



# **The Glow of Christmas**

*Or, The Heat Is On*

*The PM Saga, Book XXV*

**by Susan Kirby**



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A crisp, clear Christmas Monsterland night enveloped the icy landscape outside the cavernous abode of PM\* and Alabaster Eggshell. Twinkling and winking stars reflected off the permafrost with a luminance that surreally mimicked daylight. A dusting of snowflakes darted a fairy fandango before settling on the walkway. Icicles dangled from the entrance in stalactite grandeur.

Inside the cave, Peppermint Paunch chewed on the stem of his pipe and pored over the papers on his protruding tummy, pondering the printed pages. “No, no, no!” he protested. He puffed briefly, inhaling air (he never lights the pipe), then pouted, “This won’t do.”

Alabaster, nestled all snug on the sofa, flicked his silver-flecked tail in time to the Martha Argerich recording of Bartok’s Piano Concerto No. 3, the notes dallying delightfully around the ornately ornamented and cranberried Christmas tree in the corner. “Peppermint, the big event is two days away. Christmas Critter Caterers must have a final menu today. What’s wrong with *this* list?”

“I specifically asked that the strawberry-and-cream ice cream be *striated*, to match my markings. They’ve substituted low-cal frozen pomegranate yogurt! I *never* eat yogurt! Look! Where’s the triple fudge cake? The bon bons? The

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*\*These Sagas document the daring doings of Purple Monster, known affectionately to one and all as PM, Santa’s lead sleigh puller and North Pole Ambassador. Turn now to the last two pages to discover synopses of the previous PM pen-and-inkings. Or wait until you’ve finished glancing through this story.*

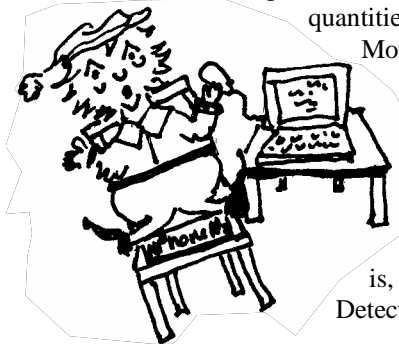


almond clusters? What's a Christmas Monsterland event without chocolate?"

Clyde Elf, perched on a phonebook at Al's computer, piped in. "I just checked the North Pole Net. There's not a chip of chocolate or a can of cocoa to be found in all of Christmas Monsterland. Everything's been bought up by 20 Christmas Monsters in a tiny border hamlet on the other side of the North Pole. Something about a Grand Super Snickle, whatever that is."

"It's Super *Snerkle*," Alabaster sighed. "Clyde, you have been a frequent guest of many Christmas Monsters over the—what, decades? centuries?—how old are you, anyway?—and you are still one naïve pixie. A Super Snerkle is how Christmas Monsters beget little Christmas Monsters. The runup to the

SuperS on Christmas Day requires the ingestion of great quantities of chocolate and champagne by the hopeful Moms-to-Be."



Clyde nodded understanding, but still hadn't a clue. (He is indeed an innocent, despite his one problematic prodigal elf episode many years ago.)

Peppermint paced pensively. "If my deductive skills still work," he pursed his lips (he is, you may recollect, a graduate of the Red Green Detective School and Christmas Monsterland's resi-

dent Sherlock), “I must surmise that my order of champagne is also in jeopardy?”

“Ommmmmm,” emanated from a quiet figure lotus positioned before the fireplace. “Ommm, ohhhhh, Peppermint, not to worry,” Dove Carrion chanted softly. “Relicta and I will be happy to find the requisite chocolate ice cream and champagne when we head OUT THERE to ring the bells for the Salvation Army. Relax. Breathe. Release your neck. Say no to tension. Find your inner Monster merriment. Your wedding—and the reception—will be perfect!”

Wedding? Did he say wedding? Yes, Dear Reader, Peppermint Paunch is getting married.

“Thanks a bunch,” Peppermint bowed. “I didn’t know getting hitched was so traumatic. I’ve been so stressed I’ve lost a blob of blab from my blubber. How did you and PM get through this?” he asked Al.

“If you remember,” Al counseled, “we didn’t have a big to-do. We just screamed at each other, decided to get married, and had Santa do the honors Christmas Eve when PM and I got harnessed to pull the sleigh. No reception, no guest list, just ‘I do,’ ‘I do,’ and we did.”

“Same for Relicta and me,” said Dove, “since my parents certainly wouldn’t have approved, given that they run the U.S. headquarters of SEGWAC”—the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas—“and I’m an ex-SEGWACian, not to mention that my wife is an alien refugee from an exploded planet. We eloped.”

Peppermint peered at the list again. “Half of Christmas Monsterland is coming to this! You guys are great to help us plan our celebration. Carmine and I are grateful.”

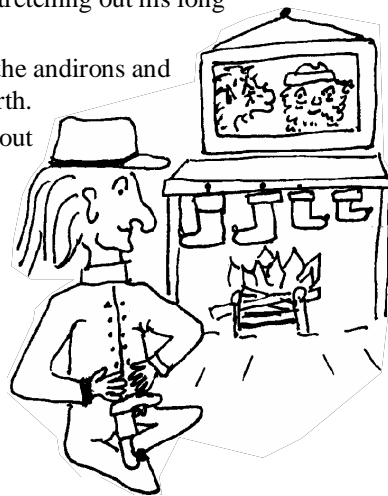
Yep, Peppermint Paunch is going to marry Carmine Poppy, the ballroom-dancing daughter of Pimento Poppy, the Christmas Monsterland child psychologist.

“Where is Carmine, anyway?” asked Al, stretching out his long ermine neck to uncrunk a crick.

A log crackled then cracked, crashing off the andirons and spurring a barrage of cinder sparks onto the hearth.

“She and PM BOING!ed to China to pick out the perfect silk wedding bow,” Peppermint purred, referring to PM’s ability to transport herself and anyone who touches her OUT THERE and back UP HERE by visualizing her destination and twitching her tail in a certain way. “I can’t wait for my scarlet scamp to get back.”

“Nor I for my heliotrope honey,” agreed Al.



On cue (when isn't she?), PM BOING!ed into the cave, Carmine gripping her magenta mane and clutching a gaily wrapped package. PM perambulated to Al's side to peck a pair of passionate kisses on her hubbie's lips and nuzzle his neck.

"Hail, fellow wedding planners!" she hailed.

"Mmm-mmm good. I taste chocolate on your lips," Al grinned, savoring the remnants of the candied kisses. "I heard there was a shortage."



PM confessed. "After Carmine and I sashayed out of Shanghai, I stopped by U.N. headquarters to once again try to get recognized as the North Pole Ambassador. No luck. So since we were in the neighborhood, we detoured to Chronicler's hovel. She was working, or at a concert, or something, and I nipped the Godivas in the fridge." (What can I say? Sorry, Mom.)

"So, let's see the bow," Peppermint said to Carmine after *their* smooches.

Clyde just squeaked "Yuck" at these public displays of affection.

"Not until our wedding!" Carmine grinned.

A whirring roar reverberated across the cavern, rattling the chandelier.

"That's my beloved," Dove cried, and hurried outside to greet the golden spacecraft gyrating to a perfect landing on the driveway. Relicta (the extra-terrestrial intergalactic traveler) and their almost 11-year-old daughter, Crystal Camellia, debarked and quivered their antennae in greeting.

"Pep, the Ice Pyramid is simply spotless for the reception," the ET IT assured the detective, "and Santa's letting us use three sleighs to transport everyone from the North Pole Chapel to our place. I've ordered five more bales of hay for the reindeer. The elves are working overtime on the decorations, so I think extra egg nog is in order."

"Thanks," duetted Peppermint and Carmine with giggles.



After taking a reading from the stars (then double-checking his watch), Peppermint called out, "It's time to rehearse. The band must sound its best for the big Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert, which this year will be the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert Just Before Our Wedding."

"Where are Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst?" PM asked, inquiring after her and Al's almost-17-year-old twin offspring.

"Setting up the instruments at the C.M. Community Center," Clyde reported. "Rudy's there, too, and Rosette. The Paunchettes have been practicing their do-wops, with Flame and Alazarin teaching Geranium the moves. Lapis has been thumping the tam tams and tambourine."

"He's a chip off the ole Monster," Al beamed with pride. "I've taught him everything he knows. His rat-a-tat-tats and pa-rum-pa-pum-pums are Watts-worthy."

"And Geranium's mezzo is mesmerizingly melodic," PM countered with equal parental pride. "I've taught her how to project and find the soul of the song. I think she'll be ready to audition for Santa next year. After all, I won the sleigh-pulling contest on my 18th birthday." (Consult the first Saga for confirmation.)

The group loped across the tundra toward the shimmering horizon, singing an improvised arrangement of "We Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In." From the community center issued a warbled reply, resulting in a harmonic convergence at the center door. That choral fantasy fell flat when a louder screech of brakes, the snort of two reindeer, and clanging bells scattered the group in all directions.

A brilliant painted sleigh stopped hard, almost toppling over. Out jumped a green Christmas Monster with a ruby fur diamond sparkling on her forehead. She ran to Peppermint Paunch and threw herself at him.

"Oh, Peppy," she puffed, then pushed a lock of mane from her eyes. "You must help!"

"Emeralda?" Peppermint stuttered.

