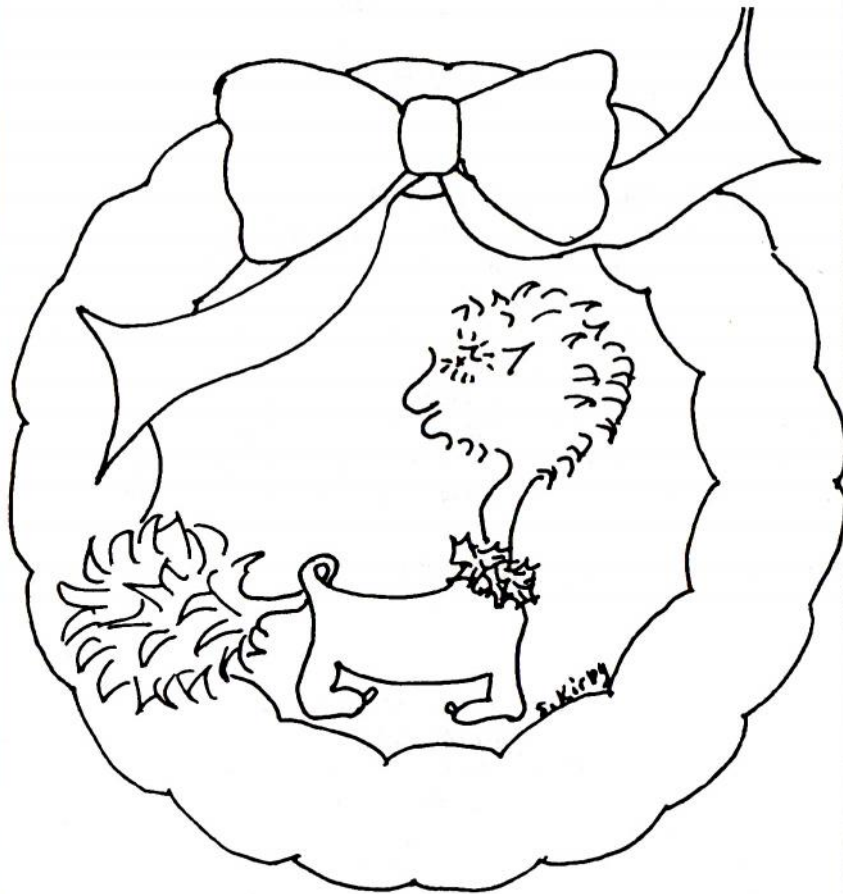




**THE RETURN OF  
CHRISTMAS MONSTERLAND**



*She's Back!*

*The PM Saga, Book XX*

by Susan Kirby

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### **PM, the Personnel Manager, Hires Herself**

Of course, we had to let the Chronicler go. Such gross dereliction of duty could not be countenanced. Surely she did not expect to retain her position after her inability to perform her job. Santa and Mrs. C. did make a persuasive case for a suspension — without pay — but I convinced them that failure to produce the 20th Saga was a terminable offense. We notified her Jan. 1 from our post-holiday hideaway in the Bermuda Triangle. Clyde Elf was all for just sending her an E-mail, but Relicta argued that Chronicler's efforts for the previous 19 Sagas (and the poem too, reminded Mrs. Claus) called for more consideration. So we dialed her number.

*Dear Chronicler, we're sad to say  
We've bad news to impart today,  
Your contract with the North Pole Crew  
Was crassly breached and broke by you.  
Your task, as you might well remember:  
To write our story each December.  
No saga last year prompts this fax.  
There's nought to do but give the ax.  
Though friends we've been since you were hired,  
You've blown it, Chron. Good-bye, you're fired!*

*With Love, Christmas Joy, and  
best wishes for the New Year,  
PM, Santa, and the North Pole Gang*



I haven't talked to Chronicler since. Thus I write my own Saga — the marvelous exploits of a Purple Monster (born into a land of red and green Christmas Monsters) who battled prejudice and lousy treatment to rise and become Santa's lead sleigh puller, to marry a wonderful silver-maned Monster, to birth and raise our precocious twins, Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst, now almost 11 years old, and, generally, to save the holidays each year from whatever Crisis the evil Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas has cooked up for Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole.

This past year has been a busy one. I continued my singing and dancing recitals, and have teletransported to the major capitals of the world to bring Santa's message of Peace and Love to all People OUT THERE.

Yes, Alabaster, what is it?

"The twins want your help with the school play."

Later, my neck-nuzzling mate, I am writing my Saga.

"Rosette says you've missed the last two rehearsals for the sleigh-pulling auditions. The tryouts are next week, and you've got three slots to fill. Take a break. We haven't snerkled in — well, I can't remember how long."

My devoted consort, I've got to go through my diaries.

"Mrs. C. says she can't spare Elvira Fernhat any more to do your transcription. She's needed to help Clyde Elf with the Naughty & Nice lists."

I simply must have her! You know how badly I hunt and peck with my single pawnail.

"PM, you're not taking the hint. I'll spell it out. Your Saga, so far, is B-O-R-I-N-G!"

What? You speak of snerkling and then insult me? Remember how cold it got at the end of Book 19?

"My burgundy beloved, I have adored you since you rescued me from the San Diego Zoo lo so many years ago. You're an exceptional dancer, you sing like an angel, you have saved Santa's skin more times than we can count. You do it all — except . . . except . . . *you can't write*. Accept it. Mr. C. didn't want to hurt your feelings. But he fears he can't publish a word of what you've submitted."

Oh. Oh dear. I should have paid more attention when Elvira fell asleep while transcribing the tape — no, Elvira, don't type this. In fact, erase all this tape. I suppose we'll have to find someone else. You're right. I'm supposed to



be living the Saga, not recording it. But who?

"I have a suggestion."

Oh? Of course, you're right. You've doctorates in Philosophy, Psychology, English and Jurisprudence, not to mention in Chemistry, Biology, and how many others? *You* write it.

"Yes, dear."

And, my perspicacious partner, it had better be poetically perspicuous!

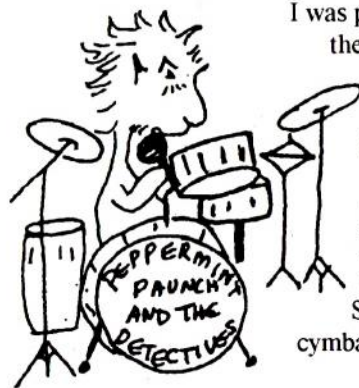
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### Alabaster Eggshell Dips Into the Inkwell

November in Christmas Monsterland is frenetic, as those in our Arctic area code contribute what we can to insure that Dec. 25 brings glad tidings, merriment, and lots of presents for all and sundry. Our most important task — for the most talented among us — is to pull Santa's sleigh. (Those who still believe that reindeer have an exclusive on that job description — you just haven't been paying attention to the Sagas.)

Each year auditions are held to replace retiring Monsters or to add to the propulsion power of the North Pole conveyance. Requirements include twinkling toes and extraordinary strength and dexterity, the better to avoid colliding with chimneys, telephone lines, and treetops. Hopefuls must also possess virtuoso voices, for the trip is long, and what better way to pass the time than in rounds of "Here Comes Santa Claus" and "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town"?

It was to these tryouts, so important to our culture, that PM turned her attention. On this particular day, the aspirees had persevered and perspired prolifically in preparation for PM's perusal. Rosette, PM's niece and her back-up in the lead position, had warmed up the group. As one of the Paunchettes in "Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives," the North Pole band that plays the annual Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert, Rosette was also looking for new choral members. So these rehearsals were all-important to the Monsterland tradition.



