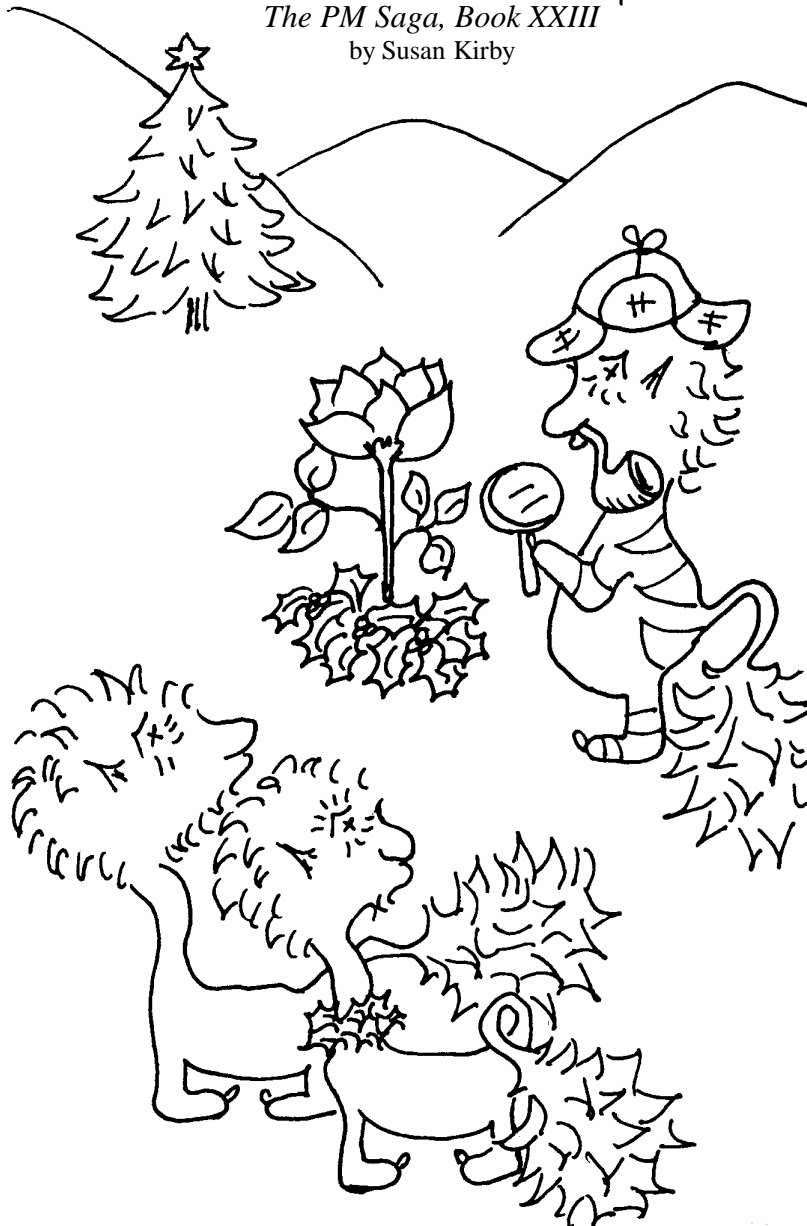




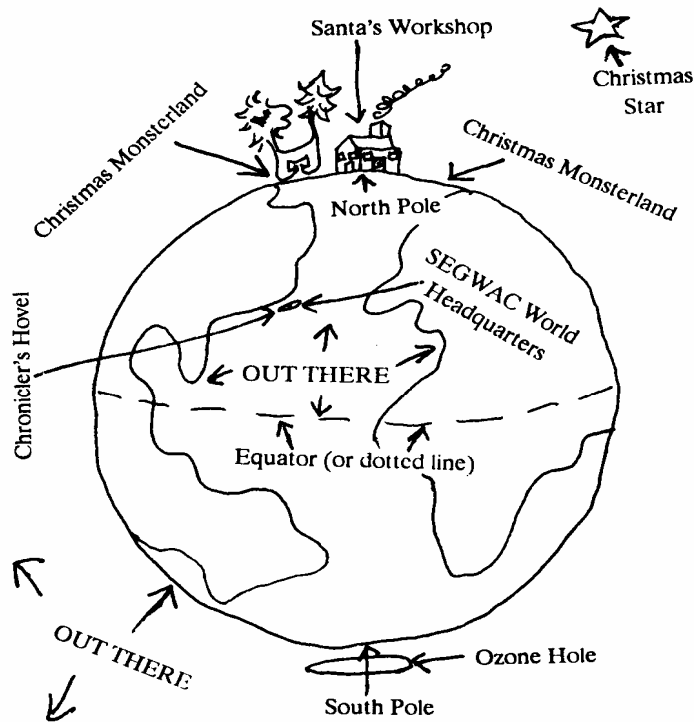
# ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS

*Or, Hippy Holidays!*

*The PM Saga, Book XXIII*  
by Susan Kirby



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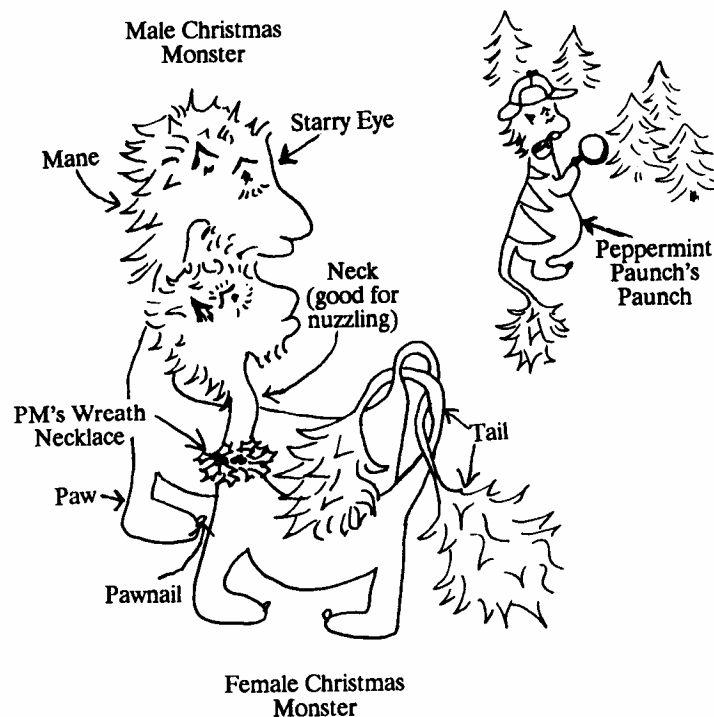
There are remote areas of Christmas Monsterland seldom visited by any but the most adventurous Christmas Monster. As you, Dear Reader, may remember, Christmas Monsterland is that vast Arctic area somewhat north of Broadway and east of Hollywood that surrounds the North Pole. Christmas Monsterland is covered by an invisible protective shield that prevents the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas (you know it as SEGWAC) from attacking Santa Claus and his Christmas Crew.

Christmas Monsters are Santa's main sleigh pullers (if you still think reindeer have that job, you haven't been paying attention), providing the aerodynamic power for the annual circumnavigation to distribute goodies to all who have embraced Nice and disdained Naughty. As the past Chronicles of the adventures of Purple Monster (PM, as she's known from Johannesburg to Jerusalem, St. Louis to St. Petersburg, St. Charles to Shanghai, Battery Park to Beijing, Milwaukee to Midtown, and every major city in Europe and along the East Coast) have revealed, Christmas Monsters are also loving and

lovable purveyors of Christmas Cheer who labor year round to bring joy to all and defeat SEGWAC's evil machinations.

Each year hundreds of Christmas Monsters prepare for Santa's ride by perfecting their singing, dancing, acting, and comedy routines (it takes great levity to levitate a sled). Hundreds more practice passionately so they can compete for whatever sleigh-puller openings there may be. (Santa Claus's main sleigh and countless refueling vehicles are required for the 24-hour journey.)