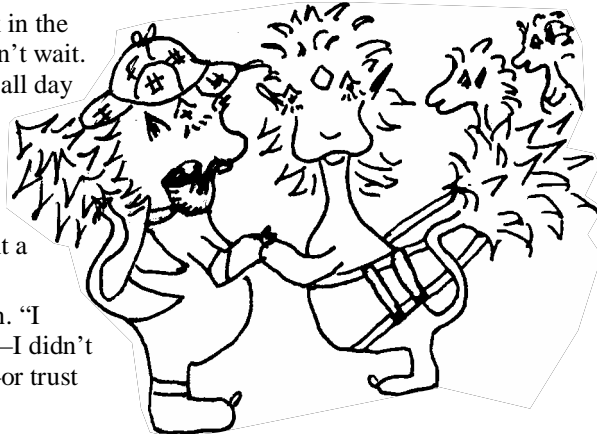
"Emeralda?!" Carmine choked from across the field, where she'd bounced when the sleigh careered in.

"Emeralda?" PM questioned. "What are you doing here? I told you I'd coach you tomorrow in AINT NICK."

Emeralda Olivine took in the reassembled Crew. "I couldn't wait. I've been driving the sleigh all day to get here! There's an emergency!"

"You could have e-mailed," Carmine snorted. "Or phoned. Or sent a telegram."

Emeralda looked down. "I didn't know if you'd come—I didn't know if you'd believe me—or trust me."





"I, for one, don't," harrumphed Carmine.

"Me, neither," echoed Clyde.

PM shushed the gang. "C'mon, Critters. Let's go inside and give Em a chance to catch her breath."

"What's she doing here?" Geranium said loudly. "Come to spy on the competition? Mom says I'll be ready to win next year's sleigh-pulling contest, so when you get off probation and get to try again, look out!"

Lapis, fluffing his ultramarine mane, trailed after Emeraldalda, a moonstruck gawk on his silvery countenance.

Emeraldalda sipped the hot apple cider that Alabaster proffered. Peppermint couldn't take his eyes off the red diamond, and Carmine's persistent punches to his paw failed to break his gaze.

PM, ever cognizant of encroaching discord, took charge. "Emeraldalda, what's going on?"

"It's obvious! She's here to get Peppermint back," Carmine blurted. "Well, he's marrying *me*."

"No! I mean yes, I know he's marrying you, and yes, I want him—"

Carmine yipped a woeful yelp.

"I want his *detective* skills," Emeraldalda asserted. "Ember is missing! You've got to find her."

"Ember?" Peppermint queried.

"Ember?" Rudy echoed. "I just saw her in Siberia, when Donner and I visited our cousins."

Relicta and Dove were totally confused. "Forgive me my ignorance," Relicta said, "but who's Ember?"

"The Russian Firebird!" Emeraldalda explained. "As you know, I'm a scene artist for Santa's sleighs. Ember was posing for a painting I'm working on. She's been flying to the border of Christmas Monsterland once a week and hovering near the Invisible Protective Shield while I sketch her. She was supposed to be there this morning, but when I arrived, I spied a golden apple in a puddle on the ground, but no Ember. I know something's happened to her! She's always so reliable, and she'd *never* leave an apple behind!"

Peppermint was fiddling with the flaps of his hat. "I suspect . . . a plot," he said ominously. "No time to waste. I must examine the scene of the disappearance."

Carmine glared at Peppermint, then at Emeraldalda, "What about the wedding?" she cried. "Let Al or PM or Relicta find this . . . whatever it is!"

Peppermint finally acknowledged her. "It's my job, lamby-Cammy," he blushed.

"But the Firebird's not even a Christmas Character," Carmine pointed out.



"She is now, since she's in the Saga," PM said authoritatively. "And that means we must consider the parable of the lost lamb, etc., etc. We can't rest until we find the missing one."

"Then I'm going, too!" stomped Carmine.

PM shook her mane in the negative. "Nope. You're needed here, to get ready for the concert and the wedding. I'll go with Peppermint and Emeraldal. We'll teletransport to the scene, assess the situation, and determine what needs to be done," she commanded. (She is very managerial when she needs to be—and can be militaristically so when barking orders.)

"I'll go, too. Cousin Paunch has been tutoring me," Lapis purred with pride to Emeraldal. "I'm almost his apprentice. I passed Magnifying Glass 101 with an A+."

"Oh, gross," Geranium said, rolling her eyes. "Puppy love in a Christmas Monster is so . . . so . . . nerdy!"

PM shushed her daughter. "O.K., Lapis, you can come," she told her son. "Clyde, you and Rudy take Dander and Xander and the new sleigh to the North Pole and dispatch inquiries to the reindeer near the border."

Rudy nodded a red arc of agreement.

"I'll do research on this end," Al contributed.

Dove conferred with Relicta. "We'll leave now for Gotham. We have to make our annual trek to my parents' anyway, so we can check in to see if this could be a SEGWACian plot."

After PM, Peppermint, Lapis, and Emeraldal teletransported away, Carmine stood in shock, tears flowing down her cheeks. "He didn't even k-k-k-iss me g-g-goodbye," she whinnied.

Rosette and Geranium comforted her. "I don't know what she's got that mesmerizes the males," Rosette declared. "She may sing, skate, paint, and dance better than any Christmas Monster besides PM, but she *did* try to ruin Christmas two years ago."

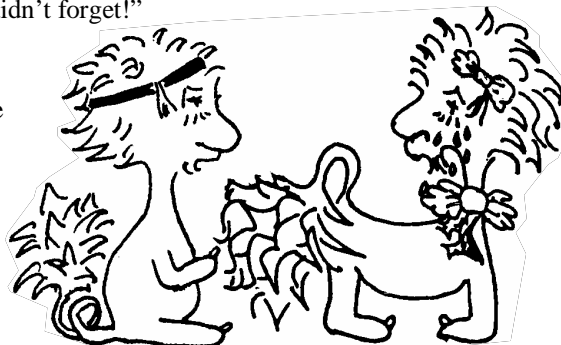
"Don't be catty C.M.'s," Alabaster counseled. "Remember, we forgave her."

"Yes, but we certainly didn't forget!"

Geranium stomped.

"Carmine, trust Peppermint," Al advised. "He loves you."

"C'mon," Geranium tugged at Carmine. "You promised to teach me that lift you saw Dr. Arké do at the Ohio Star Ball competition."





**T**he Firebird has inspired several legends since she was first spotted centuries ago in medieval Russia. One story reports that an orphan girl named Maryushka lived in a small village. She created stunning works of embroidery that were coveted far and wide, but her artistry was so important to her that she would sell her creations only to those who would treasure them. An evil sorcerer heard about the young woman and wanted to have her work, and her, only for himself. He promised her gold and jewels and luxuries, but she desired none of those “things,” wanting only to live in her village with her family and friends. The sorcerer, enraged, turned her into the Firebird, then transformed himself into a black falcon to capture her and take her away. To avoid him, she shed her plumage and died. This story doesn’t have a very happy ending, so most people choose not to believe it.

Another legend, portrayed in exquisitely detailed miniature paintings on lacquer boxes from Mstera and Palekh, casts the Firebird in a supporting role in a Russian version of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. In this tale, a tsar is upset because a Firebird keeps raiding his favorite apple tree for golden apples. He tells his three sons to catch the creature. The first two sons fail, but Ivan Tsarevich, the youngest, manages to sneak up on the Firebird and grab her tail, but he captures only one sunshiny tail feather. Ivan’s dad wants the whole bird, so Ivan goes on all sorts of adventures, involving a gray wolf and a princess, a golden-maned horse, and journeys to distant kingdoms. The upshot is, Ivan ends up with the Firebird, the horse, and the princess, but his brothers

steal his treasures when he gets near home and leave Ivan for dead. Ivan is rescued, but by the wolf, not by the Firebird. Ivan gets the princess, and last we hear in this version, the Firebird's in a cage, eating apples.

The most popular Firebird myth is the one commemorated in ballet. Michel Fokine choreographed a version in 1910. George Balanchine choreographed his interpretation in 1949 (with Maria Tallchief as the Firebird), and then revised it in 1970 (Gelsey Kirkland this time), adding choreography by Jerome Robbins, with settings and costume design by Marc Chagall. The libretto for Igor Stravinsky's haunting and pounding score details a mysterious kingdom into which Prince Ivan wanders. He finds himself in a forest and is almost blinded by a bright amber light flitting around him. Ivan hides so he can watch the Firebird, then reveals himself and catches her. She struggles against him, then regains her freedom by giving him a magic feather and promising to aid him if he waves it. Ivan then encounters ten princesses held captive by Kastchei, the evil sorcerer, and after a bit of romance with one of the princesses, he wages a fierce battle with the sorcerer and his grotesque minions and is almost defeated. But he remembers the feather. He waves it, the Firebird flies to the rescue and smites the bad guys, and Ivan and the princess live happily ever after. We're not told what happens to the Firebird after that, but one can imagine she's still flying about looking for apples and savoring her freedom.



A descendant of one of these mythical Firebirds was now missing, and it was to find her that PM et al. BOING!ed to a glacier plateau on the edge of Christmas Monsterland, above the village of AINT NICK (Arctic Isle Near the Tundra, Not In any way Close to Kalamazoo), the hometown of Emeraldal and the artists who create SAINT NICK sleighs.