I was present, in my capacity as percussionist for the Detectives, to tap flam paradiddle-diddles for the "Little Drummer Boy" routine that PM had choreographed for the preliminaries.

Carmine Poppy, daughter of Pimento Poppy, PM's former child psychologist, had labored hard all year and was the most promising Monster PM had seen in years. She was nervous, and the crash of my cymbals clattering to the concrete just before she

began her song did nothing to dispel her anxiety. After replacing the offending Zildjians and using my tail to muffle them, I hit the snares. Carmine took a few deep breaths and began.

"Come, they told me, par-rum-pum-pum-puhhh."

PM tapped the table with her baton. "Not quite, Carmine," and nodded to begin again.

"Come, they told me, par-rum-pum-pum-puhhh." Carmine stopped and dissolved into tears.

"Sweetheart, it's O.K. We often have just too many jitters. I'll sing it with you," PM encouraged. She waltzed on stage to joint the weeping warbler.

They wurbled, "Come, they told me, par-rum-pum-pum-puhhh."

PM halted. "Something's not right," she mused, scratching her ear. "Carmine, let's try that again, but let's make it B $\flat$  instead."

This time they par-rum-pum-pum-pummed as they were supposed to, and PM slipped away to let Carmine solo.

PM whispered to me, "Call Peppermint. Something's happening here I can't explain."

And so I did. He'll take over the Saga, since I have research to do on my clanging cymbals.

\* \* \*

### Peppermint Paunch Ponders a Puzzle

PM's concern called for a detective, so they called me — Peppermint Paunch, the best gosh-darned detective in Christmas Monster. In fact, the *only* detective in Christmas Monsterland, for they need no other.

I knocked on the entrance to the cavernous habitat of PM and Al.

"Ouch! What's the problem, Cuz?" I asked, rubbing my scraped paw. "I really gotta remember to use the bell."





"Where did it go?" PM asked.

"What?" replied I, seeking a clue.

"A natural," she told me.

"A natural what?"

PM filled me in on the hapless rehearsal. "When Carmine got to A natural, there wasn't any. Then I tried. Gone. Of course, we substituted Bbb, but it was very strange. After an hour, it was back."

"What was back?"

"A natural."

"A natural what?"

She went over it again, until I understood.

Such a short-term loss might seem unimportant to one less attuned than I to the inklings and inkings of a mystery. I deduced that this might be the beginning of the Christmas Crisis, without which there can be no Saga, for as has been said, "a crisisless Christmas makes for happy holidays but lousy literature." I began an investigation.

Next day, after exhausting my inquiries in Christmas Monsterland, I journeyed to the Ice Pyramid domicile of Relicta, the Extra Terrestrial Intergalactic Traveler who crashed into the Pole many years ago and is now part of our Noëllic family, and her ex-SEGWACian husband, Dove, previously known as Vulture Carrion. The couple were in residence with their almost 6-year-old daughter, Crystal Camellia. They were packing to return to

their abode in the Big A, where each year they join the Salvation Army for the big Thanksgiving Dinner and then ring chimes at Rockefeller Center when the tree gets lighted.

Relicta was reclining, an icepack perched on her skull.

"Headache, Relicta?" I inquired.

"I don't know what's the matter with my antennae," she grumbled, rubbing them.

"Yesterday they started throbbing, and ever since I've not been able to get them back in sync. Crystal's are even more dislocated."

"What time yesterday?" I queried.

"About 2, I suppose."

Ah ha! "That's the same time PM lost her note," I said.

"Note?" Relicta and Dove responded in unison.

"Yes. A natural."





"A natural what?"

I summarized the situation.

"Peppermint, do you think it's a coincidence?"

Dove asked.

"I suspect — a plot! A diabolical scheme percolating to concoct a Christmas Crisis! Come, Dove, I need your expertise. We've tracks to follow!"

Crystal cried out "Yf Yf Yf, it's happening again!"

Dove picked her up. "Remember your meditation, little one."

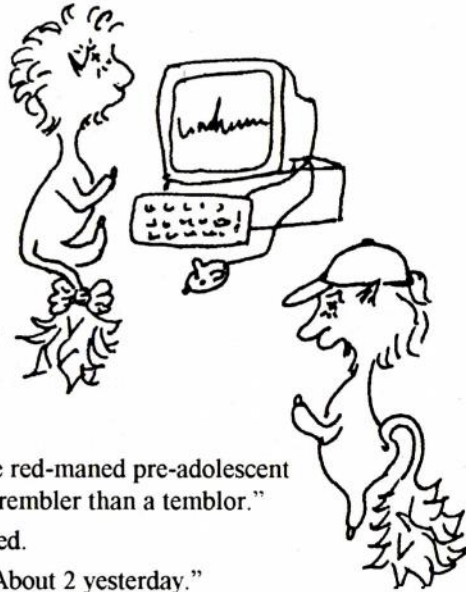
"OMmmmmmm," she managed.

"Daddy has to go for a while. Relicta, dear ET in agony, I've got my cellular. Call if you need anything."

Dove and I returned to PM and AI's cave.

"I've determined there is something weird happening," I told PM and her hubby.

Alabaster was standing over Geranium Amethyst's shoulder at the computer. "I agree, Peppermint. Look at this! Yesterday, when my cymbals clattered, I thought I'd just flipped my sticks too hard. But look here. You know where TEXXONCO, that SEGWAC oil company, has begun illegal drilling in the Alaskan Tongass? Geranium's been monitoring the seismic activity there, and there's a spike here — an earthquake?"



"I don't think so, Pop," said the red-maned pre-adolescent Monster. "Look here — it's more a trembler than a temblor."

"When did it spike," I questioned.

Lapis answered from his PC. "About 2 yesterday."

I added the clues: Missing Ah: 2 P.M. yesterday. Alien antennae fluctuation: 2 P.M. yesterday. Seismic disturbance: 2:00 yesterday.

"It's something foul," I declared. "PM — we must head OUT THERE to continue the inquisition. My attempts at penning your parable must cease, I fear, for the game's afoot! Sherlock didn't write his own story! Dove, you're my Watson!"

"And mine," growled PM. "It's my Saga!"



\* \* \*

### Dove Details Some Dastardly Deeds

I am an ex-SEGWACian. I find my relationship as son of Viper Carrion, head of the U.S. headquarters of SEGWAC, and as the twin of a still-SEGWACian, Parasite, to be stressful. So I meditate, and seek tranquility. After an hour with my quartz and tourmaline at the Ice Pyramid, Relicta and I packed up the spaceship with echinacea and our Enya collection.



With Camellia strapped securely in the back seat, Relicta piloted us to PM's cave to pick up Peppermint. We'd decided that Relicta and I would make an early trial run at our annual reunion with my family. If we could sniff out the Carrion role in the strange juxtapositions of glitches in the universal oneness, that might compensate partly for our expected rejection by my paranoid parents.

After donning our Salvation Army uniforms, Relicta straightened my cap and reassured me that I was still a *good* SEGWACian, and that I was not to let my family get to me. Right. It's nearing Christmas. My pater, mater, and sibling hate Christmas, indeed are committed to destroying it. The prospects for relative bliss are slim.



OUT HERE, Relicta's and Crystal's antennal irritation intensified exponentially.

"Lucifer Trinode has something to do with this," Relicta declared. "That alien's third antenna is altering the airwaves and activating our anti-animosity antibodies."

Lucifer, the refugee ruffian from Relicta's exploded planet who lured Relicta to rescue him from an uncharted moon some years back, can emit the dreaded isolator ray from his third antennae. Since landing here, he and my father have been in cahoots. Just two years ago he was instrumental in sucking away the Christmas Spirit, and is thus a formidable foe and another noxious nemesis.