It was at one such competition more than two decades ago that PM won her slot as Santa's lead sleigh puller. This she did despite a fur hue that at the time was considered "un-Christmas." For in Monsterland in the 70's, and for centuries prior, only red, green, red and green, or green and red Christmas Monsters could qualify for the coveted right to don Santa's halters. Because of the difficult time PM had breaking the color barrier—being as she was, and is, of the magenta persuasion—she has spent her career fighting prejudice.



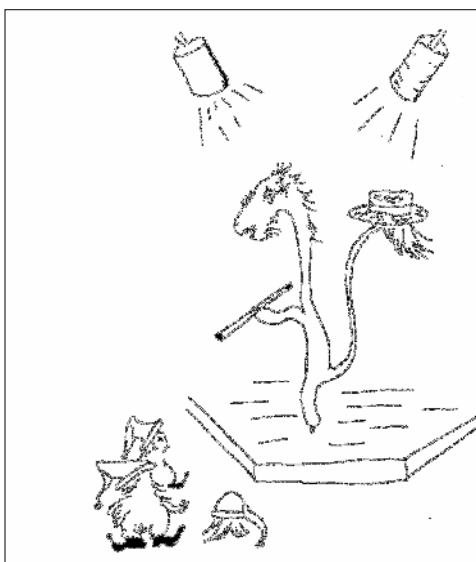
### THE ANATOMY OF A CHRISTMAS MONSTER



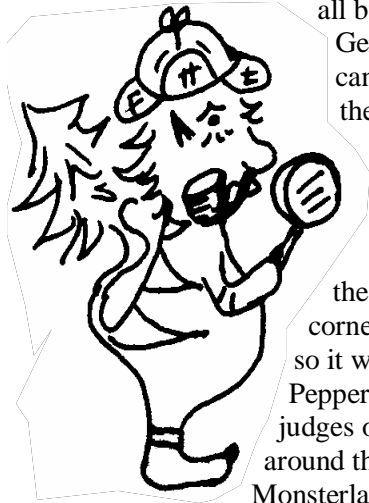
*PM's first ride. From the Saga Archives, Book I.*

As Santa's No. 1 sleigh puller, PM has assumed the task of rehearsing the auditioning Monsters so they will be prepared to go through the many elimination rounds before Santa chooses the best for the job. Thus, each year PM and Rosette (PM's niece, and No. 2 puller) devote many months to training the sleigh-puller hopefuls. They endeavor to make the tryouts fun—no wannabe ever feels untalented or unwelcome. Some must be culled out, of course, but they are always encouraged to try again, and given detailed critiques to improve their performance. PM travels the length and breadth of the tundra giving private coaching and pep talks.

Has it been mentioned yet that PM can teletransport? That she can tweak her tail and go anywhere inside Christmas Monsterland, the North Pole, or OUT THERE? Well, she can. She is the only Christmas Monster who is able to BOING!



*PM's audition. From the Saga Archives, Book I. (My, how she's changed!)*



all by herself (her twin almost-15-year-olds, Geranium Amethyst and Lapis Snowflake, can also teletransport, but—so far—only if they link tails). PM can take anyone with her, if the companion (or companions, as the case may be) touch her mane (or fur or tail).

Because Christmas Monsterland is so vast, the only realistic way to reach all the far corners in a short time is to BOING! there. And so it was that this past summer PM, with Peppermint Paunch and Clyde Elf (recruited as judges of this year's competition), teletransported around the outer perimeter of Christmas Monsterland to conduct master classes and encourage Monsters in the hinterlands to make the journey to Central Monsterland for the auditions.

(Those of you less familiar with the PM Sagas, or who suffer from brain-cell overload and have had to purge extraneous memories to make room for more trivia, may not recall who Peppermint Paunch and Clyde Elf are. Clyde Elf is an elf [duh!], Santa's general factotum and keeper of the N&N list. Peppermint is PM's cousin, a graduate of the Red Green Detective School, and leader of Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives, a rock 'n' roll band that performs the annual Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert.)

Many distant Monsterland communities have hooked up satellite dishes and Internet connections, and thus can keep up with the goings on. But there are some localities so isolated that the Monsters residents there find it almost impossible to keep up with North Pole news or to make the journey for the finals.

It was into one such area (the closest identifiable land masses within metaphorical spitting distance are Siberia and Lapland) that the trio BOING!ed one day in late August. PM had received an urgent e-mail from one "E.O.," an eager young sleigh-puller aspiree, begging PM to visit and evaluate whether she had any hope of winning a slot. As Santa's North Pole Ambassador, PM is responsible for



spreading hope throughout the world. So the least she could do was spread some rays of hope in her own land.

It was in this remote, frigid wilderness that Peppermint Paunch fell in love.

\*

“Chronicler!”

“Yes, PM?”

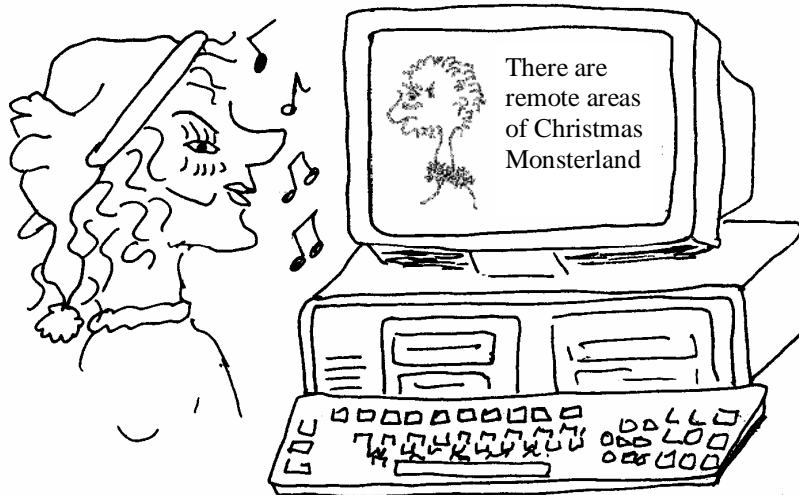
(That’s Purple Monster, of course. The countenance of the heliotrope heroine has popped up once again on my computer screen. I’m Chronicler, by the way. I’m a writer. It’s what I do, who I am. And what I write about is PM, and Christmas Monsterland, and Christmas. And since I live OUT HERE, and not in Christmas Monsterland, I rely on the North Pole Network to keep in touch. The NPN makes it convenient for PM and the North Pole Crew to keep me up to date on holiday happenings, but it also makes it way too easy for PM to interrupt my obsessive devotionals with FreeCell and Bloobs.)

“It’s less than two weeks until Christmas!” PM sang in triple-high-C out from my speakers.

“Yup. What of it?”

“I can’t believe you’ve only just started batting out my biography!” PM cried.

It’s a good thing I don’t allow a camera on my end. She wouldn’t



want to see my expression (or my wardrobe, or my gray roots, for that matter).

“I said I’d begin the composition after the election,” I replied.  
“Who’d have thunk it would take five weeks to steal the presidency? As you can see, though, I have begun the tale of your travails.”

“All this exposition is taking too much time! Cut to the chase, to the CRISIS! Time is running——”

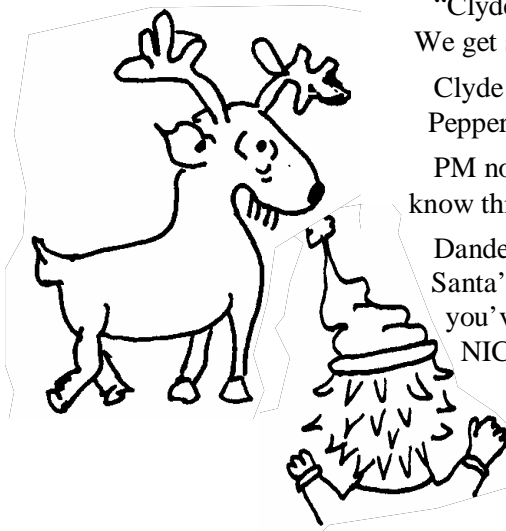
I have just clicked her off. Sorry for the digression. Now back to our story.