AIN'T NICK is on the remotest outskirts of Christmas Monsterland (the closest identifiable land masses within metaphorical spitting distance are Siberia and Lapland). Like the North Pole and the rest of Christmas Monsterland, it is protected against SEGWAC's despicable and dastardly attacks by the North Pole's Invisible Protective Shield. The only ways to get past the shield to go OUT THERE, or to come UP HERE, are (1) to fly in one of Santa's magical sleighs, (2) to teletransport with PM or with her two teen twins, or (3) to fly in Relicta's midasmetal spaceship.

Peppermint and Lapis paced the inner edge of the IPS., searching for clues.

"This is where I was sitting when I last saw Ember." Emeraldal pointed



out a large rock with an easel and a sketchpad still standing on it. “Since she couldn’t come UP HERE, and I couldn’t go OUT THERE without a lot of bureaucratic paperwork because of my probation, this was the best way for me to draw her. She’d hover out there and we’d chitchat while I sketched. I’d show her the drawings, and she’d make little suggestions.”

Peppermint asked PM to BOING! them OUT THERE, to examine where Ember had last been seen, and she complied.

Peppermint poked the ground, Lapis sniffing the trail behind him. “Hmm,” the elder detective said. “Look—here. The ice has the impression of a spaceship. And up there—the trees are scorched.”

“Do you think those spaceship impressions could be from two years ago when Lucifer Trinode and the Carrions tried to lure me to lure Santa so they could capture him?” Emeralda asked, with a blush of embarrassment.

Peppermint winced at the unwelcome memory (check out *Book 23* if you want reminding). “No, these markings are fresh, and the footprints . . .”

“Are like Relicta’s!” Lapis eurekaed. “But bigger!”

“Oh, no!” cried PM. “Those are Lucifer’s footprints! Woe to Ember if he’s zapped and captured her.”

“Take us back to Al’s lab,” the gumshoe ordered. “I’ll analyze these samples. But I intuit the answer lies much farther OUT HERE.”

\* \* \*

Relicta and Dove, with Crystal Camellia between them holding a foil-wrapped box, pressed “Down” on the Trumpcard Tower elevator. Dove had had to scour the Hell to Pay Bar & Grill to extract where his family was now ensconced. A year previous, the U.S. head of SEGWAC and his ghouls had had to relocate to the Bowery, shamed by Osama bin Laden’s superior nefariousness

and thus out of favor, and out of money. But over the last 12 months, Viper's prestige, and bank accounts, had been restored, for he had increased his munitions exports exponentially, profitably insider traded, and his propaganda wing had successfully turned all public attention away from the struggles against domestic enemies like hunger, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, and civil rights abuse to a focus on the "axis of evil" and other less definable threats. To reach its desired nadir, SEGWAC effectively equated any opposition to killing and the destruction of liberty with lack of patriotism. The two "L" words that are anathema to SEGWAC were vilified to such a degree that the November elections, aided by SEGWACPAC soft money, had brought SEGWACian candidates into office and Viper back into posh dungeon digs in the bowels of Fifth Avenue.



The elevator disgorged the trio in a sub-sub-sub-subbasement. The clanking steam pipes provided a cacophonous accompaniment for their macabre march into the deepening shadows. The slush of seeping sewage in an adjacent main could not drown out the rustle of unseen scurrying vermin.

Dove's flashlight illuminated the path of oozing slime leading to a fungus-coated portcullis. Dove tugged on the chain to raise the gate.

"I may be an ex-SEGWACian," he murmured, "but there's something about the sounds and smells of my youth that evokes a sour nostalgia for home. Dad and Mom must be so satisfied to be uptown again."

Relicta just held her nose. Crystal tossed a cookie crumb to a begging rodent.



A rusted scythe was hung over the Carrion portal with care. Knock. Knock. Knock. (More like: KA-thud. KA-Thud. Ka-THUD.)

The door creaked open a sliver to reveal Dove's doppelgänger, his twin brother, Parasite, bedecked in a garish icterine smoking jacket.

"Vulture!" Parasite snarled, employing Dove's birth name. "Don't you ever give up?"

Relicta waved hello. "Brother-in-law, you know we can't—or won't. Although we struggle for different causes, we are family. May we come in?"

Crystal's antennae quivered in expectation. The visits to her paternal grandparents were always an adventure.

Parasite slithered a retreat and the door groaned wider. Inside, Relicta complimented the new cobweb curtains, torture rack, and Iron Maiden. The fetid air was exceedingly sweltering. Relicta wiped sweat off her brow.

"S-s-s-well digs-s-s-s, huh?" Parasite hissed. "Never had such pos-s-sh real es-s-s-state when we were growing up. Great heat, too—right under the boiler. As close to Hades-s-s as-s-s we can get, without actually going there!"

As if summoned, a colossal Cerberus descendant trotted out to welcome the relatives. "New pet," Parasite explained as Dove struggled to extract his foot from one of the three sets of fang-endowed jaws.



"How's Lucretia," Relicta asked, following down the endless hallway, dodging the drips of gooey gunk.

"Mother's-s-s in the parlor, holding a board meeting with the V.P.'s-s-s energy advisers-s-s. Top s-s-secret. Let 'em try to s-s-subpoena her! S-s-she'll be s-s-s-sooo s-s-sorry s-s-she mis-s-s-sed you!"

Parasite banged on a door, then burst into the office. "Hey, old man, look who's-s-s-s darkening our dungeon again!"

Viper Carrion, in a dingy robe reeking of mildew, scowled from behind the sarcophagus that served as his desk. "Bah! Unless-s-s-s you've come to tell me that whis-s-skered N.P. idiot is taking the year off, get out!"

"Pop," said Dove, "it's our annual attempt at reconciliation. How've ya been?"

"How's-s-s it look like I've been? In the pits-s-s-s, the trading pits-s-s-s, where I've cleaned up on all the corporate s-s-s-shenanigans that went on this year. The tax cut's-s-s been great—for us and our allies-s-s!"

Anaconda Adder's voice spat venomously through the intercom. "Viper, Luc-c-cifer's on Line 2."

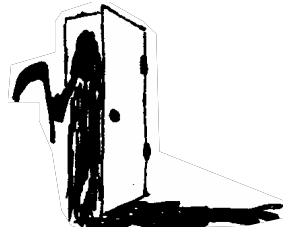
"His-s-s-s. Tell him I'll call right back. There are s-s-spies in here!"

"Where is Trinode?" Relicta blurted out, then regretted her overt curiosity.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Viper snarled. "Hmm, I think you would! In an undis-s-sclos-s-sed location. Lot of that going around. Os-s-sama. Mullah Omar. Cheney. And every other weekend, the Big A's-s-s mayor!"

"Crystal," Dove urged his daughter, "give grandpa his Christmas present."

Viper and Parasite howled. "How dare you curs-s-se in our house! But come here, young'un!"



Viper beckoned, curling his gnarled index claw at the child.

Crystal crept to the desk and gently handed the gift to the denizen. "It's an autographed photograph of Trent Lott, with a hand-calligraphied transcript of his Strom Thurmond birthday tribute," she announced.

Viper was overwhelmed. "How thoughtful! There's-s-s potential in you, child!"

Crystal smiled angelically. "Oh, Daddy says we should give gifts that the recipient will l—"

"What have you been teaching her?" Viper screamed. "Haven't you taught her never to use the L-word in my pres-s-sence?"

"He said presents, Daddy," chirped Crystal delightedly.

"Out! Out! Out!" Viper whistled for Cerberus, who chased the trio to the exit.

"That went well, don't you think," gasped Dove when the three were safely back in the elevator.

\* \* \*

Dove called Al from the street. "No sign of Ember, but the place was stifling. Parasite stuttered it was because they're under the boiler, but since heat rises, I think the Firebird may have been there. But neither Relicta nor Crystal picked up any strange vibrations, other than the usual nasty ones my folks emit. And Lucifer's back, for sure. I bet Dad's on the horn with him now. We're heading to the Salvation Army. Call if you need us."

\* \* \*

Lucifer Trinode was losing what little patience he had (and the evil alien has very, very little).

"Listen up, you pathetic paragon of pyrotechnic poultry. I know you understand me." He passed a golden apple through the bars of the midasmetal cage.

The feathered prisoner just stared at her captor with soulful eyes and spit an apple seed, bonking his bald head.

Trinode's third antenna was vibrating overtime. "Want another pop of my isolator ray? Let's go over the legend one more time. I capture you—done. I put you in a cage—done. I feed you golden apples—Golden Delicious golden apples—done. You plead for your release—*not done!* You give me a magic feather—*not done.* You promise to do whatever I want if I release you—*NOT DONE!*"

Splat. Another golden apple seed between the eyes.

"Get with the program!" Lucifer raged. "Not much time until Xmas Day. Whether you like it or not, you are going to be my weapon of mass destruction. Together, we *will* stop that aged crimson-garbed goliath from circumnavigating the planet that I am about to wreak havoc on with all sorts of vile machinations."

Splat. Splat. Spit. The triple barrage of seeds was followed by a very vocal



and belligerent burp.

Lucifer flipped open his cellular.

"Viper, get the heck up here right now! Your plan isn't working. Our captive is a loony bird, a dodo bird. You swore this would work."