My little threesome approached my parents' den of iniquity and inequity with dread. Racer Rattler, the household's general factotum, responded to the gong. "Go away, wimps-s-s," he menaced on spotting us. "Lucretia [my Mom] and Viper ain't here."

"What about Parasite?" I prodded.

"He's pass-s-sed out in his-s-s coffin," Racer spit and slammed the iron gate in our faces.

"Guess we'll have to wait 'til closer to Christmas for the annual reconciliation effort," I sighed with relief.

"But this only postpones ferreting out the Crisis," Relicta reminded me.

I had an idea. "Do you still have the silly-putty and spirit gum that PM left here when she did makeup for the SA's Halloween party?" I asked when we reached our Army quarters.

"Sure. Whatever for?"

"Put a mole on my nose," I instructed. "If Para's passed out, I'll play his part and discover what I can."

My costume on and the mole attached, Relicta looked me over. "Wear the sunglasses," she advised. "They'll hide your kind eyes."

I set out for the Hell to Pay Bar and Grill, a notorious SEGWACian dive. Parasite's compatriots (and my former comrades in crime) might be able to fill me in on this year's plot to ruin Christmas.

The grease-covered tables and beer-soaked sawdust-covered floor brought back old memories of my former existence as a SEGWACian. Sidling up to the bar, I ordered a draft and waited — not long — until an old acquaintance slid onto the stool next to me.

"More of the hair of the dog?" he said.

"Machiavelli Asp," I grunted. "How long's it been?"

"Since last night, you booze-brained lush."

"Was it only last night?" I parried.

"So what time's the next test set for, Para?" he asked. "Trinode's ship came in an hour ago."

"You'll get word," I treaded.

"Think we'll make be ready for that poisonous peri-pathetic's pop concert on the Night Before the Night Before C—"

"Hiss-s-s-s-s," I hushed, for my SEGWACian upbringing hadn't dissipated so much that I forgot that the "C" word is as abominable to denizens as the "L" one.

Anaconda Adder slithered into the room.

"Para, why the shades?"

"Too much light, Adder," I groaned. "Bit of a head."



"Some night, huh?" he smirked.

"Yeah." I put my head in my hands. When I started to look up again, I noticed the hairy mole was on my finger. I pushed it back on my nose and lowered my hood. "Gotta get back to headquarters," I mumbled and sauntered as best I could out of the bar.

PM, I can't continue writing the Saga. It's too easy to be bad and lapse into SEGWACian habits. I must purge my urge to backslide. I need time with my crystals. I'm turning this over to Relicta. Ommm-m-m.

\* \* \*

### Relicta, With No Relish for the Role

Like I have time to annotate the annual annals? There's a cement mixer churning my brains and my antennae are shooting piercing needles into my skull. But what the heck, here goes nothing.

After Dove's mission, we convened an emergency meeting with PM, Alabaster, Rudolph, and Peppermint at Penelope Pigeon's roost on West 76th Street.

Peppermint put together the info we'd gathered.

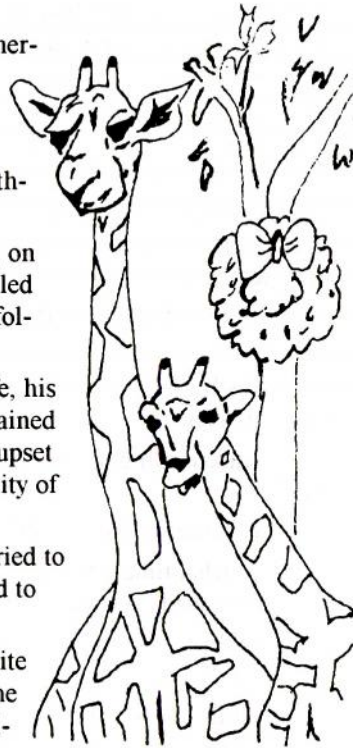
Rudy chimed in that Dancer and Prancer, on their yearly visit to relatives in Siberia, had called Santa to report a rumble beneath their hooves followed by a temporary loss of D#.

Alabaster mentioned that Geoffrey Giraffe, his old buddy from the San Diego Zoo, had complained of a strange earthquake, which wouldn't have upset him if it hadn't been accompanied by an inability of the llamas to bleat a Gb.

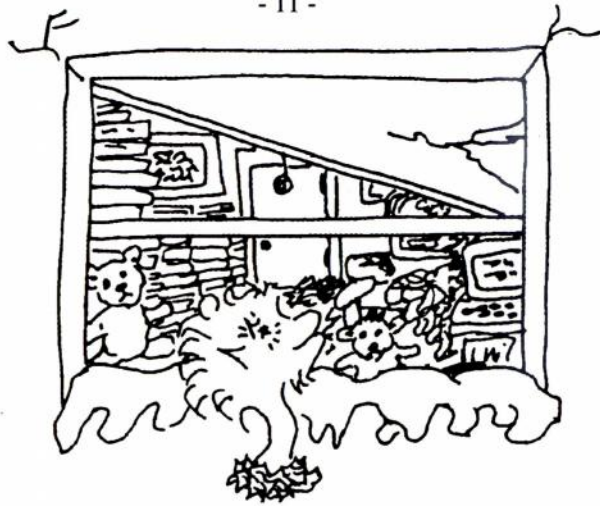
Penelope piped in that Calico Kitty had tried to meow a Gb too at about the same time, but had to howl an F# instead.

Clyde E-mailed that the North Pole satellite had recorded a pulsing from the new SEGWACian satellites that had been lurched into orbit recently.

Peppermint added it up.  
Holes deep in the earth emitting shaky signals.  
Satellite transmissions.  
Pitches striking out.







Test runs.

The Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert.

Lucifer Trinode.

SEGWAC.

Equals:

A Crisis, obviously. But what?

PM was lost in thought, staring from Penelope's nest into the window of the hovel next door. That hovel had been such a favorite stopping-off point in the Crew's Big Apple sojourns.

"We rescued Clyde there," she reminisced. "We sipped hot cider there after the Thanksgiving Day parades. You still can't see the floor," she murmured wistfully. "A tornado plus a hurricane plus El Niño couldn't create a mess like she can. Look! If you crane your neck, you can see a new painting. It's another Benjamin Levy — a man hugging a tree in a field with a dog. Terrific. And she's got another marvelous Judith Bush still life up now — how I wish I could see those greens better. The Noah Jemisin print's been hung by the Corneille with care. Ahhhh, a twin towering stack of new art books climbing up the wall that I've not gloated over, and she never showed me her Ukrainian icon. Do you think she'd mind if I BOINGed in, for old time's sake?"

Alabaster nibbled her ear. "No, dear, you can't. You fired her, remember?"

"And I was right to do so. You've all read the draft of the Saga she tried to write last year, which she never finished and we rejected. She had me blasting out four-letter words in a SEGWACian brothel, for goodness sake. That paltry, puny, patently prurient penning of the PM parable portended problems with her portraying my positive persona in perpetuity, am I right?"

"Yes, dear," Alabaster sympathized.

"Just one peak to see if she's O.K.?"

"Not without an invite," I warned. I'd watched this breakup of my two friends with sadness. Chronicler could be a pain in the — well, in the antennae — but she *had* contributed greatly to SEGWAC's defeat in Book 19.

Here was the score. We knew we had a Crisis looming. We sort of knew when. We sort of knew what — sort of. But how? And why? And how to stop it? And most of all, who to record it?

I took a chance. "PM, I'm not a writer, it's *not* what I do, *not* who I am. I'm an ET IT, not a lit. Call her," I suggested to my fuchsia-furred friend.

"Yes, call her," Alabaster echoed.

"Good idea," nodded Dove, opening one eye.