\*

PM, Peppermint, and Clyde BOING!ed onto the highest rim of a floating glacier, materializing next to the shiny new satellite dish PM had used to guide her. They pattered toward the iceberg’s center and looked down. Below was a shimmering crystalline village, with a Main Street lined with intricately carved igloos and festive sleighs. The town was surrounded by a forest, from which Christmas Monsters were hauling Christmas trees. Several reindeer were grazing in a lee, and Clyde recognized Dander, one of Donner’s cousins who occasionally visited the North Pole. The trio made their way carefully down a slippery path to the outskirts of the village.

“Dander! Is this where you live?”

Dander looked up mid-munch and shook his tufted tail with excitement.



“Clyde! What are you doing here?  
We get so few visitors.”

Clyde introduced PM and  
Peppermint.

PM nodded a warm hello. “I didn’t  
know this place existed.”

Dander rolled his eyes. “Aren’t you  
Santa’s lead sleigh puller? And  
you’ve never heard of SAINT  
NICK?”

“Of course,” Clyde  
cried. “That’s Santa! I work  
for the guy!”

“The letters also stand for the products of this village—Sleighs from the Arctic Isle Near the Tundra, Not In any way Close to Kalamazoo.” (That’s a stretch, I know, but December 25 is breathing down my neck, and that’s the best acronym I could concoct.)

Peppermint pondered ponderously. “Of course! Those are the letters on the side of the Clausman’s chariot. Is this where the sleighs come from?”

“Yes, AINT NICK is a community of artesans,” Dander nodded. “They’re world famous!”

PM apologized. “I’m so embarrassed that I didn’t know! I should have made a point of finding out where our craftsMonsters dwell.”

“You didn’t come to see how we make the sleighs?”

Clyde piped in. “Sorry. We’ve been asked to meet with someone named ‘E.O.’”

Dander scratched an antler against a branch in thought. “E.O.? Oh!” He looked around, then aimed his antler eastward. “That’s her, over there, skating on Permafrost Pond.”

The three spotted a shimmering, iridescent green figure in the distance gliding deliberately across the ice, turning smoothly, and then leaping into a triple salchow followed by a Hamill camel. Her long mane whipped and glistened as she spun. On her forehead was a patch of ruby fur in the shape of a diamond, which sparkled through the



falling snow. Peppermint was transfixed.

PM nudged her cousin, who was inching hypnotically toward the pond.

The Monster spotted them. Her purringly dulcet “Halloooo” echoed through the valley.

Peppermint sighed serenely. “What music, what tone! She doth teach the birds to sing!”

“Oh, please,” yucked Clyde. “What’s got into you, Paunch?”

The striated Sherlock ignored the nauseated gnome and lumbered in the vision’s direction. He failed to look down and tripped over a rock, splatting on his proboscis.

Glisading over, the malachite Monster braked and knelt over the prostrate gumshoe. “You poor thing, let me help you up,” she sang, and with a nip of Peppermint’s mane, she pulled him to his paws.

PM and Dander caught up to the pair, trailed by Clyde. Peppermint brushed off his scraped ego.

“Are you E.O.?” PM inquired.

“Yes. I’m Emeralda Olivine,” she introduced herself, proffering a paw to PM. “You must be Purple Monster! It’s an honor! I didn’t believe you’d really come!”

“This is Clyde Elf,” PM introduced. “And this is my cousin, Peppermint Paunch.”

Peppermint doffed his cap, knocking his pipe to the ground.

“Pleased to meet you, Peppermint,” Emeralda twinkled, bending her neck gracefully to retrieve the pipe. “You shouldn’t smoke, you know.”

Peppermint’s red stripes blushed scarlet. “P-p-p-pleased to meet you! I don’t smoke it. It’s just for show. I mean, it’s p-p-part of my



image. I mean, your image—you are so beautiful!”

“Thank you.”

Emeralda removed her skates and led the visitors to the center of town. She pointed out the workshops along the way where various parts of Santa’s sleighs are carved and joined together. “First, the raw wooden frames are brushed with red or black pigment, coated with lacquer, allowed to dry, and then polished, painted with holiday scenes, and then lacquered and polished many times more,” she detailed.

Emeralda said she was a scene artist, trained by descendants of artists from Palekh, Kholui, Mstera, and Fedoskino in the Russian icon and lacquer-box style. “We paint every panel on Santa’s sleighs by paw, using brushes with as few as two or three sable hairs,” she explained. “We can portray Father Christmas, Old Man Winter, the Snow Maiden, reindeer, moose, forests, or glades, or illustrate North Pole legends. One panel can take a year, or two, or even three to complete, with at least eight layers of lacquer applied and polished. It’s the paw rubbing that gives Santa’s sleighs their depth,” Emeralda concluded, offering a magnifying glass so that the gang could examine one of the panels.

Emeralda told them that Dander’s description of the North Pole and Santa Claus, of his thrill when he glided through the sky pulling a sleigh, had made Emeralda want to fly. When AINT NICK finally got an Internet connection, she surfed to PM’s Web page and took up PM’s offer to visit anyone who wanted to learn.

(More expository digression. Those of you who are quite familiar with the Sagas can skip this if you wish. Who can fly in Christmas Monsterland? Of course, Christmas Monsters (and some reindeer), but only if they are harnessed in one of Santa’s magic halters—made on the opposite side of Christmas Monsterland, by the way—and are tethered together with other Christmas Monsters or reindeer by enchanted reins attached to one of Santa’s sleighs.

As mentioned previously, Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole are protected by an invisible protective shield that guards against SEGWAC invasions from OUT THERE. There are only three ways that Christmas Monsters can visit OUT THERE (this is for their own protection, for OUT THERE they are mortal and can be injured or even killed—perish the thought!) or that those OUT THERE can visit UP HERE: They can teletransport with PM or the twins. They can fly with

Relicta (the Extra Terrestrial Intergalactic Traveler) or Dove (her ex-SEGWACian husband) in a golden spinning spacecraft (not something I recommend unless you have ingested Dramamine). And, of course, they can either ride in or pull one of Santa's mystical sleighs. End of digression.)

Peppermint gathered his courage to ask Emeraldalda to join him for an ice cream cone in the local cafe. PM and Clyde completed the tour of the town with Dander, who showed them the newest conveyance, almost completed, with a painting of PM at the lead of a fourteen-Monster pack. He noted that Prancer and Dancer would be arriving to pick it up in a week's time for delivery to the North Pole.



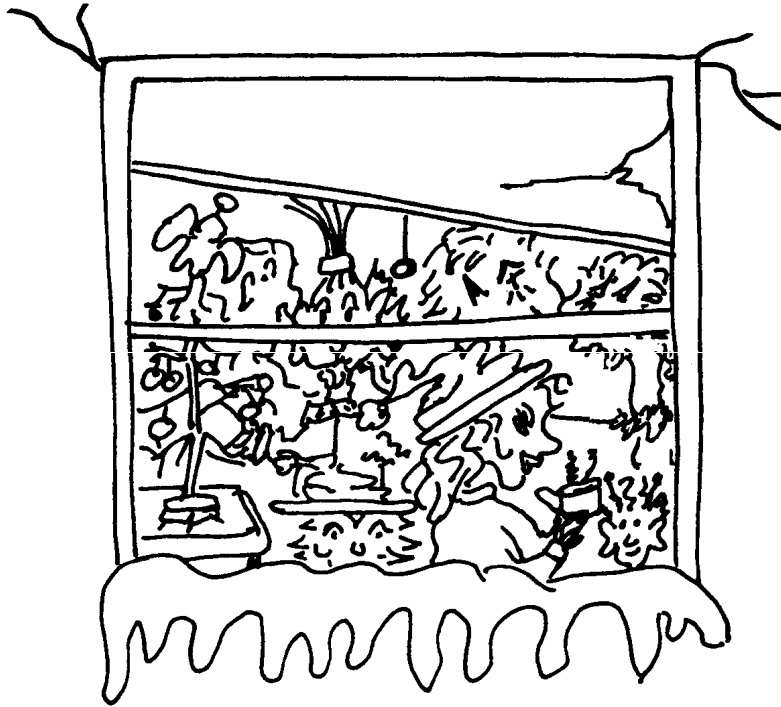
PM planned to stay for several days to help Emeraldalda. She corrected her arabesques and demonstrated how to complete a paw movement with that extra stretch. Emeraldalda's innate talent was amazing for a Monster deprived of formal training. "You're a natural," PM congratulated her.