\* \* \*

Peppermint tapped the keyboard and clicked the mouse, checking the weather on the World

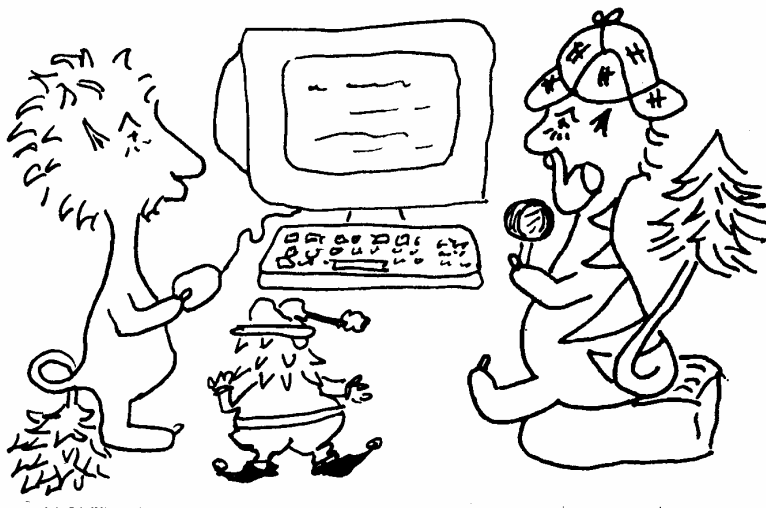
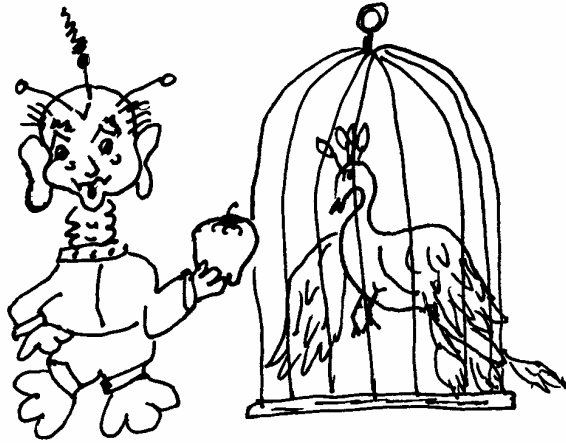
Wide Web. Carmine peered over his shoulder. The rest of the gang was holding a video conference via the North Pole Net. "There are heat waves in Havana, Crawford, and D.C.," Peppermint announced. "But we can attribute those to normal hot air. . . . Hmmm. . . . Wait a minute. There's an island of teeming temperature at the Central Park Zoo."

Clyde chimed in. "oh-Ho! oh-Ho! I just talked to Gerald Giraffe at the Bronx Zoo. He's heard rumors rumbling up to his borough that the Manhattan polar bears are inviting the sea lions over to their new hot tub."

"That's where they're holding her!" Peppermint determined in triumph.

"I'll go after her," PM declared. "I'll BOING! in there, introduce myself, and BOING! us out."

Alabaster shook his mane. "No, you'll be burned. If the heat doesn't get you, Trinode's isolator ray will. Remember, you are safe UP HERE, but can be





*hurt* OUT THERE!”

(Sorry, better spout more exposition: Lucifer can dispense an isolator ray from his third antenna. It’s probably the most dangerous weapon ever invented. One zap and you’re surrounded by a

thick film of darkness. You can see only those like yourself—all others are the enemy. Two zaps and you feel you’re alone in the universe, that no one cares, that there’s no hope, no connection. Three zaps and empathy is nonexistent, depression reigns, and the only thing to do is take as much as you can, any way you can, because nothing matters in the end. Despair drives those zapped thrice to vile, violent deeds.)

“I’ll go,” Relicta volunteered remotely from her terminal at Salvation Army Headquarters. “I’m in town already. I’ll wear my midasmetal spacesuit and fly her up to the North Pole in my ship. If Lucifer survived a flight with her, so can I. After all, we are similar species.”

Dove objected. “No, I’ll go. My folks are behind this. Darling Relicta, you don’t dare risk it, not in your condition.”

“Did you know, PM?” Al asked.

“No! Congratulations!” PM congratulated.

“I should have suspected,” Peppermint said. “Guess I’ve been distracted.”

(A pending marriage *and* a pending birth? What more surprises await us?)

“It’s up to me, then,” PM insisted. “I’ll risk it.”

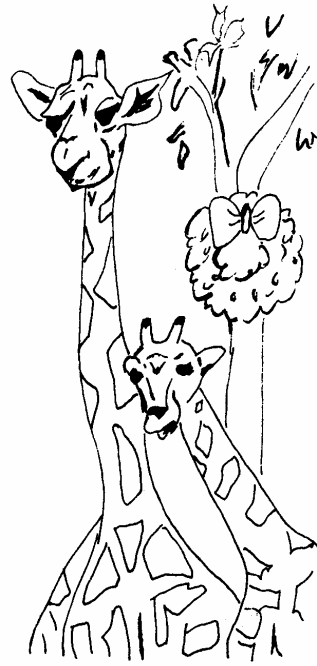
“We’ll all go,” concluded Alabaster, despite his aversion to zoos (see *Book 4*, in which Al was mistaken for an Alpaca? and imprisoned in the San Diego Zoo).

Relicta had a suggestion. “PM, we can put you in the spacesuit—then Ember can’t torch you.”

“But she’s got to touch my fur, and I have to be able to twitch my tail!” PM objected.

“I’ll open a seam at the back for your tail and a window in the helmet for a clump of your mane. If you teletransport fast, you should make it to the North Pole before too much damage is done. I hope.”

“So do I,” echoed PM.



"And what is Christmas without hope?" a voice called out from a computer speaker.

"Santa! Glad you could join us!" PM hallooed to the pixelated image.

"Good luck," he chuckled. "Can't wait to meet Ember. Bring her straight to the workshop!" He signed off.

"Glad he believes we'll succeed," Carmine smiled.

"If *he* doesn't have faith, who does?" PM affirmed.

"Carmine, what do you mean *we*? I assume you're using the editorial *we*?" Peppermint interjected.

"I'm going, Pep. You might need my help!" Carmine declared.

"No, no, no. It's too dangerous. It's elementary, my dear Poppykins. OUT THERE is treacherous for Christmas Critters. The smaller the group, the better."

"But I'm going," Lapis insisted.

"And I'm going!" parroted Geranium. "You might need an emergency evacuation, and Lapis can't teletransport without me!"

"Not yet," Lapis smirked. "But I'm practicing!"

Al and PM shared a worried look. "O.K., but no reckless risks."

Rudy piped in. "I should go. You'll need my nightlight."

"I'll be in attendance, too," Emeralda stated. "Ember knows me. She trusts me."

Peppermint nodded and patted Emeralda's paw. "I'll find her and rescue her, I promise."

Carmine shed more lonely tears at their departure.

\* \* \*

There were dastardly demons skulking in the sullen shadows encroaching on the Fifth Avenue entrance to the zoo. The early evening air was algid, and the few pedestrians on Central Park East scuttled by with their heads lowered against the wind, their faces buried in scarves wound tight round pulled-up collars.

Relicta parked her spaceship behind the restoration wall at the Frick Museum. She instructed Crystal to wait inside the craft, then she and Dove joined Al, Peppermint, Rudy, Emeralda, Lapis, and Geranium, who were waiting in the courtyard.

"Where's PM?" asked Dove.

BOING! "Sorry," PM puffed, "I used the few minutes until you got here to pop in to peruse Bruegel's small *Three Soldiers* and view Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*. I still haven't decided what's in the lady's letter."

The trees at the base of the steps into the zoo were chattering with the chirpings of gaggles of frequent flyers nesting for the night. Rudy tweeted up a

greeting to the yellow-bellied sapsuckers, brown creepers, and Carolina wrens he spotted with his red light (remember, in two past Sagas he's imagined himself a duck—specifically, a dabbling duck, a mallard—so why doubt he can speak sapsucker?).

With a “coo, coo, coo,” Penelope Pigeon perched on PM's proboscis.

“Friend, thanks for scouting things out for us,” PM greeted. “What have you found out?”

“There are multiple malevolent SEGWACian malefactors malingering in the park. There's an unusual lumination behind the penguin palace, and a distinct thermal aberration. A spaceship's anchored on Monkey Island, and Morris the Snow Monkey is not at all happy about that, let me tell you. He's been pelting it with banana peels.”

The gang silently scampered over the entrance gates. Two SEGWACians were swiftly dispatched to sugarplum dreamworld by precisely aimed karate chops from Lapis and Geranium.

They crept right along the path, scooting into umbra when they sensed a slithering SEGWACian. Finally they neared the bear pit. A whiff of putrid air stung the Monsters' sensitive nostrils. They crept up to espy Trinode, Viper, and Parasite silhouetted in front of the radiant den.

There was a heated (literally and figuratively) argument in progress.

“Viper, just fix it,” Trinode was insisting.

“What did you do to her? S-s-she was fine when *we* had her,” Viper sneered.

“I took her up to the sun, where you insisted she'd get stronger. I fed her golden apples. I even sang Stravinsky to her. Did that get her off her quivering quills? Noooooooo. So I brought her here.”