"Good idea, good idea," parroted Peppermint and Penelope.

The cell phone rang. "This is Santa, Ms. Ambassador. Mrs. Santa — and I — say, 'CALL HER!'"

"I'll think about it," PM mused.

\* \* \*

### Will the Mystery Scribbler Sign In, Please?

I was sitting on the wet bench, outside the Bahnhof, waiting for the bus back to Flensburg. I had three hours to twiddle my thumbs, and since everything in Niebüll shuts down on Saturdays at noon, and this was Saturday, I didn't have much company nor any way of getting the chill out of my bones. Through the mist a figure approached. I glanced sideways and observed a trenchcoat-covered traveler, a shawl shrouding the head and shoulders.

"Guten Tag, Fraulein."

Those dulcet tones. A dream? A nightmare? I knew who it was. How'd she find me? And why?

"Nolde?" I asked rhetorically.

"Who else? When your answering machine said you'd gone trans-Atlantic, I BOINGed over. Dr. Arké told me you'd notched additional van Goghs and Gauguins on your belt in Copenhagen, then deserted her at the veterinarian convention in Århus and taken off for more art's sake. There were two places to look: the CoBrA museum in northern Denmark, and the Emil Nolde museum in Seebüll. I knew you'd elevated your need for Nolde from desire into quest. My only initial confusion: Where the heck is Seebüll?"

"I was in an Expressionist frame of mind," I said, and fingered my 10-deutsche mark fare. I just wanted the interloper to leave me alone with my thoughts. Those "Large Poppies (Red, Red, Red)" and the black and white cows. "Das Leben Christi" in the basement of the Nolde Museum, and the eerie "Hermit in Tree." It had surely been worth my 15-hour trek.

But what was *she* doing here (even though she too loves art and would have found the trip worthwhile)?

"That shawl and trenchcoat make you look ridiculous," I finally acknowledged her again.

"Don't want to be recognized. You might have been followed."

"Why? Who'd follow me? Except you. Why are you here?"

"SEGWAC."

"What's SEGWAC to me or me to SEGWAC?" I was, admittedly, still bitter. After 19 splendid stories — well, maybe 18 and 1 that was so-so — to be canned, given the shaft, booted out.

"We need your help."

"You made it clear after Christmas that you don't."

"I was wrong. We were wrong."

"Didn't hear you."

"I was wrong. Sorry."

PM's tail twitched a bit beneath the coat. I knew she was that close to BOINGing out of here, leaving me alone in the Niebüll fog.

"Thanks for sending the box of Godivas to Mom for her 85th," I said, for some reason wanting to extend her visit. Hadn't I vowed I'd never set eyes on her again?





"Did she like them?"

"Yep, though the caramels were missing and a couple of pieces had incisor indentations. It was the thought that counted."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm hmmm."

"Uh-hmm."

A family loaded with shopping bags moseyed to the bus stop. PM slouched under her hood. "Gotta go. You're being followed. Be careful. Paris."

"But?"

Gone. I was encircled by a crowd of Germans. As we the boarded the bus to Flensburg, I used the hour journey to study my fellow passengers. SEGWACians? Which ones? If any? How did PM know about Paris? And why did I care? I snoozed on my return train trip north.

\* \* \*

My feet hurt. I'd been to the Musée Jacquemart-André, stomped around the Champs-Élysées, gone shopping in 11 book-stores, and had Beaujolais nouveau at La Pre-grille on Rue Saint Severin to accompany my escargot.

I contemplated last night's ballet at the Palais Garnier — Massine's "La Symphonie fantastique." Was it the Chagall ceiling and that chandelier that had spurred my imagination? Maybe all that gold and gilded everything. But I could have sworn that butterfly with the wicked pirouette had magenta fur and a tail under that costume. Nah, couldn't be. I am really becoming blind in my middle-middle age. I was just looking for Monsters everywhere, awaiting the next contact.



I had a half hour before I had to leave for the theater. Back in my hotel room I took out my ticket. The ticket said 19H00. That's 7:00 P.M. in American, right? But wasn't it supposed to say 19H30? I was late. Very late. I staggered into my dressy duds and high heels and scurried to Boulevard Saint Germain to hail a taxi.

"Bonsoir, monsieur," I huffed to the taxi driver, "Opéra Bastille, s'il vous plait."

"You're late, you know."

"Yes. You speak English? Waitta minute. How'd you know I'm late?"



That green cap. That squeaky voice. But what would the elf be doing in Paris?

"You're *always* late. Never could get your Naughty-&-Nice lists in on time."

It was Clyde! "Don't have to do them anymore, since I'm no longer a Christmas Character. Step on it. I'm going to miss the first act."

Traffic was terrible. People were taking their seats for Renée Fleming's opening night in "Der Rosenkavalier," and where was I? Stuck in traffic, carted by a chatty chartreuse chauffeur.

"Chron, I can't climb over these cars. Now listen. PM sent me with a message: 'Listen carefully,' she said. 'Tonight may be the last glorious music you hear for a while.'"

"Nonsense."

"Listen. It's *crisis* time, Christmas Crisis! You remember, SEGWACian machinations!"

"So what? Put the pedal to the metal. It's 7!"

"PM says you gotta be careful. She said, and I quote, 'SEGWAC is messin' with the music.' Voilà! Opéra Bastille. Better hurry."

I paid the fare, and even tipped the diminutive driver. Only when I exited the taxi did I see he'd let me out at the center circle of the Place de le Bastille instead of in front of the theater entrance. Traffic whizzed by. No pedestrian crossings anywhere. Curses. Darn. Drat. And a few other words. No way across! The lights turned. There was the Opéra Bastille beckoning just across the way, and I was trapped! Yipes! I circled and circled the July Column, and finally, sucking in my stomach and hiking up my velvet skirt, I



scampered ahead of the oncoming kamikaze cars. "Renée, I'm on my way!" I cried as I hit the curb.

I snuck into the back of the first balcony and watched Act I kneeling on my fuzzy coat. Glancing into the mirrored set, a reflected singer in lavender costume winked at me. But it couldn't be — could it? She really is good enough for the chorus, of course.

Next to me, emitting a foul odor, and a hiss — SEGWAC? One's mind plays very strange tricks in Paris. I shook it off. The opera was divine.

\* \* \*

Thanksgiving came and went with ne'er a howdy-do from a single member of the Christmas Crew. Obviously whatever Christmas Crisis that had loomed so ominously had been thwarted, and there was no need for my help. So the scrawny tree came down from the closet to be garlanded with lights and souvenir ornaments, only to be buried under the debris and detritus that dominate my life, and the work and concerts continued.

One performance of the Tchaikovsky Fourth did make me wonder — a French horn failed to find a note, but it was the New York Philharmonic, not the Chicago Symphony (with their vaunted brass), so it provoked only a brief misgiving and a grimace. At the Dvořák Eighth, Mimi and Camille behind me drowned out a few soaring passages with their hacking, but again, it was the Philharmonic, where Concertos for Consumptives and Program Rustlers are the norm, so again, no bad tidings, only a suppression of my instinct to eliminate my fellow audience members.

An almost perfect Mendelssohn "Elijah" convinced me that I had imagined PM's warnings. By the time Dec. 15 rolled around I was scrambling to complete the seemingly endless work so I could pay my actually endless bills. Christmas this year would just be a blip in my routine. No time to ponder the holiday, just continue my own consumption. I did my usual gift shopping — one gewgaw for Mom, one for me, one trinket for Kathy, one for me, one trifle for Becky, one for me, one tchotchke for Jane, one for me . . .

