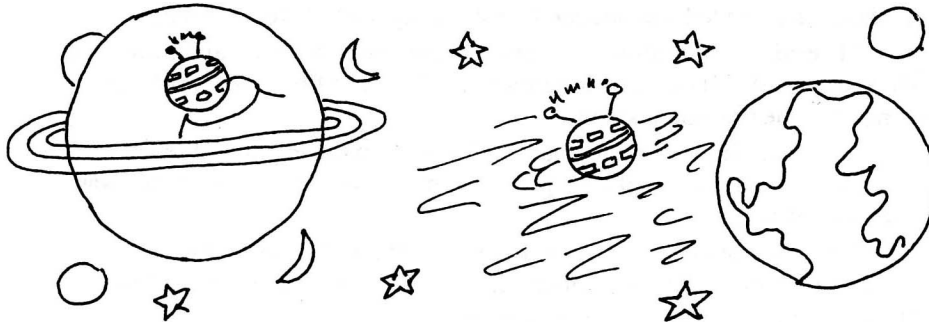
"Chronicler, once again you fail to see the big picture. We're stranded," Relicta explained. "Not to mention that the Trinode is whirling to earth, that the North Pole will think he's us, and nothing can stop Lucifer from pulverizing the Christmas Crew with his isolator rays."

"Isolator rays? What are they?" PM asked the question I too was wondering.

"Probably the most dangerous weapon ever invented. One zap and you're surrounded by a thick film of darkness. You can only see those like yourself – all others are the enemy. Two zaps and you feel like you're alone in the universe, that no one cares, that there's no hope, no connection. Three zaps and empathy is nonexistent, depression reigns, and the only thing to do is take as much as you can, any way you can, because nothing matters in the end. Despair drives those zapped thrice to vile, violent deeds."

"That's a weapon SEGWAC would dearly love," PM sighed. "So the question is, how do we stop him? And how do we keep him from trying to zap Santa and the gang? Or the people OUT THERE on Earth, who have enough isolation as it is?"

"First we have to get out of here," I suggested.



"How?" PM asked. "You've finally written us into a totally hopeless situation. Thanks a lot, Chronicler."

"A Crisis, I admit," I admitted. "But I haven't been zapped with an isolator ray yet. I have hope. You're the heroine of these tales, PM. Come up with a Christmas miracle."

PM took up the challenge. "I could try to teletransport back to the North Pole, warn Santa, then intercept the Trinode before he gets there, grab the spaceship, and come back for you."

Relicta shook her head. "You've never tried to teletransport that far. You might disintegrate! It's too risky."

"How much power do you need to start up the rockets, Relicta?" PM asked.

"Not much, a couple of volts would get the computer fully on line."

PM grabbed my camcorder. "Take the batteries from here," she said. "Will that do?" (I didn't object, though I thought about it – what followed next would have been great film making.)

"Yep, it should. But even with the computer up, the solar panels have lost their reflectors."

"Chronicler, do you have any doodads on you?" PM asked.

"You mean the rhinestones with which I sparkle the covers of your Saga?" I asked.

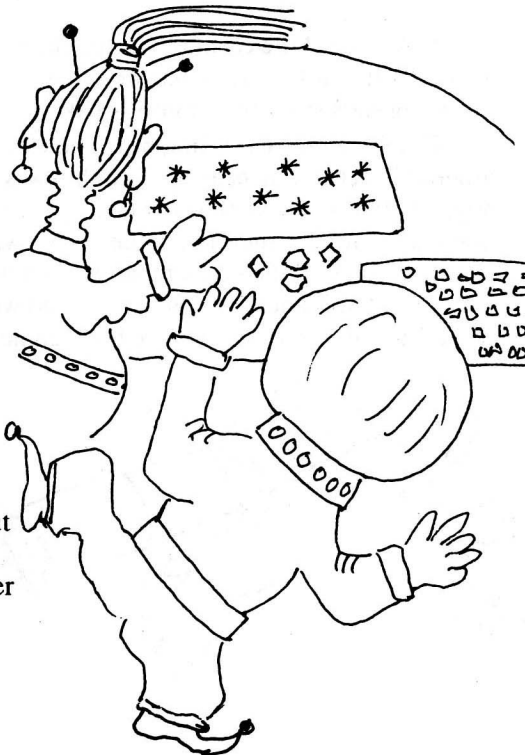
"Yep," PM replied.

(Correction: Last year's Saga erroneously reported that the crystals are Australian. My supplier has informed me in her 90-year-old squeaky Brooklynese voice that the rhinestones are "Austrian, the finest made." The error is hereby corrected.)

I dug inside my spacesuit and extracted a bag of gems. "Here," I said, handing them to Relicta.

Relicta removed her necklace. "With those, plus these crystals Dove gave me, I can fix the panels!" She pushed a few buttons and the solar panels retracted into the ship. Crystal by crystal, rhinestone by rhinestone, the reflectors were replaced and the panels flipped out once again.

"Well, the solar power should get us off the ground. But I don't know how to get home. The flight path is in the computer in my ship."





“Click our heels and think about Kansas?” was my brilliant idea.

PM’s swallowed a piercing retort and said, “No, Chronicler. We find the Christmas Star and follow it!”

“Right! The Wise Men angle,” I asserted, always on the lookout for a biblical allusion.

“With the Christmas Star and Love to guide us, we are never lost!” PM declared. “Grab hold of my tail, everyone. Put Camellia ’round my neck.”