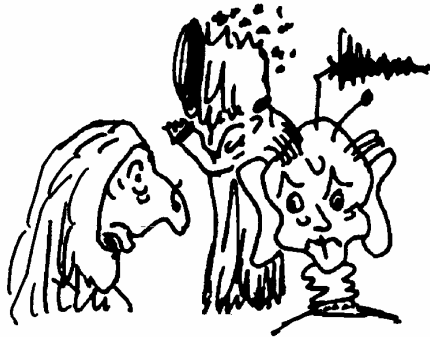
“Then why is-s-s s-s-she jus-s-st lying there?” asked Parasite derisively. “Why in blazes-s-s is-s-s her finery flopping?”

Lucifer's side antennae were emitting a foul stench, and his isolator antenna was gyrating ominously.

“Watch it, Tri!” cautioned Viper. “If you z-z-zap me, I'll be no us-s-se to you. Z-z-zap that s-s-simmering s-s-simpering peacock again, s-s-s-he'll be no us-s-se to *us-s-s-s-s!*”

“She's no use now! Fix it!”  
Trinode commanded and stomped away to his ship.

PM and Al padded nonsonantly closer to the den. Peppermint approached from the other side, Emeraldalda clutching his tail.



A loud splash from the polar bear pool broke the silence.

“Oooooooooee! Paula, c’mon in! Better enjoy the hot tub before the water cools.”

A burst of steam rose overhead, and PM glimpsed Paul R. Bear lounging in the pool, his head luxuriating against a rock, a manicured paw toasting a tankard of lemon fizz.

The noise drew Viper and Parasite away from the den, and the four older stealth Christmas Monsters snuck in while Lapis, Geranium, and Rudy kept guard.

The SEGWACians’ dismay had not been unfounded. Ember, crammed inside a midasmetal cage in the polar den, was fading fast. Golden apple seeds crackled underfoot as the Christmas Monsters tiptoed across the concrete.

“Shhhh!!” shushed Peppermint.

“Shhhhhh!” shushed back PM.

Al examined the lock on the cage. Peppermint lumbered over, magnifying glass in paw. “A SEGWACian XXXNOXMAS lock,” he whispered. “No problem.” He withdrew a candy-cane skeleton key and swiftly tickled the tumblers until the door swung open.

Despite her weakened state, Ember was still emitting parching heat. Emeraldalda knelt as close to the Firebird as she could. “Ember, it’s Emeraldalda. We’re going to get you out of here. This is my friend PM. I told you about her. She’ll take you to the North Pole. I’ll join you soon.”

“O.K.,” sighed PM with an indrawn breath. She flicked her tail through the midasmetal suit in a test run. “It’s time.” She bent over Ember. “Use one of your talons to grab my mane.”

Ember reached out weakly and clasped a lock of fuschia fur protruding from the helmet. Sizzle. The unmistakable odor of burnt hair. “Ouch! Oh, that smarts!” A twitch of that magnificent magenta tail. BOING!

The cage was empty. The temperature plummeted.

The paddling polar bear shrieked, “Why the cold shower, Paula?”

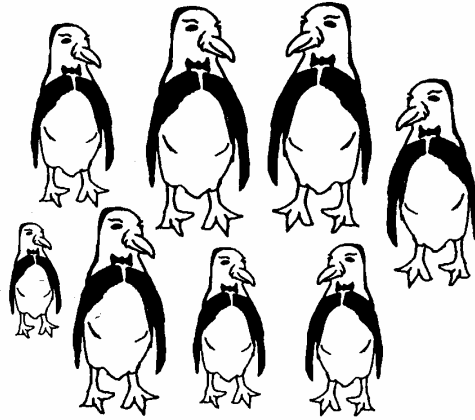
Lapis whistled a



warning.

Furtive and furry footsteps.  
SEGWACian curses. Christmas  
Monster equivalents. Fleeing  
good guys. Pursuing bad guys.

Geranium sang out, "Now!"  
From the penguin palace rang  
forth, "She Looooovvvees You,  
Ya, Ya, Ya" in Antarctic har-  
mony. The SEGWACians roared.  
Trinode's wail erupted across the  
park. The seals clapped and the  
Rodriguez fruit Fledermaus dive-  
bombed appreciation.



Lapis and Geranium linked tails with Al and Rudy and teletransported  
out. The rest of the gang hightailed to Relicta's golden orb and swirled and  
twirled up, up, and away.

\* \* \*

**P**M and Ember crash landed in the icicle garden outside Santa's front door.  
PM punched her sizzling head into the nearest snowball.

"Ouch! Get away from me!"

"Sorry, Frosty. Didn't see it was you."

Mrs. Claus ran out, peered at the Firebird melting through the ice, and  
called, "Elvira, bring the oven mitts!"

Lapis and Geranium BOING!ed in with Al and Rudy, then Relicta &  
crew landed nearby.

Dr. Arké fox-trotted over, stethoscope slung round her neck. With her  
paws in the oven mitts, she examined Ember, while Al rubbed soothing cocoa  
butter and aloe balm on PM's smoking pate.



Santa stuck his head  
out the door. "Well, Ms.  
Ember, where are we  
going to put you?  
You're turning the  
North Pole into Hot  
Springs."

Ember feebly  
blinked her adynamic  
eyes.

"Don't dump her  
in the hay," Clyde  
warned. "It would break

every North Pole fire code in the books.”

“Maybe in one of the sleighs?” Mrs. C offered.

Peppermint negated that suggestion. “She’ll melt the lacquer paintings.”

Santa ducked back in the house and re-emerged in full Christmas-ride regalia. “Let me take a look at you, Ember.”

PM cried, “No, Santa, don’t touch her! She’ll burn you. Look at what happened to my fur!” (There indeed was a mangy charred hole where once a hunk of gorgeous wavy grape mane had grown.)

Santa laughed, jiggling jellylike. “I’ll be fine! Aren’t I the one who crawls down hot chimneys into roaring fires? My boots, suit, cap, gloves, and beard have been fireproofed! That’s a thought, though. Clyde, grab my extra suit from the closet. I keep a spare, in case the cleaner gets delayed. We’ll make a futon for the Firebird out of it. But I’m afraid she can’t stay here much longer. Ember’s diatheramancy is warping the iceblock foundations of the workshop. Soon my elfin helpers will have to tap out the toys on a cruise ship.”

Rudy slid over an antique metal sled. “I found this in the storeroom, Santa. Put her on it, and I’ll pull her farther from the workshop so Dr. Arké can continue her examination.”

Santa gently lifted Ember, wrapped in the backup suit, onto the sled. Rudy and Blitzen tugged and tugged away, the Christmas Crew tagging behind.

Ember was very, very weak. Dr. Arké prescribed pine nuts and hetastarch. “I think she may have heartburn from all those golden apples,” she diagnosed. “The pine nuts will provide protein.”

The prescriptions filled, and slowly consumed, Ember perked up a bit.

Al was conferring with Dr. Arké. “Ember could be a phoenix. Maybe she’s reached the end of her 500-year life and has to burn up so she can arise from the ashes. I’ll bet that’s why Trinode wanted her. Remember, in the Harry Potter stories, two of the most powerful wands have phoenix feathers.”

Ember furiously shook her avianic head. “Phoenix?” she sputtered sotto voce. “Do I look like a suicidal Arabian turkey? Or 500 years old? I’ve got only one life to live. Harrumph. I no more resemble a phoenix than a Christmas Monster looks like an Alpaca.” Al grimaced.

Emeralda grinned. “You can speak again! Are you better?”

“Christmas . . . Star!” Ember whispered, her strength ebbing once more.

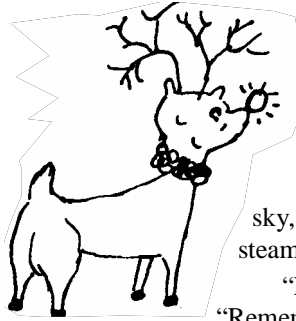
The ground under the group’s feet was getting soggy, and steam was rapidly obliterating the sky.

“Christmas Star?” asked Peppermint. “Do you get your strength from the Christmas Star?”

Ember nodded, then passed out.

“How’d you know that, Peppermint?” Emeralda purred. “You’re so smart.”





“We overheard Trinode telling Viper that he’d taken Ember in the spaceship to the sun, but she’d not gotten any stronger. So I deduced, when she just croaked ‘Christmas . . . Star,’ that that’s what she needs.”

PM looked up. There was no longer any visible sky, and thus no visible stars. “As long as she’s creating steam, the starlight will never reach her. What to do?”

“Let’s take her to the Ice Pyramid,” Relicta suggested. “Remember, that’s where the Magic Garden of the Christmas Star appeared some years back. The Star shines with unusual intensity over the Pyramid.”

“I have healing crystals at home we can try,” offered Dove. “We’ll meet you there!” He took off with Relicta and Crystal.

In a flurry of movement, with Rudy lighting the way through the now murky fog and with the somber measures of the Allegretto movement of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony blaring from Lapis’s portable CD player, the Christmas Crew tugged and pulled and worried the old metal sled bearing the weakening Firebird toward the border dwelling where Dove and Relicta reside many months each year. They increased their speed as the Seventh’s Presto movement metronomed a galloping, skipping, prancing pace.



Carminé was decking the hall of the Ice Pyramid with more tinsel for the reception when she harkened to the whoosh of the sled and the Allegro con brio of the Beethoven. Taking two seconds to arrange her bow, she gallumphed outside to discover Rudy and Blitzen, Al and PM, and Peppermint and Emeraldalda harnessed side by side, pulling the now almost comatose plumed personage (birdonage?).

“Carminé, clear a space inside for Ember,” Emeraldalda ordered.