A week before Christmas, while waiting at the bus stop on 57th Street following a revitalizing rendition of "Revelations" by the Alvin Ailey dance troupe, I retreated into the shelter to avoid a shrouded figure who was not observing the acceptable distance between two New Yorkers. When the malodorous masher once again nudged against me, I did what any Gothamite in the same circumstances would do — I jabbed him with my elbow in the solar plexus, spit out, "Beat it, creep," and awaited the knife jab that often accompanies such urban encounters.

"Ouch! Chronicler, is-s-s-s that any way to greet an old friend?"

I did what no respectable New Yorker should do — I made eye contact.

"Virus Carrion," I frowned. "What hole did you crawl out of?"

"The 56th S-S-Street s-s-s-sewer drain. What a coinc-c-cidenc-c-ce





meeting you here," the SEGWACian technology expert (Viper's brother) replied.

"I doubt it," I snarled, fingering my gold Metrocard and glancing at my watch — my two-hour free transfer was about to expire, and not a 104 bus in sight.

"Luc-c-cifer Trinode, Viper, Paras-s-s-ite, and I were just dis-s-scus-sing you," Virus continued.

I glared down Eighth Avenue again and said, "Why? I've nothing to do with the Saga anymore, and am no threat to you. Leave me alone."

I put my wrist to my nose to sniff some of the Bal à Versailles, a Paris purchase, to counter the putrid stench. A whiff of SEGWACian can almost knock you flat.

Virus continued, not taking my hints. "We notic-c-ced that mauvette Monster menace and her ins-s-sipid compadres didn't gulp their usual post-Turkey-Day-Parade pre-prandial hot chocolate in your hovel."

"I cannot tell you what a relief it is knowing you're keeping an eye on me," I said sarcastically, while a shiver generated at my cranium Alexandered its way through my sacroiliac down to my frost-bitten toes.

Virus grabbed my elbow. "We've a propos-s-sition for you."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

The computer-unfriendly SEGWACian dragged me down an open manhole. The sound of nearby screeching subway trains were deafening as we traversed the slimy tunnels. When we finally emerged in the sub-sub-sub-basement of Trumpcard Tower, I growled at Virus, "We could have stayed above ground, you know. I would have liked to see the Rockefeller Christmas tree."

Virus just hissed a threatening, bone-chilling hiss as we descended even further into the bowels of SEGWAC's New York headquarters.

I was ushered into an empty room — dark and dreary, only a lighted black candle flickering on a worm-eaten table, which was probably best since the scratching and scampering I heard around me set my teeth on edge.

"Wait," Virus commanded.

"Only if you give me a can of RAID," I chattered. I lit a cigarette, the lighter casting shadows on the walls seeping dank water over Rorschach-patterned mold. Somehow I didn't think SEGWAC had a no-smoking policy, perhaps the only civilized trait I can attribute to them.

The door creaked and the stench intensified. I didn't need illumination to know Viper Carrion, the nefarious CEO of SEGWAC USA, was behind me.

"What's it been, Vipe," I puffed. "Two years? Three?"

"Two," he sneered.

"Look, you malevolent Mephistophelean," I said, making an effort to endear myself, "can we exit this dungeon? Whatever's playing tic-tac-toe on my shoe isn't likely to make me too receptive to — well, to whatever you've got in mind."

Viper yanked me from my seat and with barely enough time to squish out my cigarette with my toe and squash the — whatever it was — with my heel, I was pulled down the hall into a brightly lighted, modern room jam-packed with massive computers and terminals. Viper donned some shades and sat me down across from a PC with data zipping across the screen.

"I detes-s-st the floures-s-scents, but it's-s-s the pric-c-ce we pay for progres-s-s-s," Viper complained.

"Get this over with," I urged. "Use fewer 'S' words and we'll get through this faster."

Viper sighed a sinister sigh. "We want you to work for us-s-s-s."

"Yeah, right. Just what I've always dreamed of. Not."

"Hear me out. S-s-since you no longer get the two calories-s-s a word that that pars-s-simonious roly-poly guy in the red s-s-suit us-s-sed to pay you," he began, "and s-s-since we know you're heavily in debt, for we own your bank . . ."

I always suspected as much.

" . . You need moolah, and we have it."

"And whatta I gotta do to get it?" I asked, intrigued.

"Tell all."

"Huh?"

"There's-s-s-s a market out here for exposés-s-s of the onc-c-ce-adulated. The tabloids-s-s are thriving. Books-s-s baring the s-s-sins and foibles-s-s of the famous-s-s s-s-serve our interests-s-s and make us money. You have the ins-s-side s-s-scoop on the North Pole and thos-s-se detes-s-table good-deeders-s-s. Write it! Tell the world their darkes-s-st s-s-secrets-s-s. We know you can do it. We read las-s-st year's-s-s-s aborted draft."

Why had I submitted that ill-fated Saga to Santa over the Internet without encryption? Why hadn't I deleted it from my hard drive? Had I no privacy

any more?

I pondered my situation. There was one humongous American Express bill wending its bankrupting way toward my hovel. I was facing a couple of weeks away from my copyediting duties. And hadn't PM so rudely dispensed with my services? Besides, what secrets could I reveal that hadn't already made it into the previous Sagas?

"Okey-dokey," I agreed. "After we talk advance."

"You write first, then we pay."

Phooey. Ah well, what other prospects did I have?

"Where do I create this blockbuster?" I queried.

The floor rumbled and I caught a flying mouse (the computer kind, fortunately) before it crashed to the floor. When I looked up again, I was trembling-face-to-quivering-antenna with Lucifer Trinode, who was followed deferentially by Anaconda Adder and Parasite.

"We have a network terminal here," Parasite proffered. "You type, we edit."

"But I gotta have the Sagas to refresh my memory about what I left out."

Viper went ballistic. "Thos-s-se will never cros-s-s our thres-s-shold!"

I was adamant. "No Sagas, no dirt."

Lucifer grinned sardonically. "No problem. We'll escort you to your hovel, you take notes on a disk, and we'll just have Virus scan them for the 'L' word, the 'C' word and the 'SC' words, and delete them if you try to slip some in."

An exposé on CM without the 'C' word? It would be a challenge.

"Just make sure I have a carton of smokes, a case of caffeine-free DP, and my daily dose of glazed donut and Velveeta Shells & Cheese, and you gotta deal," I negotiated.

The denizens gagged and agreed.

"And my CD's — I need my music."

They exchanged glances, and smirked.

\* \* \*



### **Dirt Disher in the Catacombs**

On my return to my hovel (this time by subway), escorted by Anaconda, I changed the message on my answering machine, then took my notes. (Anaconda averted his eyes in horror when I opened my file of Sagas,





nauseated by the dazzling Austrian crystal doodads and the sparkling glitter glopped on the paint-splashed covers of the PM Sagas.)

I grabbed some CD's from my collection, slipped the disks into my 10-pack carrying case, took extra batteries for the player, stuffed a backpack with other essentials, and locked up.

The next few days were spent deconstructing PM and the North Pole Crew. Lucretia Carrion, Dove and Parasite's Mommie Dearest, took my efforts and edited them into unrecognizability. It wasn't that I made anything up, really, but somehow distilling my former friends' bad traits

from previous stories did indeed put them in a bad

light. PM was now purple with rage (Book 13), Alabaster was green with envy (Book 13), Clyde cavorted and leered lecherously (Book 7), ~~Peppermint~~ the striated detective pouted (Book 13) [Lucretia, you've deleted the alliteration!], and ~~Santa~~ was an ice-cold do-nothing (Book 19).