On the last day of August, Clyde's cell phone rang. It was Dr. Arké, the North Pole veterinarian, with bad news. PM and Clyde prepared to rush to the North Pole. PM offered to let Emeraldalda stay in her cave with Alabaster Eggshell (her silver-maned hubby) and the twins while the AINT NICKer trained for the auditions. Peppermint decided to stay behind to accompany Emeraldalda to the Monsterland town where he and PM lived. They'd catch a ride on the new sleigh when it was picked up. When PM and Clyde departed with a twitch of her tail, Peppermint and Emeraldalda were seen strolling paw in paw toward a nearby hot spring to soothe their sore muscles.

\*

PM and Alabaster BOINGed! into my 6-foot-by-6-foot 76th Street hovel, swiftly followed by Geranium Amethyst and Lapis Snowflake, with Clyde tucked between them. Two seconds later there was a pounding on my door, and PM admitted Relicta, Dove, and Crystal Camellia (their daughter), who were in town this first week of September to work with the Salvation Army.

PM screeched at me. "Can't I leave you alone for a few weeks?"

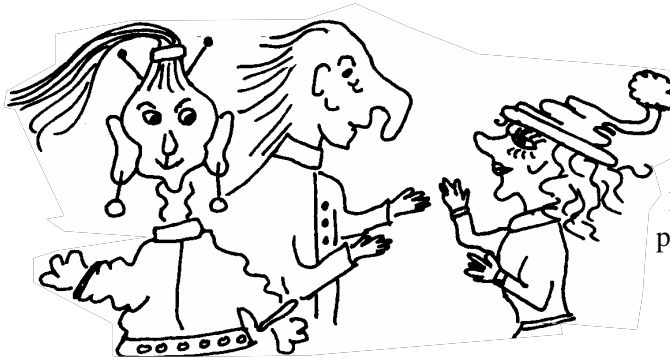


When I last talked to you, you were with your mother in Bermuda. You promised you'd start painting the cover *early* this year. What the heck have you done to yourself?"

"I broke my hip," I mumbled weakly.

"How'd you do that, Chron?" Al asked with the sympathy I'd expected from PM.

Relicta squeezed past Al and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I heard it had something to do with a cruise, a Turkish waiter, a tramp, and delusions of desirability."



"Be careful, Relicta," warned PM with a grin. "You know Chronicler isn't literally licensed to proffer prurience."

I grimaced. "That

Penelope Pigeon. She just can't keep her beak shut." (Penelope roosts in a coop just outside my hovel window.) "It's nothing so dramatic. The cruise was with my Mom. Great time! I went snorkeling over the coral reefs."

"What about the waiter?" Dove asked.

"Don't ask. But the tramp—that's my mini trampoline. I wanted to get back in shape. I fractured my hip exercising."

Relicta's antennae quivered with laughter. "How do you break your hip on a mini tramp?"

"You put a little Eurythmics on the stereo. You get on the trampoline. You jump up and down. It hurts. You jump some more, 'cause you think it's a muscle pull. Then you walk around in excruciating pain for three weeks before you finally give in and get an X-ray. The doc says you gotta have surgery. You get three gigantic bolts put in to hold you together," I instructed.

"When Dr. Arké came back from being with you in the hospital," Geranium reported, fluffing my pillow, "she said you have halitosis."

Lapis smirked. "No, she didn't. Dr. Arké said she has osmosis!"

"No, it's comatosis," Clyde piped in. "Or was that psychoneurosis?"

"No! It's osteoporosis." I translated to the crowd: "Porous bones."

(I didn't expect the Christmas Monsters in the group to understand, since I'm still not sure if they have any bones. Dr. Arké won't tell me. I do know they have teeth. PM bit me once when she was ticked off at me.)



Dove was inhaling deeply (he often does breath-counting meditation). "Om-m-m-m. Oh. My! My goodness, you quit smoking!" he mused with wonder.

Alabaster stared at me. "I thought you were just being considerate, not



setting a bad example for the twins. Or making a healthier environment for your mice. Have you really quit?"

I growled, then winced. "The doc said if I didn't quit, I wouldn't heal. If I don't heal, I don't walk. Smoke or walk? Walk or smoke? Hmmm. I figured I needed to walk to go to my concerts. So ..."

PM was chuckling. "You swore you'd never quit unless you were locked in a padded room." (I really dislike it when she gets sarcastically sanctimonious.)

I pointed to my crutches. "I told everyone not to buy me cigarettes. I can't leave my apartment, since I can't walk. My sofa is padded. That counts. I quit. Drop it."

Dove was serenely supportive. "I'll give you meditation exercises," he offered. "You will get through this."

"But how will Manhattan survive her withdrawal?" Clyde squeaked. "You know how she gets when she isn't puffing on coffin nails. I'm surprised there aren't bodies strewn up and down the Upper West Side!"

"Nicorette," I muttered. "It's the only thing between me and mass homicide." I was getting grumpy.

"We'd better cut this visit short," PM warned the gang. "Do you need anything before we pop out?"

"See if I have enough milk," I suggested.

PM checked my fridge, which prior to the accident had been the receptacle for Diet Pepsi, unexposed film, congealed Velveeta Shells & Cheese, packets of soy sauce, and a half-roll of Toll House cookie dough (Dr. Arké devoured the other half when I was in the hospital). PM was astonished to see a bulging larder, thanks to the "252" angels, friends, and Times comrades who shopped for me. (There are many angels who dwell in this world, I have discovered, and many of them live in the building that houses my hovel. One of them was named Angel, and he lived up to his name. Now he is heaven's angel, and



deeply missed.)

PM took stock. “Plenty of milk,” she reported. “But these Godiva chocolates—well, they’re wasted calories, and you need the icebox space. I’ll take them for you.”

(Sorry, Mom, those were yours. But you know PM. I hope you didn’t expect me to wrestle them from her in my condition. Plus, PM had moved my walker so I couldn’t get to her.)



“Remember, Chron,” PM said, munching a nougat, “you’ve got all this recovery time. Now you have no excuse for being late with my story!”

\*

PM checked on my progress throughout autumn, by phone, Internet, and occasional BOING!s. She fed me Christmas Monsterland rumors for the Saga (I would have preferred a cinnamon glazed donut) and filled me in on Peppermint Paunch’s enrapturement.

Emeralda had made the journey to PM’s cave and settled into the spare cavern. After her years of relative isolation in AINT NICK, she expressed wonder at every nuance of Christmas Monsterland.

And she worked hard. Her singing improved exponentially with coaching from PM’s star pupils, Carmine Poppy (daughter of Pimento Poppy, PM’s former child psychologist), Rosette, and PM herself. Once Emeralda learned proper breath control and to relax her jaw (courtesy of training from Primrose Madder in the Alexander technique), her lullingly lyrical soprano took flight.

Peppermint almost never left Emeralda’s side. He took her everywhere, including Relicta’s ice pyramid home on the North Pole border, where Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives rehearsed. Soon she was singing along with the Paunchettes. This did not sit very well with Carmine Poppy—who as the newest Paunchette felt a tad insecure—or Geranium Amethyst, who’d been promised the next open mike in the band, only to be displaced by the spearmint newcomer.

Geranium Amethyst and Carmine complained to PM.

“Peppermint doesn’t even notice we’re around,” griped Geranium.

“And he gives all your songs to her when you’re on a trip and can’t rehearse,” Carmine chimed in.

Lapis, a bit taken himself with Emeralda, sniffed, “You’re just jealous.”

PM, who’d caught a really bad case of jealousy in “A Very Crazy Christmas” (*The PM Saga, Book XIII*), recognized the signs of ensuing envy and warned the two Monsterettes to be careful. But she did talk to Rosette and asked to have more frequent updates.