“Excuse me? Did I hear a please? Who are you to—”

“Carminé, don’t argue. Just do it!” Peppermint barked.

“Peppermint, how could you!” Carminé bawled.

PM growled. (She sometimes does that when she’s frustrated, or infuriated. Don’t know which she was here. At any rate, she did growl. And turned a livid lavender.)

“None of that! *Please* clear a space for our guest. She needs our help.”

Carmine, chastened, ran inside and quickly pushed the ice cream wedding cake to one side of the pyramid and the swan ice sculpture to the other. The group portaged the Firebird on Santa’s suit, setting her in the pyramid’s center. Dove distributed his healing crystals around Ember. “Open the skylight,” he told Crystal, who vibrated her antennae to activate the mechanism.

As the roof of the pyramid slid open, the sky came into view, dotted with dazzling, blazing stars.

Al consulted his astronomical chart (he just this year earned a doctorate in star gazing). “The Christmas Star should appear directly overhead in four minutes!”

The group patted their paws, tapped their toes, twiddled their antennae, checked their pocketwatches, and Ommmmmed, peering up, peering down, peering up, and then peering down yet again.

“Excuse me,” Carmine interjected.

“Not now,” Emeralda hushed, glancing up.

“There’s something you should know,” Carmine tried again.

“In a minute,” Peppermint said, glancing down.

“Now!” Carmine cried, grabbing Peppermint with one paw, spinning him around, then pulling PM’s tail.

And all had to look down, because looking up, they saw only steam. Looking down, they saw the Pyramid floor had become a three-inch-deep swimming pool.

“We’re melting, we’re melting!” cried Relicta.

“Hurry, take Ember outside!” ordered Al. “Before the Christmas Star passes by.”

The Firebird was removed to the outdoor permafrost.

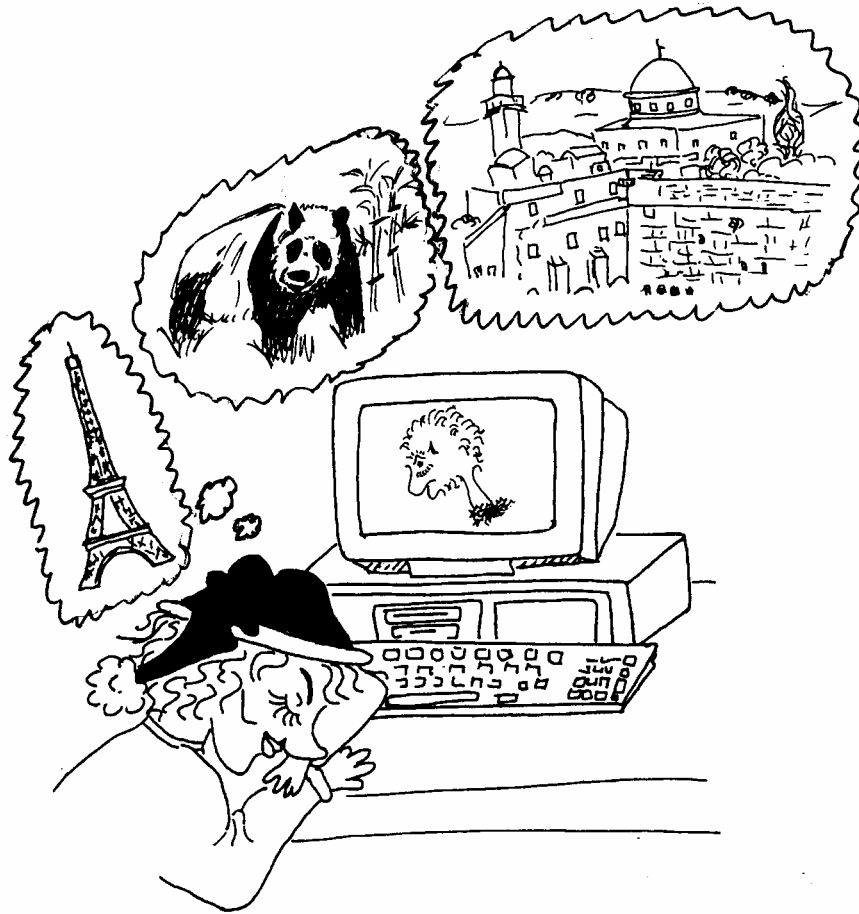
Carmine surveyed the Pyramid. To her left, the wedding cake was now a gigantic scoop of strawberry-and-cream goo. To her right, the ice-carved swan had transmogrified into a piddling floating partridge. The garlands now drooped from the remaining two feet of Pyramid wall, and the tinsel had joined with the snow bunting to form splotches of aluminum slush.

“My reception! It’s ruined!” Carmine collapsed dejectedly in a puddle, adding a torrent of cascading tears to the wetlands.

\* \* \*

“Chronicler! Where the heck are you?”

You know perfectly well where I am, PM. You’re looking at me on the despicable two-way video cam you installed on my computer to keep tabs on me. As you can see, I have been diligently typing in the amazing feats of the Christmas Monsterland and North Pole Crew as you face and successfully solve this year’s Christmas Crisis.



"Maybe. But I also see you're watching a rerun of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. You have to come up here!"

Why? You're doing the job so well yourself. Remember, you're the one who told me in January that you were displeased with last year's Saga and that I was to keep myself out of this year's. I quote, "The Saga is not supposed to be about you-you-you, but about me-me-me (fa so la ti do!)." I'm sticking to our agreement: I write (I'm a writer, it's what I do, who I am), you solve the Christmas Crisis.

"At least you've given us a Crisis, unlike last year," PM huffed.

Be careful what you wish for, I always say.

"You owe me."

For what?

"Didn't I teletransport you to St. Louis for your Mom's 90th birthday party, since you couldn't afford a plane ticket?"

Well, yes, and I thanked you for that. Besides, you offered only because you knew I had bought her a trunkful of truffles. Which she never got to eat. Because *you* gobbled them.

“Chronicler, it’s up to you to bail us out. We’re down to our last idea. You’re it!”

Yeah, right. One middle-aged, middle-class, Upper West Side liberal with middling midriff spread is going to save Christmas for the world. Did you happen to catch the results of the November election? Who are you kidding?

“Chronicler, you’ve been having a midlife crisis for five years now. Enough already. You’re just feeling sorry for yourself because you didn’t take a trans-Atlantic or trans-Pacific journey this year, which was, as you know, your own fault for burying yourself under a Himalayan mountain of debt that even the Abominable Snowman couldn’t dig out of. Get over it! You are, I repeat, *are*, going to keep Ember’s fire from going out.”

My fire went out two years ago. I didn’t notice you helping to reignite it. In fact, I remember you taking away the matches.

“That was to help you quit smoking. Pack your portable PC, charge your cellphone, and get ready. Here I come!”

BOING! She’s just landed head first in my six-foot-by-six-foot hovel. I guess I’m going to have to conclude this Christmas Crisis yet again. I’ll be back.

\* \* \*

Where we landed, I have no idea. First I thought it was London on a bad night, the fog was so pea-soupy. Wishful thinking. Then I was sure we were in a steam room at a luxury resort. Again, wishful thinking. I latched onto PM’s tail and trailed behind. Maybe, the Okefenokee Swamp? My steps complained: squish, squish, muck, squish, squish, muck. PM waded her way toward a blinking red beacon.

The flashing light beckoned us toward a mini yellow hemisphere. As we neared, I had my first glimpse of the ailing Firebird.

She reclined on Santa’s suit, her wings furled but faintly flapping. Despite her frail condition, each feeble inhale sucked in cool air, each exhale excreted hot air.

“She has Firebird Fever,” Al explained. “There’s only one way we can think of to cure it.”

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked PM. At least, I think it was PM. Puce is so hard to make out in a fog.

“You’re going to fly Ember closer to the Christmas Star,” I heard her voice.

“I don’t think so,” I protested. “Let Relicta do it.”

“It’s too dangerous in her mother-to-be state,” Dove argued.

“Then Santa can take her with him when he takes off tomorrow night,” I argued back.

I got whacked by a furious tail. "No. It'll be too late!" That was definitely PM.

"Then *you* take her," I said. "You're the one who insisted you are the hyacinthine heroine of these Sagas. Be heroic!"

"I don't know how to fly the spaceship, and I can't teletransport Ember into space without burning up myself. This is getting ridiculous. The North Pole is melting. Christmas Monsterland is melting. Soon we'll be on floating icebergs, sailing to the Bermuda triangle. You *are* going to blast off into space with Ember, point her toward the Christmas Star, and allow the Star to refuel our Firebird friend."

"Okey dokey, artichokey," I agreed. "Give me the spacesuit and point me to the rocket."

"Nope, I'm wearing the suit."

"What's to prevent *me* from burning up?" I protested.

"You said you lost your fire, didn't you?" PM chuckled. "Just kidding. You'll wear Santa's backup outfit. Since you gained all that weight, it should just about fit."

"Ho, ho, ho, very funny. But minor problem. Ember's on top of it."

A solemn procession carried the Firebird, the bearers at the front waving paws and hands and antlers in front of them, feeling their way until we reached the golden orb floating in lapping waves somewhere in what was quickly evolving from swamp into pond into lake into sea into ocean.