Lucretia prodded me to spread the mud with a trowel, goading out the gritty details of Monsterland sneaking. Previously restrained from such pandering to voyeurism, I now had a literary license to promote prurience and labored to comply. Since I'd never been privvy to the details of ~~Christmas~~ [Oops!] Monsterland procreation, I made them up in the most lascivious language I could devise. Without the "L" word and the "C" word, I reduced my former holiday heroes into sniveling, quarreling, insignificant, pedestrian — well, mundane Monsters. Without the magic — but a writer has to make a living, and once again, after two long years, I was a writer — what I do — who I am.

Around me the frantic activity of the SEGWACians distracted me, and occasional rumbles jiggled my CD player into chaotic noise.

By Dec. 23 I'd finished my first draft, and requested a break from my labors.

"I have a ballet ticket for tonight," I mentioned to Virus, who occupied the work station adjacent to mine.

"You won't like it," he snickered.

"Why not?"

"You'll see. We have another concert for you to attend, one you've gone to many times before."

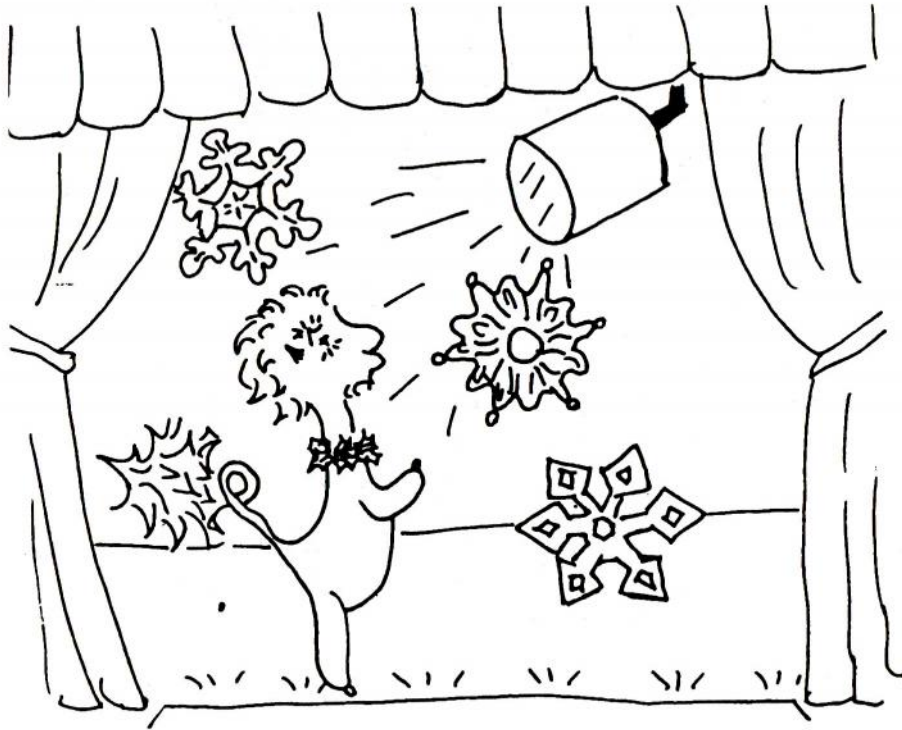
"After what I've done, dare I show up?" For I knew he referred to the Night-Before-the-Night-Before-~~Christmas~~ That-Day-Off-From-Work-for-Most-People Concert that PM and the Crew performed yearly for ~~charity~~ the poor and needy. [This editing is getting on my nerves, Lucretia.]

"With what we've done, dare you mis-s-s it?" Viper's unscrupulous ~~laugh~~ snigger rattled my soul bones.

\* \* \*

Madison Square Garden was packed to the rafters with ~~merrymakers~~ attendees. Rudolph's nose was blinking ~~brightly~~ briskly as the opening chords for "The First No~~e~~ [Lucretia, I must protest, that's the name of the song] thundered through the hall. ~~Cheers~~ Applause greeted PM as she trotted on stage, her mane ~~glistening glossy~~ [aw, c'mon!] well-brushed in the klieg light.

The ~~lilting~~ lilac Monster had only belted out the first few notes when the seats started shaking. "The first No—," then silence. The G was missing. "The ang—" and the B disappeared. Murmurs wafted warily through the crowd.



PM stopped the band. "Sorry," she sorried. "Don't know what happened. Let's try 'Good King Wenceslaus,' " but by the time she got to the "-ces-" in "Wenceslaus" that note too had disappeared.

One by one the notes disappeared. A $\flat$  gone. C $\sharp$  gone. G $\sharp$  nowhere to be found. When PM began "Jingle Bells," the only note she could belt was F $\flat$  (E $\sharp$  having dissolved as well).



"Jing-le bells, jing-le bells" was as usual, on F $\flat$ , as was the next "Jing-." But the following "-gle," could only be trilled as F $\flat$ .

Relicta tried a scale on her Roland. Every note was F $\flat$ . Peppermint fingered a slide on his guitar. The audience burst out with boos, all on F $\flat$ .

All the other notes were missing.

Peppermint Paunch lunged toward Viper, two seats from me in the front row. "You're behind this, you tin-eared terrorist!" he cried (on F $\flat$ ). The Paunchettes grabbed his tail before he could pounce on the villain.

"Try having a happy holiday now!" chortled Parasite, as the North Pole Crew gathered around PM. Lucretia called out. "Deck those halls with F $\flat$  fa-la-las! Ha ha!"

PM grabbed my hair. "Traitor!" she shrieked (F $\flat$ , unnaturally). Pulled away from the SEGWACians, I heard Viper call out: "A monotonous Xmas to all, and to all a bad night!" before the BOING!

\* \* \*

### The Chronicler Continues

We were at the North Pole, in Santa's cozy living room.

"Why'd you teletransport *her* here," Clyde complained to PM, pointing at me but unable to ask it as a question because even in the Claus-man's domain the only note available was F $\flat$ , making inflection impossible. "She's



a terribubble SEGWACian now.”

“It’s not my fault,” I said, without the emphasis I would have preferred had other pitches been available.

The one-note grumbling at my inclusion in the escape from New York was shushed by Santa, who had the TV turned on to the late-night news. The one-pitch patter of the newscaster described the situation we’d just left OUT THERE.



“In-the-mid-dle-of-the-‘Mes-si-ah’-the-notes-dis-ap-peared. All-a-cross-the-world-har-mon-y-has-giv-en-way-to-drones-and-moans-on-one-note-only. Car-ne-gie-Hall-has-shut-down-in-def-in-ite-ly. Christ-mas-car-o-lers-have-gone-si-lent, un-ab-le-to-ut-ter-an-y-thing-but-F $\flat$ .”

[Dear Readers, I interrupt this broadcast briefly to request an experiment, since typing all these dashes to give you the idea is giving me RSI and will take too much ink. Read the above out loud on F $\flat$ . Then try singing “Jingle Bells,” using only F $\flat$ . Thank you. Now that you have the idea, I’ll dispense with the typographical illustrations. We now return you to your program.]

The announcer continued: “All music radio, except for rap stations, have shut down, since their programming is no longer listenable. News continues, as well as Rush Limbaugh and Congress, since they’ve been pounding only one note since the election. Senator Tessie Tiller has applauded the developments, given her deep aversion to diversity in general and the arts in particular, and said that such unity of voice could only hasten the desired end of the N.E.A.”

More news: “SEGWAC has issued a manifesto. We will now put it on screen, since we can’t stand to hear ourselves talk like this any more. We are in danger of irritating ourselves out of any Christmas spirit.”

Across the screen scrolled:

“We have taken 11 of the 12 notes from the scale. We hold them hostage, with the following demands:

“1. Cancel the carols and uplifting songs (to be determined by us). Nuts to Nutcracker. Let those Flowers forté to a waltz in F $\flat$ . ‘O Tannenbaum’? All the ornaments have been removed — try it on F $\flat$ .