Rosette reported that Peppermint had tramped ten miles to the Magic Garden of the Christmas Star to pick the perfect rose for Emeralda. “And I saw them nuzzling necks!” she gasped. “Paunch gave her chocolates!”

“If he starts gulping champagne, that’s when we’ll really worry!” said Alabaster, alluding to the Super Snerkle, which is permitted only after matrimony.

\*

In mid-October, PM dropped by my hovel to hound me about the perpetual pause in parable progress. I was getting ready to attend my first post-orthopedic-surgery concert at Carnegie Hall and was struggling with my crutches when she arrived.

“Peppermint is so smitten,” PM said. “His maintenance of North Pole security has gone down the tubes. Alabaster has had to take over for him, and he’s been so caught up with surveillance duties that we’ve not had time to snerkle, much less Super Snerkle.”

I sympathized. “I couldn’t get Paunch to work for me, either. I tried to hire him to find out what happened to my calcium. Thought he’d be cheaper than the endocrinologist. But he said he had no time for a missing mineral case.”

“Chronicler, you’ve got to do something to get Paunch’s attention back.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault,” I countered. “Peppermint’s old enough to know how to conduct a mature Monster romance.”

“Ah, but it *is* your fault!” PM exclaimed. “You’re the Chronicler. You could have given Peppermint a true love any time these last

twenty-plus years, as you gave me my dear Alabaster Eggshell. But your writer's prerogative kept him a secondary character. Now he finds infatuation and is ill prepared for it. You must accept responsibility."

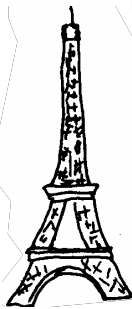
"I just report on your activities," I pouted.

"But you're the one who imagines them!" PM insisted. "Judge for yourself. I've brought Emeraldalda and Paunch for her first visit OUT HERE. They'll be at Carnegie Hall tonight. Emeraldalda told me it became her dream after reading some of your concert reviews. I'll be joining Relicta to help at the soup kitchen while they're there."

I caught a cab to Carnegie, and sure enough, when I looked up at the first-tier box seats, there sat Peppermint and his new lady love. He had on a sporty new scarf, and she had on a silk shawl covered with doodads, sequins, and bugle beads that matched her ruby diamond and glittered in the house lights. They met me in the lobby during intermission, but since it took me so long to hobble up the aisle on crutches and back to my seat, I spent only a few seconds with introductions and "Howdy do's." I had to admit that with the exception of PM, Emeraldalda was the most gorgeous Monster I had ever seen. All eyes were on her. I offered to take the pair out for a milkshake at the Brooklyn Diner after the performance (Kennedy fantastically fiddling Beethoven, garbed in one blue and one pink sock), but Peppermint declined, saying PM was BOING!ing them back once the applause stopped.



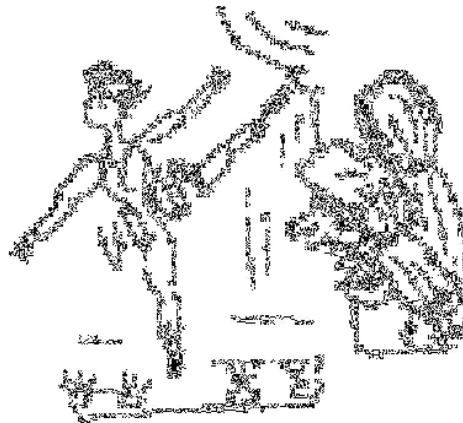
By the first week in November, I had transferred from crutches to a cane. I had tickets for France and England, purchased before my accident, and the prospect of that trip greatly aided my recovery. On the day before the U.S. election, I flew off (I voted by absentee ballot, although now I know it was probably never counted). My first night in Paris I hied myself to the Opéra Garnier for a performance by the Paris Opéra Ballet. After checking out the Chagall ceiling, my gaze lowered down the



balcony and I glimpsed a red diamond on a green furry forehead in the first balcony. After the performance, I attempted to spot her again, but couldn't limp fast enough to catch up with the fleeing mane. Since navigating the numerous steps of the Métro took all my concentration, I decided I was mistaken and headed back to my hotel. But who was that hooded figure she was with? I was going to tease Peppermint about becoming the phantom of the Opéra when I saw him again.

And in London, at a performance of the Royal Ballet's "Swan Lake," I sat in the second balcony. Peering across the Covent Garden stalls, once again I thought I spotted that red diamond under the hood of a vermillion satin opera cloak. But Sylvie Guillem was executing perfect, dramatic fouettés, and I had also spotted Natalia Makarova in the audience, so I was too awed to think further about it.

After my trip (a therapeutic tonic for my bruised sense of self—I can't accept that I'm getting old and falling apart), I got caught up at The New York Times with the election news. By the time Thanksgiving arrived, I had



forgotten all about the sightings, or what I thought were sightings (add diminishing vision to my list of woes).

Thanksgiving morning the Christmas Crew arrived for the parade. I had a guest for the holidays—the BGIAC (Best Guide In All China), who is now the BSIAB (Best Student In All Buffalo). I took her to see her first Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade (PM always rides on Santa’s float), and afterward we joined PM, Peppermint and Emeraldal, Al and the twins, and Clyde Elf and Elvira Fernhat for a Chinese Thanksgiving dinner of Chicken in Orange Flavor and Broccoli with Garlic Sauce at Ollie’s, followed by a trip up the Empire State Building to see the city at night. (My Israeli friends enjoyed the view so much earlier this year that I’ve now made it a first-see of Chronicler’s Guided Tour of Gotham.)

It was a bitterly cold but clear night, and I shivered next to Emeraldal as she stared out at the twinkling bridges, mesmerized by the moving headlights and taillights of the ant-sized autos.

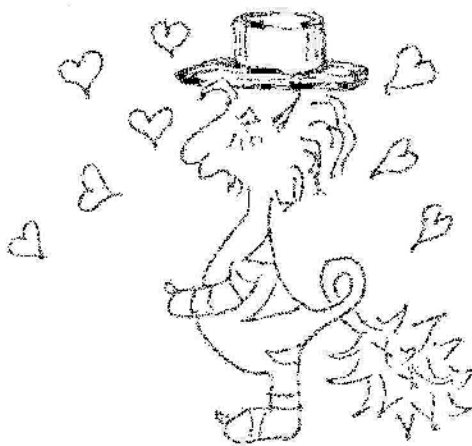
“Did you enjoy Paris?” I asked, to make conversation.

“You must be mistaken,” Emeraldal answered. “I’ve never been to Paris. But of course I would love to see the City of Lights. Oh, Peppy, look at the lights here! It’s magic,” she swooned to Paunch, who’d just bought her a crystal apple in the gift shop.

Peppermint had changed. He was confident, almost cocky. And he was wittier. His eyes sparkled, especially when he gazed at Emeraldal. What was once a gallumphing gait had evolved into a debonair glide, and his deep, hearty laugh was even deeper. Love looked very, very good on him (except, perhaps, for that pound of pungent pomade Paunch had poured on his pate).

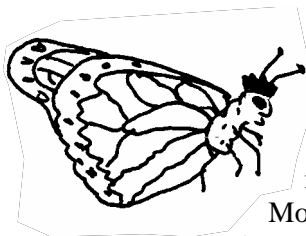
After a spot of green tea at my hovel, the gang returned to Christmas Monsterland. But before they left, I nabbed PM and whispered that I thought I had seen Emeraldal in Paris.

“Nah, couldn’t be her,” negated PM. “She was gone that week, but went home to do some repair work on a panel for Santa’s



sleigh. She's become a fantastic flier, and Clyde let her help Blitzen draw the sleigh to AINT NICK. She came back when she said she would, and the sleigh was perfect. So I'm sure that's where she was. Your eyes aren't what they used to be, Chron."

I shrugged. I couldn't disagree with that. But I did wonder.



Giving the BGIAC the Grand Tour of the Big A consumed the rest of my weekend, and then the endless, endless, upsetting election overwhelmed my attention, so much so that I barely kept up with e-mails. (One fluttery missive from Queen Danaus Plexippus, the Monarch of the Lepitopteran Valley, asked me to forward her letter to The Times denying any responsibility for the confusing butterfly ballots in Palm Beach.)