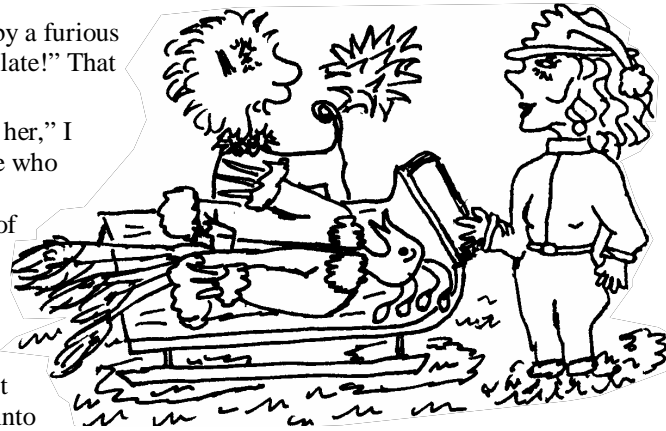
Al and Peppermint carried Ember up the ramp and slid her onto the onboard midasmetal settee and hurried out of the saunalike ship. PM, after donning the midasmetal protective gear, gently lifted the Firebird off Santa's suit and handed the wardrobe to me. I garbed myself (I'm pleased to report it was way too big! Must be all that walking I've started to do).

I stared at the console. "I don't remember how to fly this!" I complained.

Relicta called in. "It's like riding a bike, you never forget. Besides, there's an instruction book in English to the right of the joy stick."

"*Press Ignition,*" I read. "Check. *Press Lift Off Button.* Check. Oops. Missed a step. *Enter Coordinates.* WAIT! We're going up. Where are we going?"

"We're following the Christmas Star!" PM trilled, patting Ember gently



with her midasmetal gloves.

I popped Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, the March to the Scaffold section, into the CD player. PM was not amused.

"I would think you'd want to hear 'Star of the East, Oh Bethlehem Star,' " she muttered.

The steam thinned out when we reached a higher altitude, and I steered a course upward through the atmosphere, trailing the exhaust disappearing through the ozone hole.

"Now where?" I asked.

"East," PM said.

"We're above the North Pole," I reminded her. "Which way's east?"

"Al forgot to give me his astronomical chart," PM apologized.

"Great," I said, and tissueed the drenching dewdrops off my forehead.

"There's a homing device here to the North Pole Satellite, which positions itself to the Christmas Star," I discovered, then announced.

I pressed the button, and we gyrated and swirled toward the heavens.

(I swore—oops, forgot, not allowed to swear here, how 'bout promised?—that I was never, ever, ever again going to bail out of another Christmas Crisis by spinning off into space. But here we are again, Dear Reader, and I apologize. But if we are to save the Firebird, spin we must.)

"Uh oh," PM declared.

"Uh oh what?" asked I.

"Look-out-the-rear-window uh oh."

I peeked in the rearview mirror. Another spaceship was following us, and gaining ground.

"That's not the shuttle, is it?" I inquired with not much optimism.

"Unh-unh."

"It's Lucifer, isn't it?"

"Uh huh."

"I'm going to blast him out of the sky, aren't I?" I asked. "It's the new policy of pre-emptive strike."

Santa's face appeared on the onboard CRT, and his voice boomed out from the stereo speakers. "That may be your president's policy, but it's most definitely not North Pole Policy!"

"But he's an evildoer!"

"Slapping a silly, simplistic label of immorality on him won't make your act of violence moral. Before you take a single life, you'd better be sure you can live with the moral consequences—they'll stay with you forever. As will lives destroyed in your name. Let me read from *our* policy book: 'Blessed are the

peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.’ And, ‘How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.’ And one more, ‘Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.’ Find another way,” he ordered, and signed off.

“Easy for him to say,” I muttered. “My intelligence tells me Lucifer’s got weapons of mass destruction that he’s not afraid to use.”

“You have no proof,” PM said. “So we must continue our policy of deterrence and containment.”

“You contain him. I’m wanna blast him!”

“No!” PM negatived. “What’s with you trigger-happy Americans? Keep flying. Besides, Relicta took the laser guns offline years ago.”

A whiny, raspy voice croaked across the two-way radio. “Relicta? Do you have something of mine there? Wasn’t my plan masterful? I steal the Firebird. If the legends are true, I get a new weapon for my arsenal. If you happen to recapture her, I win again, and make the N.P. a mud puddle, open up ANWR for oil drilling, and pollute and flood the world!”

“You here to gloat, Trinode? What do you want?” I squeaked back.

“Chronicler? I thought you were banned from the banal banterings of the Sagas. What do I want? Hmmmm. I envision a Hobbesian nightmare: ‘No arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.’ Doing pretty well, aren’t I? For my next number, I’m gonna erase the penciler of the parables, and blast you out of the sky!”

“He’s stolen my idea!” I complained to PM, my hand over the mike.

“I’ll go over and negotiate,” PM whispered.

“He’ll zap you with his isolator ray!” I protested.

“I’ve got on the suit, remember?”

“Yeah, but it still has the hole in the helmet, and your tail’s still sticking out.”

She paid no heed. She rarely does. With a cramped crink of her tail, she was gone.

“Now what?” I turned to Ember. “Or, better, now *where*?” I checked the rearview mirror again. Trinode was gaining on us.

Ember rolled and propped herself on her left wing. Gazing wistfully out of the dashboard window, she scanned the constellations. She whistled, then squawked and pointed her right wing at an irradiance peaking out from behind the moon. I navigated around the lunar rock, waving to the Man in the Moon. Then there it was! The Noëlic nova!

“ ‘For we have seen his star in the east,’ ” quoth I. “Now what?”

“Space walk,” she whispered.



"But there's no other suit!" I said.

"I . . . don't . . . need . . . one," she whimpered.

"I do!" I complained. "And PM's got the helmet and the pressured astronautical getup. Where is she? Lucifer's got her, I know. Oh dear, this is definitely not going well."

"Help me . . . to the door. Tie me . . . with that strand . . . of Christmas lights."

I did what she requested. "Now . . . open the portal," she instructed.

"But I'll be sucked out, too!" I cried. "Remember, I'm not a magical mystical mythical being, only a mundane mortal."

"Fasten . . . seatbelt. Hold . . . breath!"

I pushed the button labeled *Open Hatch*. With a giant sucking sound, the ramp lowered. Fortunately (for me), Relicta's craft was fitted with oxygen masks, which dropped down when the pressure sank. Fortunately, too, Santa's suit was designed for high-altitude flying, so my capillaries didn't explode nor did I faint, and I was able to record the space walk—or space flight.

Ember, floating before the Christmas Star, spread her wings and widened her tail feathers. Her bejeweled plumage and crown sparkled and glittered. Her red feathers burned crimson, her yellow down shone golden. She was as magnificent a creature, posed against the starry night, as any might ever see.

I could not take my eyes off her, and thus didn't see Lucifer's spaceship until it was hovering next to us.

"Uh oh!" I cried to Ember. "We've got company. Get back in here!"

But Ember flapped one wing at me, then waved to the other ship. Its flight lights were blinking in time to my recording of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. And waving back from the front seat of Trinode's control console was—PM! She indicated the two-way radio in her paw, and I picked up mine.

"PM?"

"Roger that," she replied. "Well, not Roger that. PM that." Then she lilted a lyrical "Would You Like to Swing on a Star?"

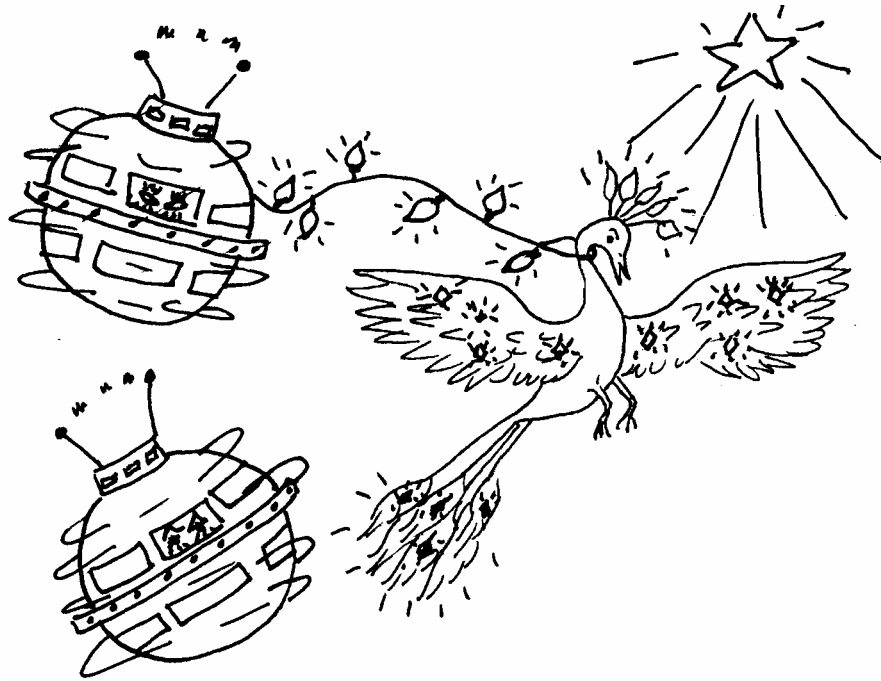
"Where's Lucifer?" I interrupted the musical divertissement.