“For all purposes other than music, we will rent out notes one by one, for an exorbitant, excessive fee.

“We’ve set the tone. We call the tune. SEGWAC.”

The Christmas Crew listened and watched as people tried every which way to break out into pitches other than F $\flat$ . The President attempted to utter soothing words, but his “My fellow Americans, look on the bright side, at

least there's no dissonance" without the Southern cadence irked even him and he just turned to Buddy, his new retriever, who barked a one-note "woof, woof."

I switched on my laptop (I *am* a writer, after all, and I never leave my hovel — or a SEGWACian pied-à-terre — without it.

"Let's communicate this way," I typed, "lest we bore ourselves into oblivion."

Outside an icicle melted, drip-drip-drip-drip, all on the hideous single note.

Clyde nodded, brought out more laptops and terminals, and we plugged into the North Pole chat room.

"What she doing here?" the elf tapped furiously, and scowled at me.

"Seh wsa unedcvre," PM clicked with her one pawnail. [To help you out, Dear Readers, and save you from PM's wretched typing, I will correct the typos. Translation: "She was under cover."]

Me: "Yes, but I wish I'd been under the down comforter I've asked Mom for for Christmas."

Peppermint: "We figured it out when we heard the message on Chronicler's answering machine:

*My bags are packed,  
I'm out the door.  
I'll call in soon,  
But here's the score.  
If you me need,  
Hark to the tone,  
Say who you are,  
Hang up the phone.*

"This was followed by a beep in C."

Mr. Claus: "You figured it out from *that*?"

Peppermint: "Elementary, my dear Santa. 'Score' meant music. 'You-me' could only be Chronicler and her alter ego, PM. 'Tone' was, Listen to the pitch of the beep, which was C, which meant 'Come' and 'Christmas' and 'Crisis.' "

Me: "I knew I could count on you, Paunch."

PM: "So I teletransported to her hovel. There I discovered the empty CD cases, which Chronicler had flung, seemingly haphazardly, onto her bed. There, in



order, was Shostakovich, Chopin, Grieg, Wagner, Arrau, and Chopin yet again — S C G W A C. Yes, the first Chopin confused us, until we saw it was the Piano Concerto in E $\flat$ , which meant E, not C, so we had S E G W A C — SEGWAC! There followed 'In the Hall of the Mountain King,' suggesting that Chron had gone to their headquarters, and the Beatles album — which at first confused us, until I saw 'Paperback Writer' and assumed they'd hired Chronicler to dribble some drek for them."

Al: "So what did you find out? How can we get the notes back before people are too comatose to celebrate Christmas?"

Me: "I was able to sneak looks at the computers and determine that SEGWAC set up vibrators in various subcavernous areas to oscillate the planet. I saw a schematic, which I didn't understand, but it had something to do with Lucifer Trinode's third antenna, which he'd recalibrated to beam from his spaceship into the SEGWACian satellites, which bounced his reverberations back to Earth. They got around the Invisible Protective Shield around the North Pole and Christmas Monsterland by drilling close to the border for the vibrator and beaming the satellite transmission through the hole in the ozone above the Pole."



Peppermint: "Just as I suspected!"

Me: "They had a lot of trial runs, briefly taking a note here and there, until all the resonators were resounding reliably."

PM: "So how do we stop the sonic jamming so we can once again sing joyously unto the Lord?"

Me: "Beats me."

Relicta: "I'll just have to fly up and knock out the SEGWACian satellites."

Me: "No can do."

Al: "No can do?"

Me: "Nope."

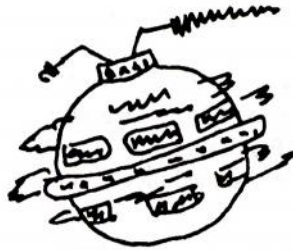
Dove: "Nope?"

PM: "Why nope?"

Me: "First, the last two Sagas have ended with space flights that saved Santa, Christmas, and the Sagas. I *refuse* to redux that resolution. Second — this took a little longer to dig out — I discovered if Lucifer sees your spinning orb, he's prepared to bombard your antennae with reruns of 'Beverly Hillbillies' at







such incredible volume and velocity that you and Crystal may never recover. He won't be fooled again."

Relicta: "That explains the pain Crystal Camellia and I suffered. So what do we do?"

Me: "Not a clue."

Clyde: "Lot of good you were, and here it is Christmas Eve and there's no songs, and that F♭ ping-ting-a-ting-a-tinging tympany of my fellow elves in the workshop and the unitonal blaring of Donner and Blitzen outside are about to drive me bananas!"

Me: "It's not my fault."

Al: "But it is — at least some of it. If you'd written a story last year — a printable story, that is — SEGWAC would have been occupied taking care of last year's Crisis — which there wasn't — instead of having two years to come up with this devious predicament!"

He glared at me, after dramatically pecking the exclamation point.

Me: "Hey, PM fired me. Thought she could come up with a better story. She's the heroine. She started this Saga. Let her solve it."

Everyone turned to PM, who let out an F♭ moan and punched the keyboard.

PM: "Woe! Woe! Woe! Why am I the heroine? Because I'm Santa's lead sleigh puller. Why am I Santa's lead sleigh puller? Because I sing and dance divinely. Now I can't sing, and I don't feel like dancing. Without music, how can we soar with Santa's sleigh? How much Merry Christmasing can we do without melody?"

Santa: "Come, all ye faithful! This negativity isn't helping. We must search for a solution. Now what? My flight is scheduled for midnight, you know, and we haven't much time."

Everyone looked at me.

Me: "Hey, I don't work here anymore, remember? I've spent all my money on concerts that I would have spent on paints and doodads, on glitter glue and gold gouache, on printing fees and postage stamps. I'm busted. You should have thought of this in time for me to budget better. Good luck. I've got a concert to go to in a few hours."





Relicta: "Those tickets aren't going to do you any good without the 11 other notes."

Me: "Yeah. I momentarily forgot what the Crisis is. Silly me."

Relicta: "Think of the musicians with no music, begging on the street."

Peppermint: "And if you don't find a solution to this, think of what SEGWAC can come up with next!"

Geranium: "Yes, Aunt Chron, they'll take away rhythms, so that not only are we monotonous, we're also metronomic!"

Lapis: "Yeah, and then they'll take away red — and then green — then blue and yellow! We'll be monotonous, metronomic, and *monochrome*!"

Oh dear. The New York Times wouldn't like that, after investing so much in adding rainbows to the front page.

Me: "Am I rehired?"

PM: "Yes. Ple-e-ease!"

Santa: "Two calories a word, as before."

(Had you wondered why this Saga stretches on and on and on?)

Me: "O.K. Leave me alone with my laptop. Do your Christmas Eve thing and pack the sleigh. I've got work to do."

\* \* \*

It was getting late. Reports from OUT THERE, viewed on CNN, were bleak. One note, over and over, was too much to bear, and many responded with silence, while others shouted shrill Fb's at one another in frustrated rage. TV was useless, for the most part, except that those using sign language could still sing with their hands, which gave graceful, and mercifully quiet, melody to the season. Of course, most telephones had been rendered useless, relying

as they did on touch tones. Corporations were negotiating with SEGWAC for communications services, or switching back to pulse phones (and you thought me so retro for retaining my rotary dial).

Especially hard hit were the birds. The "chirp, chirps" and "honk, honks" were fine, but the "too-wits" and "bob whites" had our feathered friends flying around in circles, looking for their mates. The hills were alive, but only with monotonous babbling brooks, and the echoes of F♭ had the mountain goats butting their horns against the canyon walls.