I did read that Emeraldalda had made it through every round of auditions, passing with flying (literally) colors. Her scrapbooking demonstration won a blue ribbon, and a dressage routine had the crowd clamoring for more. But the highlight was her skating program, a miracle on ice, and every judge gave her a perfect 10. (Peppermint gave her two 10's. He should have recused himself, but he said that if Justice Scalia saw no conflict of interest in the Supreme Court, why should he care about conflict of interest in a talent contest?)

Carmine Poppy sent me tapes of her auditions, with a note saying, "Chronicler, I think you and Dr. Arké and PM are the only ones who will see my ballroom dancing! Dr. Arké gave me Latin motion pointers, and helped design my costume."

Carmine's waltzes were wonderful, and so were her cha-chas. But I saw she wasn't paranoid. Whenever the camera panned the judges, I could tell that they all (with the exception of PM, of course) were watching only one con-



estant—Emeralda, resplendent in a sea-bream tutu.

Carmine groused, “Emeralda won the final sleigh-pulling competition paws down! Santa was thrilled with her performance, and gushed over her bel canto. She snowed them all. She *is* really talented, I admit. PM is giving Emeralda the No. 2 position, next to her. Do you believe that? PM’s picked me for the lead sleigh, too, so I suppose I shouldn’t complain. But why can’t Peppermint see how that prissy Ms. Olivine is using him? What can’t he see that she doesn’t love him like—well, like the rest of his friends do? Can you come to the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert?” she pleaded. “I’m back in the back row of Paunchettes, but I do get a little solo in ‘Twelve Days of Christmas.’”

Although it was getting late, and I hadn’t finished the Saga, nor started inking the illustrations, nor even come up with the hint of a CRISIS!, I agreed. Should this end up a rendering without resolution, so be it.

\*

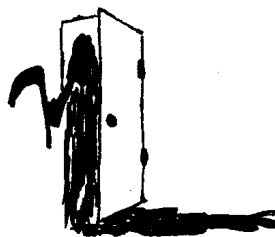
On the night before the night before Christmas, I caned my way to Madison Square Garden (a pity stick does get you a good seat on the bus). I got to see for myself the magnificent Emeralda in several solos, and her debut brought loud applause. But when PM took the stage, the crowd went wild. With the announcement, “This next song is for Chronicler, whose medical bills this year have exceeded her income,”



the mauvette-maned mezzo warbled a delightfully wry rendition of "I'm Giving Nothing for Christmas," which included a lyric about wrapping copies of my X-rays to drop in my family's stockings. She brought down the house.

I had misgivings about several members of the audience. It was too close to Christmas for the slimy operatives to still be gloating over the election (and their elimination of much good will). They were sure to be skulking and slithering out of the woodwork.

I drifted backstage. An odorous shadow I was positive was Viper Carrion, head of US SEGWAC, exited a broom closet and scurried by me toward the exit. Then I thought I saw Emeraldalda furtively leaving that same broom closet. But then again, my contact lenses were foggy, and I could have been mistaken.



After distributing hearty congratulations on their thrilling performance, I hitched a ride with Relicta, Dove, Paunch, and Emeraldalda back to Christmas Monsterland for the post-concert party. Emeraldalda gushed over Paunch. "I'm so excited! I've never ridden in a spaceship before! Peppermint, you've shown me so much!"

I closed my eyes to staunch my dizziness. Voices floated around me. "And this is the button you push for the ray gun?" Emeraldalda asked.

"What ray gun?" Relicta queried. "I took that out of here years ago. What an imagination you have!"

I nodded off again. I tire easily these days.

\*

We partied in Christmas Monsterland until Christmas Eve evening, then BOING!ed to the North Pole for the bon voyage party. While the Christmas Crew merrily made ready for the voyage, Mrs. Santa handed out steaming cups of apple cider and Emeraldalda passed around what she called "Marzipan Madness." "I made it myself," she told PM, handing her a chocolate-iced morsel.



“She cooks, too!”  
Peppermint boasted. “She’s darn near perfect!”

When the departure hour neared, PM strapped Emeraldalda into the No. 2 position of SAINT NICK I, and Rosette and Carmine took their spots right behind. Alabaster helped PM into the No. 1 slot next to Emeraldalda. The Monster mates nuzzled necks, nipped each other’s tails, and smacked their lips together. “Drive carefully!” Al ordered.



“Face forward! Discipline, fellow Christmas Monsters!” announced PM, as the younger Monsters, including Emeraldalda, turned to watch Mrs. C. wrap her plump red-suited partner in a warm blanket and wrap a voluminous hooded cape over his head so that only his warm breath could be seen. She gave him a kiss, and the Christmas Monsters turned front. They snorted when they felt the sleigh sink into the snow as the rotundest Christmas Character climbed to his seat and took the reins. Alabaster and Clyde took positions behind him next to the large, bulging velvet sack. Behind Santa’s main sleigh, the elves were helping more Christmas Monsters and some reindeer into the



hundreds of harnesses in front of the dozens of refueling sleighs loaded with zillions of presents. Rudolph stomped his hooves and blinked his nose in anticipation as he was strapped into place in SAINT NICK II.

When Santa called “Hi, ho!” PM answered with, “On the count of three! One . . . two . . . three! Dashing through the air, in a fourteen-Monster sleigh, o’er the Pole we go, laughing all the way! Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells!” Off they flew, the excitement of the night, their good cheer, and LOVE propelling them up, up, and away!

\*

PM’s stomach was churning, and visions of black spots danced in her

head. SAINT NICK I was approaching the invisible protective shield, the most dangerous airspace PM had to navigate on the way OUT THERE. When she lost consciousness, the sled hurtled, plummeted, and spiraled earthward until it crashed on the hard surface.

Complete silence. Then, dazed, the Monster sleigh pullers began one by one to pull themselves up and circle PM. PM's eyes slowly opened. "What happened?" she asked.

Emeralda was stroking her mane. "You must have fainted. You yanked us all down." She helped PM to her paws.

"How's Santa? How's Al?" PM worried, turning to look at the sled behind her. Alabaster cried out, "We're O.K.!" and a gloved wave from under the blanket reassured them all.

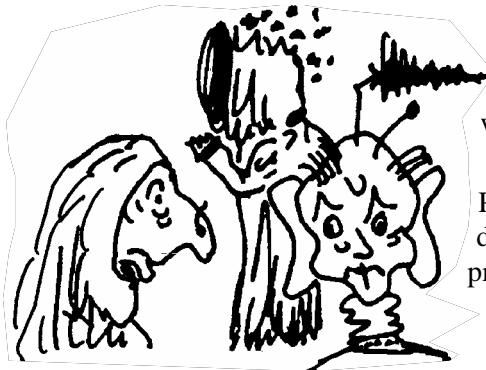
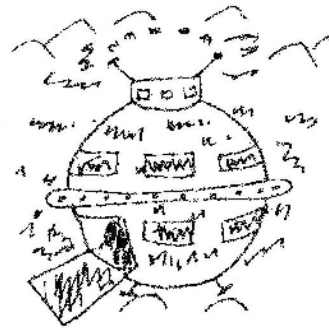
The shaken Monsters scanned the horizon. They were on the border between Christmas Monsterland and OUT THERE. Across the divide they could see a golden orb.

"Thank goodness! That's Relicta's spaceship!" shouted Rosette. "What's she doing here? Did she follow and see us crash?"

"No," said PM, furrowing her violet brow. "Look again."

The ramp to the craft was slowly dropping, and out stepped ... Lucifer Trinode (the nefariously evil ET IT with the isolator ray), followed by Viper and Parasite Carrion. Anaconda Adder lurked in the doorway.

"Emmmmmmmerraaaaaldaaaaaaa!" caromed dankly throughout the crevice. "Bring them here! Cross-s-s-s the border and we'll take over!"



Lucifer's third antenna quivered. "Ms. Olivine, we have a deal!" he growled when he sensed hesitation.

"What's going on?" asked PM. "Emeralda, what have you done? What has SEGWAC promised you?"