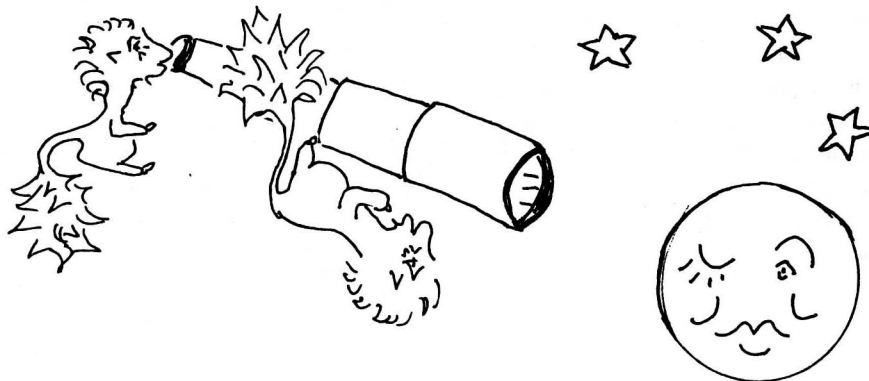
PM placed a paw on the controls. “Now, positive vibes, dear friends. Think of your families. Think of your friends. Think of the joy on children’s faces on Christmas morning. Think of Santa!”



I pushed thoughts of failure from my mind and concentrated on the things that matter. Obviously PM and Relicta and Camellia did so, too, for the engines purred, pulsated and then roared. I visualized the St. Louis arch, marzipan and mistletoe, ornaments and Noëllic nativity scenes, and thought merry thoughts. The spaceship twirled, then rocketed off the planet. Before I could say Pierre Lapin the desolate planet was a speck in our rear-view mirror.

PM scoured the cosmos, located the brightest star in the galaxy and aimed for it. Faster and faster, whizzing through the universe, we passed flickering stars that blurred into streaks of light – we were on our way home!

But would we arrive in time? The Christmas Star blinked brighter and brighter, a beckoning beacon. The ship was traveling so fast my ears popped. In no time at all (or maybe I passed out and lost track of time) we saw a familiar face: the Man in the Moon, who winked as we soared by. Ahead we spotted the newly repaired Hubble telescope, and hanging on with their tails, Lapis and Geranium! The duo were staring through the lens into space and didn’t spot us until we hovered next to them.



"Lapis! Geranium! Get in here!" PM commanded maternally. The two blinked into the spaceship. "Does your father know where you are?"

"Nope. We snuck off. We wanted to keep a lookout. We thought *that* was you!" Lapis pointed to a tiny golden dot emerging from a distant black hole.

"That's the Trinode!" Relicta cried. "I don't know how we did it, but we beat him! Hurry! Through the ozone hole to the North Pole. We have to reconfigure the force field fast to prevent him from landing."

"I'll teletransport from here and find Alabaster and Peppermint to configure the changes. When you've gotten into the atmosphere, we'll close off the entrance."

PM tweaked her tail and was gone. Lapis and Geranium linked their tails to provide more power for the ship and *WHOOSH!*, we soon landed at the North Pole, too close to Santa's workshop for my liking, but this was, after all, an unfamiliar spacecraft, and Relicta made the best touch down under the circumstances.

Dove was waiting for us, and used a skeleton key left over from his SEGWAC days to unlock the spaceship. My legs wobbled as I waltzed off the ship. I fell in the snow, yelling at Elvira Fernhat to hand me more batteries for the camcorder. I wanted to get the conclusion of the Crisis on tape.

"What time is it?" I queried Clyde, who had crowded close to me and was clapping his hands excitedly, creating a cacophonous clamor that clanged inside my still-gyrating skull.

"It's almost Christmas, Chronicler!" declared the diminutive elf. "Santa's sleigh leaves in 10 minutes. And once again, you've failed to give me your Naughty and Nice list in time," he scolded me in his most petty-bureaucrat tone.

"I'll get it. It's in my computer on the spaceship. I'm a writer, you know, it's what I do, who I am, and a writer never leaves Earth without her laptop . . . Uh-oh. It's not on this spaceship. It's on the *other* spaceship.



Along with the floppy disks containing my composition of this year's Saga! What am I going to do? I can't edit the film *and* produce a Christmas story in the time remaining!"

"Make a choice, Chronicler! Story or film?"

"It will be a rough copy, but loan me a PC, Clyde. I vote for the story!" I cried. "Too many people expect it. We'll premiere the movie next year."

Relicta, Dove, and Crystal Camellia, still hugging and kissing, joined the Christmas Crew. PM, nuzzling Alabaster's neck and cuddling the twins, recounted our adventure to Santa and Mrs. Claus as they loaded the sleigh.

Relicta looked out to the stars and shuddered. "The Trinode is on his way. At his rate of travel he won't get here until after Santa's ride, so I think you'll be O.K. tonight, Mr. Claus. We'll devise a way to keep him from the North Pole, but eventually he'll find a place to land on Earth. It won't be long until SEGWAC finds him – or he finds them. They're natural allies."

"Maybe he can be converted," suggested Santa. "It didn't take you too long to find the Christmas spirit," he smiled.

"Not likely," Relicta answered.



I looked up from the computer screen Clyde had loaned me. "Well, he does have my laptop. And on it, a complete set of *The PM Saga*, Books I-XVI. If he reads them, who knows? Stranger things have happened. I'll start work on the sequel tomorrow."



May the Christmas Star help you find your way,  
wherever your way may be.