\* \* \*

### The Chronicler Surrenders

Dear Reader, I'll let you in on a secret. This Yuletide yarn rambles on because I really *haven't* a clue how this will end. You see, here it is, once again, late Christmas Eve. It falls on me to come up with to compose a brilliant resolution, followed by a quick wrap-up, in which St. Nick takes the reins and Christmas is saved, and all the little children wake up from their sugarplum dreams to find Beanie Babies, Pet Doctor Barbies, Sing & Snore Ernies, candy canes, marzipan, and stockings stuffed with oranges, walnuts, bon bons, and, for the rare, very truly naughty kid, that dreaded lump of coal.

Nice, huh? If I hadn't written myself into an exit-less corner, that's what would happen. It *isn't* my fault! I didn't start this narration. It wasn't my idea. I came in as a replacement Chronicler. How do they expect me, in less than, let's see, what time *is* it? — oh oh, in less than an *hour*, to do this? Maybe I could start another story? In 60 minutes? And get it formatted, illustrated, offset printed, painted, and mailed off? I don't think so.



But to leave you with a world without music? That thought's paralyzed my pen (or keyboard, as it were, and is). Half of my income is spent on concert tickets, half on recordings (the art and art books I buy on credit, not to mention rent, clothes, et cetera, et cetera). I can't write without music! (Or a cigarette, but the NP is NS.)

Just the other day I was concocting a fantasy performance for which I'd travel across the ocean to hear — Boris Berezovsky, that incredibly talented young Russian pianist, playing the Dvořák piano concerto, with Francesco Mander conducting the St. Petersburg orchestra (as he did when I heard him in Russia a while back). Now that would be music! But should SEGWAC succeed in squelching such a scenario with its insidious insistence on a single,



solitary sound, my dream duo would forever be an auditory hallucination.

A Christmas without music? An inconceivable thought. Yet now it's conceived, and what do I do? A solution must be found, for it is said, "And he said, It is not the voice of them that shout for mastery, neither is it the voice of them that cry for being overcome: but the noise of them that sing do I hear."\*

SEGWAC's plot is truly despicable. But all I can do is try to remember a melody — Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet," which I heard the other night, is running through my brain — "Dum de dum de dum de dum de, dum de dum de dum de." I suppose you can't hear it, but it is really an exquisite instance of orchestral splendor.

"That's it!"

Who's that?

PM: "It's I — me — whatever. You forgot you're still in the North Pole chat room, and I've been looking over your drooping shoulders. Stop whining and rejoice! You've found it."

Huh?

PM: "How to defeat SEGWAC!"

I did?

PM: "Leave typing for a while, and attend. It's time to record the crescendo."

\* \* \*

PM's radiant face beamed out from the North Pole satellite to TV sets far and wide. True, she spoke in F $\flat$ , but 'twas not as irritating from her velvet tongue as it had been from others'. Once more the North Pole Ambassador was in her element, spreading the hope that must always accompany any Christmas chronicle.

"Santa's sack is packed and ready," she said, "but we need your help to launch the sleigh. SEGWAC has not taken our music. We still have it in our minds and souls. Sir Thomas Beecham, the conductor, said, 'Magical music never leaves the memory.'"

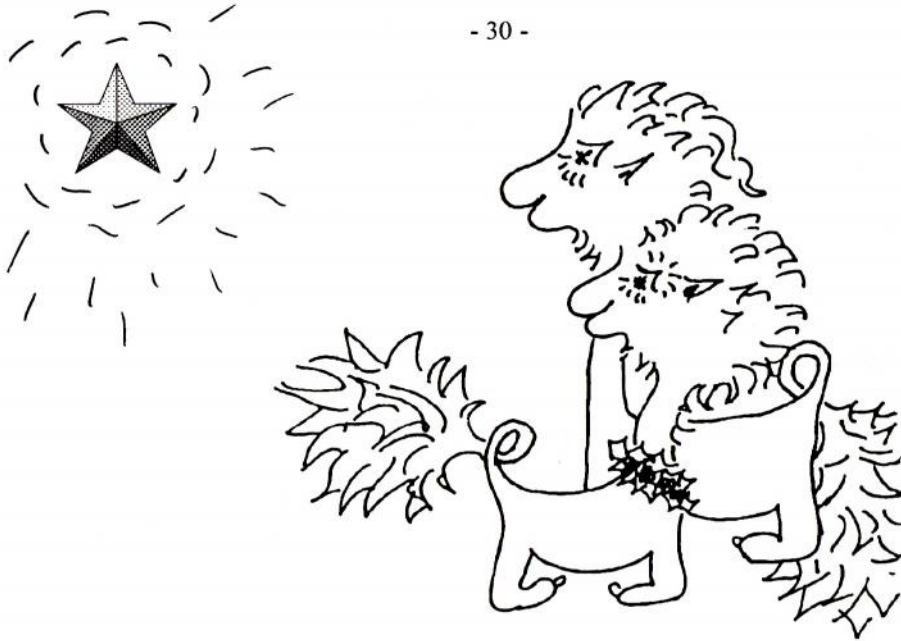
(Where does she get these?\*\*)

"You have music in your memory. As the clock nears midnight, find a song and sing it in your head and with your heart. 'O Holy Night' would be splendid. Or 'Santa Got Run Over By a Reindeer' — well, maybe not that.



\*Exodus 32:18.

\*\*Columbia Dictionary of Quotations, if you must know.



The 'Hallelujah Chorus' is a swell choice, but so is 'Winter Wonderland.' Have you an instrument? Sing praises with the timbrel and harp.\*"

She gathered speed, as the clock ticked away. " 'Make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise,'\*\*"she urged. " 'Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; break forth into singing, O mountains'\*\*\*! If you can't remember a melody, there's a ditty that always irritates SEGWAC, and you can sing it on F $\flat$ : 'All We Need Is Love'!\*\*\*\* All together now!"

And with that, Alabaster hitched her into her lead position at the head of Santa's carriage. As the cacophony of F $\flat$ 's bombarded the Pole, PM plié'd, pas de chat'd, glissaded, and with a grandioso grand jeté jettisoned the sleigh, Christmas Monsters, reindeer, Santa, and all the presents skyward. With a tweak of her tail and as much lyricism as she could lift into 'Joy to the World,' the magic-propelled sleigh broke the sound barrier with a sonic boom. A choir of angels appeared, and the heavens were alive with the sound of multitonal music, and the Earth sang once more.

---

\*Psalms 149:3.

\*\*Psalms 98:4.

\*\*\*Isaiah 49:13.

\*\*\*\*(Yes, Dear Reader, that monotonal song appeared in Book 19, but it's late, so I'm recycling.)

\* \* \*

Ah, another Christmas saved! And definitely with a loud noise. And this time PM was the heroine, as well she should be, of these, her Sagas.

Yes, it did require some celestial help, but that's what Christmas is really about, isn't it?

Now, for the dénouement, a coda if you will:

When PM took off, Relicta and Crystal Camellia simultaneously sang "Away in a Manger" while wiggling their antennae and aiming their transmission, plus lots of Love, through the ozone hole. This alien amplification short-circuited Lucifer Trinode's third nodule, and we hope it shall take a very long time to repair. (Please note: No spaceship this time — I just couldn't take another dizzying, nauseating, whirling, twirling ride in that spinning orb yet another year.)

For those of you who hoped to read the "tell-all" pulp I pecked out for SEGWAC, faggeddabouddit. I've destroyed the teeming text (Virus Carrion isn't the only computer nerd who can erase a disk). You'll just have to review the past 19 Sagas if you have a need to know the seamier side of St. Nick and Christmas Monsterland.

By the way, SEGWAC didn't pay me. Can anyone loan me a paint brush and air fare to St. Louis?

*A Merry and Melodious Christmas to You All,  
And a Harmonious New Year!*