Parasite was holding aloft a

gigantic diamond pendant. “This-s-s-s-s is-s-s-s for you! Come get it!”

Emeralda’s big eyes widened even bigger. “It’s so beautiful,” she whispered.

“It’s just a rock,” Rosette pleaded. “It’s not important!”

The sleigh inched forward as Emeralda tugged the sleigh toward the glowing stone. “You have everything! You don’t know what it’s like to be an outsider your whole life, looking in.”

“Oh dear, she’s not read the first Saga,” moaned PM, “or she’d know how untrue that is.”

Lucifer’s antenna was emitting sparks, his temper flaring. Parasite scowled, “Now, Emmmmmeraaaaalda—bring the s-s-s-sleigh and that portly old guy here. NOW!”

“They said I could go anywhere,” said Emeralda, dragging the sleigh another inch toward the divide. “They flew me to Paris, so I could see what I’ve been missing. They let me experience the ballet, breathe the foggy London air, tiptoe through the Amsterdam tulips, gobble up Vinnie V.G.’s in the D’Orsay and Kröller-Müller and da Vinci’s in the Louvre. They promised I could dance with Julie Kent at American Ballet Theater and have Martha Argerich accompanying me at the Philharmonic! They offered a record contract! And an anchor spot on MSNBC.”

Emeralda took another step to hurl the sleigh across the invisible protective shield. Then she stopped and looked back at the fat figure with his head down, his body slumped in sorrow.

“I want!” she tried to explain.  
“I want so much!”

“We’ll buy it for you!” Viper urged. “You can have everything you covet. You know we can do it! See what we were able to buy with s-s-s-special interest money in the S-s-s-tates-s-s-s! Katherine Harris-s-s-s will do your makeup! You can s-s-s-sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom! We’ve got an ‘in’ now! We’ll give you the world!”



"You already have the world," whispered PM. "Because you have LOVE!"

The 'L word' sent sinister shivers through the SEGWACians.

One tear flowed down Emeraldal's cheek, then another, then another.

"They said they'd make me a star, like you!" Emeraldal answered PM with longing.

"There's only one star that matters," PM said softly. "That's the Christmas Star. Anything that doesn't get its light from that isn't worth having."

"Now!" conjoled Parasite.

"Now!" tempted Viper.

"NOW!" threatened Lucifer, his flashing antenna shooting explosive sparks through the dank, dark smog that surrounded the evil SEGWACians.

Emeraldal's paw lifted to cross the line, the border to OUT THERE. She took one last look at PM.

"No!" Emeraldal cried, as her paw pulled back from the brink. "I can't give you Santa!"

"NOW!" yelled PM.

And suddenly Lucifer's spaceship began to whirl, then lifted off, veering left, then right, then south toward New York. Following close behind they saw a second whirling golden orb, its lights blinking a Morse-code Hallelujah!

PM put her paw around Emeraldal's shoulder as the green Monster wept.

"I'm so sorry, Santa," Emeraldal sobbed when she faced the sleigh.

The portly jelly belly slowly stood and sadly began to unwrap the blanket.



When he pulled back the hood, it was not Santa's visage that greeted the Christmas Crew.

"I'm sorry, too," said Peppermint Paunch, stifling a big snuffle.

"To work, Monsters!" PM ordered. "Santa's hovering overhead in SAINT NICK II, waiting to change sleighs. He's got a lot of presents to deliver, and we're running late!"

"Aren't you going to remove me from the harness so Peppermint can arrest me?" Emeraldalda asked.

"Absolutely not," PM said. "You've finally made the right choice—you chose Christmas. You're not the first Christmas Character to be seduced by SEGWAC. And you're the best flier in Christmas Monsterland—next to me, of course. We need you!"

"What about them?" Emeraldalda said, pointing at the SEGWACians, who were screaming unprintable obscenities at the Monsters. "Won't they come after us?"

"In what?" answered Peppermint. "Relicta and Dove were tracking us. When they saw us crash, they landed and Relicta snuck over to liberate Trinode's ship." (Christmas Characters aren't allowed to steal—nor do they want to.) "The SEGWACians'll find it at the top of Donald Trumpcard Tower when they make it back to Gomorrah on the Hudson."

"I wonder how they'll get back," Carmine Poppy said as the sleigh began to rise for the second time that night.

"Don't know, don't care," said Peppermint. "I suspect Lucretia Carrion might miss them and send a scouting party."



“And if they haven’t returned by January 20,” sighed PM, “W., I’m sure, will send Air Force One to pick them up.”

\*

The Crew rendezvoused safely with the hovering refueling sleighs and zapped through the invisible protective shield, this time with the real Santa Claus at the reins.

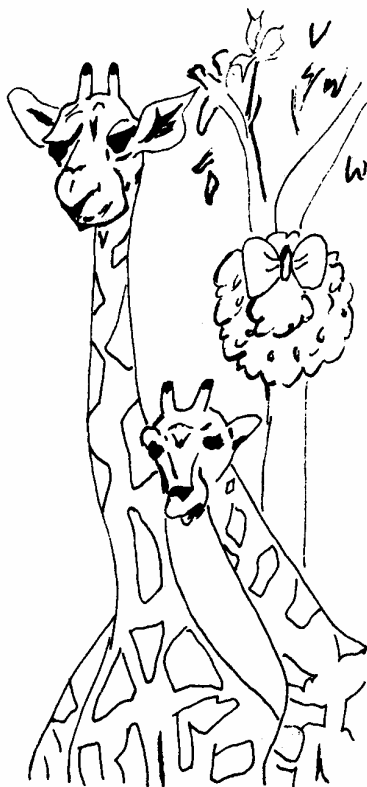
And where was I while all this was taking place, you might ask? (You probably didn’t even care where I was, did you? Remind me to re-edit my N&N list.) Well, I was typing madly on my laptop (a writer never leaves home without it), stuffed in Santa’s sack in the back of SAINT NICK I, peeping through a little tear in the red velvet. At the meeting place I was unceremoniously tossed into Relicta’s spaceship, with Dove at the helm, where I’m now spinning and whirling madly and absurdly toward St. Louis. This must be what it’s like to be Cuisinarted. I just know all my hip hardware’s going to unscrew.

Since there’s a little time left before I land for an epilogue, a hint of denouement, and since there are some loose ends to tie up, I’ll fill you in.

After I mentioned seeing Emeraldal in Paris to PM, she consulted Alabaster. Together they confronted Peppermint. At first the infatuated flatfoot wouldn’t listen. He’s suspicious by profession, but by nature he’s trusting—and he was, indeed, hopefully in love.

But the clues were too many to ignore. When Emeraldal put the little crystal apple Paunch gave her in her bag, he spotted a crystal Fabergé egg (I have one I got in Paris, so I can guess where she picked that up).

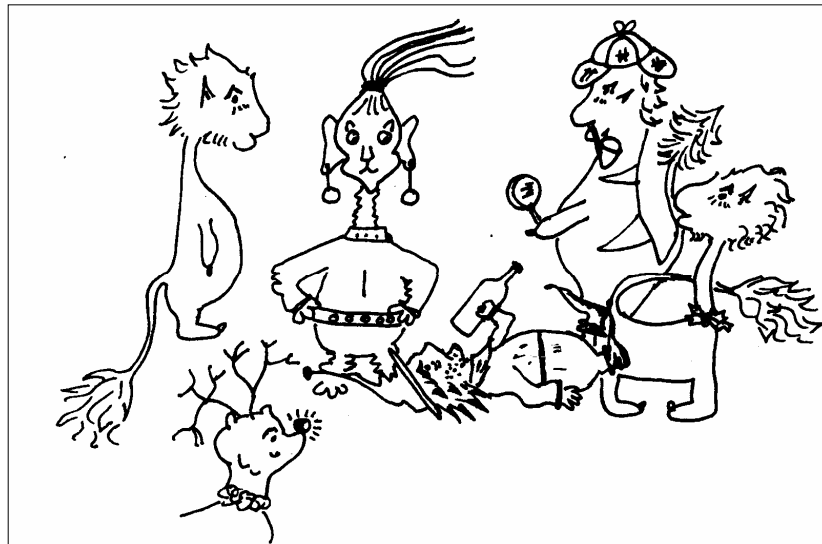
Al reminded Paunch of the symptoms of SEGWACian seduction. Paunch had not forgotten, had he, how SEGWAC had lured Alabaster OUT THERE oh so many years ago with promises of scholarly recognition and an end to his loneliness (*Book IV*)?



Eggshell's refusal to betray Santa landed him in the San Diego Zoo, where he spent way too long a time as an "Alpaca?" (Which turned out to be fortuitous, however, since that's where PM found him, ensnared him, rescued him, and enamored him.)

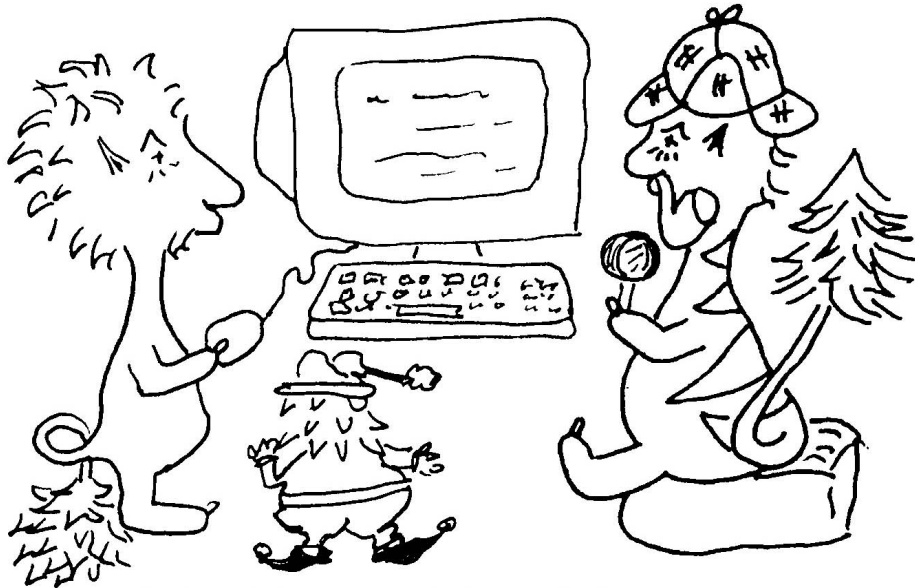


Clyde forced Paunch to re-read "The Prodigal Elf" (*Book VII*), so that Paunch would remember how the pixilated pixie's longing for stardom had led to his downfall.



*Clyde, as the Prodigal Elf. From the Saga Archives, Book VII.*

Finally, Peppermint sat down with Carmine, Rosette, and Amethyst, who convinced him to at least check out Emeraldal's activities over the last few months. When Peppermint found an e-mail from Virus Carrion to Emeraldal, offering to aid her desire to escape AINT NICK, that clinched it. Further research found communiqués detailing SEGWAC's proposed Christmas Eve Santa-napping, with instructions to keep Peppermint distracted so he wouldn't sleuth out their plan.



(Peppermint found these cybermissives in SEGWAC's mainframe. He could have hacked into Emeraldalda's computer, but Christmas Monsters don't spy on other Christmas Characters, except for PM, who is constantly looking over my shoulder. But they are absolutely, positively permitted to periodically peer penetratingly into SEGWAC's notoriously rotten activities.)

The sting was stung, and Peppermint took Santa's spot. If all the suspicions were mistaken, there'd be no harm done. But if Emeraldalda were truly lost to SEGWAC, at least Santa would be saved. He desperately wanted to believe in Emeraldalda's love. When the sleigh plummeted, so did Peppermint's heart.

Will Peppermint Paunch spend the rest of his life without a true love? Emeraldalda used him, and that hurts big time. It will take a while to get over the betrayal. He'll forgive Ms. Olivine, for that's what Christmas Critters do, but only time will heal his psychic wound.



(PM insists that Peppermint's love life is up to me, since I come up with these **CRISES**. But I'm too pooped to concern myself with lust—I gave up on that when my crushed hip quelled my own fantasies.)

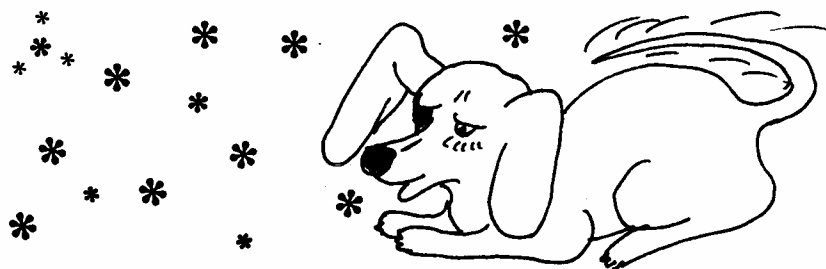
"How could I have fooled myself into believing that one so beautiful could fall for lunking me?" I heard Peppermint moo in self-pity as **SAINT NICK** I flew away (I had to get a reference to New York's Cow Parade in here somewhere, and this is the only place I could think of).



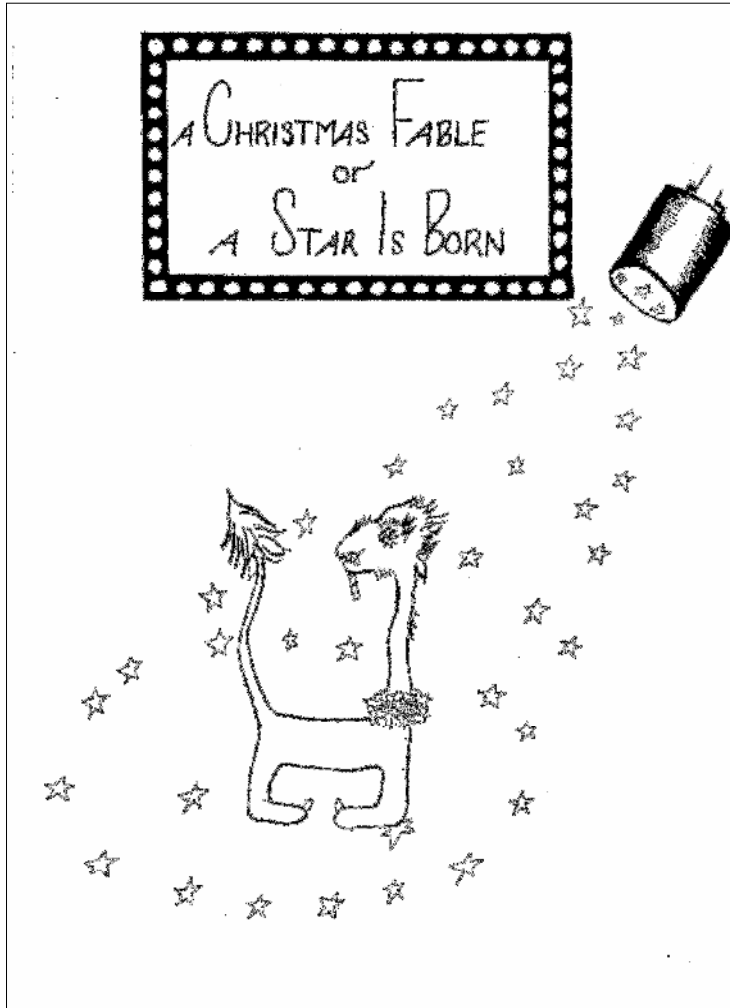
Did you noticed how Carmine Poppy's eyes got goo-gooed when she garnered a glance at Paunch? And how Peppermint seemed to really see her for the first time? Maybe next year . . . . .

But for now, I have to survive the gyrating twirl to St. Louis, and then avoid slippery surfaces until my brittle bones get stronger. Which they will, if Santa brings me the year's supply of Caltrate I've asked for.

May Santa bring *you* what your heart desires—which I hope includes Love and Good Cheer! (I want a puppy!)



**Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!**



*First cover of the PM Saga. From the Saga Archives, Book I.*