"I caught him by surprise—landed on top of him and bent his isolator ray. Before he could react, I flipped the switch to autopilot, BOING!ed him to Baghdad, and BOING!ed back here. The inspectors can ask him about *his* illegal weapons."

"What took you so long?"

"I had to figure out how to fly this thing. His instruction booklet is written in ¥ƒ¥ı."

We sat back in silence and marveled as Ember billowed her wings like sails and captured the miraculous rays of the Christmas Star. One by one, the



little bulbs on her tether glittered on, first red, then green, then yellow, then blue, until all were blinking merrily in sync with the blinking lights on the two space vehicles.

Ember, now reinvigorated, flew back inside the ship. I pushed the *Close Hatch* button and removed my mask.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"Much, thank you."

"It's not as hot in here," I reported to PM with puzzlement.

Ember explained: "When my powers are recharged, I can control the temperature. You see, I'm a Christmas Firebird. My purpose in life is to wing it all around the world, spreading the warmth and glow of Christmas. I warm the hearts of those who see me, and replenish their souls with the glow of Christmas love. If I can't regulate my temperature, think of the environmental damage I can cause."

"I've already seen!" I said. "Instant global warming. Or, at least, North Pole slush."

PM's voice crackled over the radio. "Just got off the horn with S.C. He and the gang managed to pump most of the water out of the chapel before everything froze again, but it's now an ice rink, and Emerald's skating figure 8's and quadruple salchows. Santa said you should land Relicta's ship at your place. I'm to fly to Lake Christmas Monsterland—that was Al's joke—and

pick up the instruments and the band. We'll just make the concert!"

"It's the Night Before the Night Before Christmas already? Where has the time gone? Have you checked Trinode's ship for bombs or booby traps?"

"If there's anything askew, the I.P.S. will bounce it off—and me with it!"

"Happy landings!"

In starts and stops, PM aimed the craft toward the northern ozone hole. I couldn't watch. I programmed Relicta's ship for West 76th Street and landed on the roof of my building with a minor thud and a major dink in the landing gear.

After introducing the Firebird properly to Penelope Pigeon, who normally nests on my fire escape, I gave Ember a tour of my hovel and showed her my favorite lacquer box.

"That's my great-grandmother," cried Ember. "She was a Sun Firebird. I'm the first Christmas Star Firebird in the family."

\* \* \*

Madison Square Garden was rockin' 'n' rollin' to Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives. Ember and I had box seats, where we were joined by Emerald. She hugged her fiery friend in joyful reunion.

On stage, PM was finishing a stirring rendition of "The Hallelujah Chorus." Thunderous ovation.

After the applause died down, and the audience choir of consumptive coughs subsided, Peppermint grabbed the mike.

"Thank you, thank you very much. This annual concert to benefit Save the Children, The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, and arts institutions from the Metropolitan Museum to Carnegie Hall, the Philharmonic, A.B.T., and N.Y.C.B., has special meaning for all of us in Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole."

Peppermint continued. "Now, I'd like to introduce the band. You all know PM. On drums, Alabaster Eggshell and our newest musician—on the triangle and xylophone—Lapis Snowflake. Relicta, on the synthesizer. Elivira Fernhat on bass and Clyde Elf on keyboards. Rudy, on jingle bells. And our pulchritudinous Paunchettes—Flame, Alazarin, Rosette, and our two newest, Geranium Amethyst and my beloved fiancée, Carmine Poppy!"

More applause. And coughs. And talking. And program rustling. New York audiences are the worst.

"As those of you who read the Saga will soon discover, we had a Christmas Crisis earlier today." (As you must be aware by now, a crisisless Christmas makes for happy holidays but lousy literature.) "Carmine and I were supposed to be married tonight at the North Pole following the concert. But the chapel flooded, and the reception Pyramid is now an icy archaeological dig. Carmine thinks the wedding's been canceled, not only because of the Crisis,



but because I behaved like a fool and took her for granted.”

Carmine blushed a deep naphthol crimson.

“So in front of all these witnesses, on my knee, I ask again—Carmine, will you be my Christmas Monster mate, to have and to hold?” And Carmine, once more in soppy tears, hugged him and planted a noisy smooch on his lips.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Emeralda, next to me, wore an enigmatic, wistful smile.

“In that case, I introduce our surprise guest. Those who followed the joint House Un-Christmas Activities Committee hearings back in ’81 but are non-believers will recognize him as Dr. Tannenbaum, the North Pole historian and anthropologist. The believers—and I bet almost all of you are—will need no further introduction. Here to present our wedding vows—Santa Claus!”

Tumultuous exultation. The SEGWACians seeded in the audience were taken by surprise and unprepared to wreak harmful havoc.

Out strode the Clausman, in person, a day early, carrying the Paunch

family Bible. PM helped Pimento and Rose Poppy tie the special wedding bow on Carmine, and Strawberry and Lobster Paunch popped a top hat on Peppermint's topknot.

The ceremony was brief but eloquent. Peppermint's and Carmine's "I do," "I do" preceded Santa's "In the name of Peace, Love, and Christmas, I now pronounce you Monster and Monster."

Applause as the band struck up "Silent Night."

Peppermint and Carmine danced an enamored tango. Ember flitted over the guests, spreading carolic cheer.

PM grasped the mike. "Thanks for coming! Santa has to leave now, with the elves and reindeer. They've got about 24 hours before his flight. But there's more music to come. And a wedding photo session at the Rockefeller Center



tree. Chronicler has graciously offered her hovel for the reception, and you're all invited!"

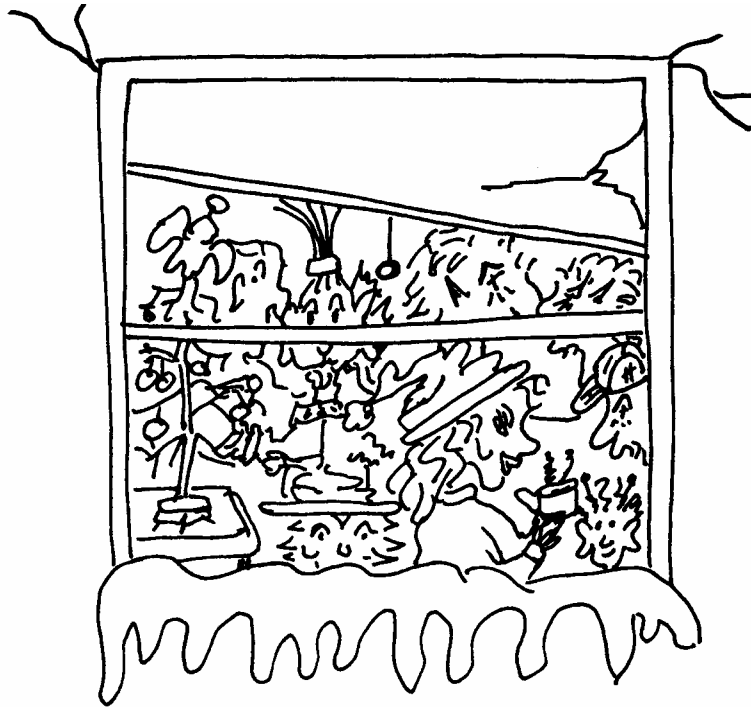
I did? They are? No one told me. Visions of the Saga covers lying half-painted on the piano and the dazzling Austrian and Czech doodads strewn across my floor danced in my head.

"I didn't think you'd mind," PM explained when she popped up next to me.

All I could stutter was, "Hope Fairway's still open. And the Häagen Dasz store."

\* \* \*

The party has gone on all night. I crept out on the stairwell with my laptop (we writers never leave home—or hovel—without it) and tortured out the final taps to the Saga. Ember swooshed off to St. Petersburg after catching a



performance of New York City Ballet's "Nutcracker," where she offered Maria Kowroski pointers on portraying a Firebird (not that she needs them). PM and the gang exited just in time for the sleigh pullers to be strapped in their harnesses. Carmine is taking the third-sleigh-puller spot this year. After the circumnavigation, she and Peppermint will get dropped off at the honeymoon cloud castle at the end of the rainbow.

I have been evicting the last of the revelers, including the conga line of mice dancing the macarena under my radiator (they're so retro, and so out of here!). If I can excavate my suitcase from under the debris, I might catch my flight to St. Louis.

**Wishing one and all a warm-hearted Christmas  
and an irenic New Year!**



**The PM SAGA: A CHRONOLOGY**  
*27 Years, 25 Sagas, 1 Poem, and 1 Apology*

- [1] **A Christmas Fable, or A Star Is Born:** PM, despite a perceived handicap, practices and practices and wins the role of Santa's lead sleigh puller.
- [\*] **A NOW Christmas Story:** Although not officially part of the PM Saga, this poetic parody reports the historic ride of Mrs. C. when Santa becomes incapacitated.
- [2] **Another Christmas Story:** The North Pole is afflicted by Apathia Sowhata.
- [3] **Crisis At the North Pole, or Yet Another Christmas Story:** SEGWAC malevolently disorients the North Pole crew with a hallucinogenic drug.
- [4] **A Christmas Love Story, or The PM Saga, Book IV:** PM becomes North Pole Ambassador, is kidnapped, and meets Alabaster Eggshell, the Christmas Monster of her dreams.
- [5] **A Very Moral Christmas Story, The PM Saga, Book 5: The Fantasy Strikes Back:** Santa is called before the Un-Christmas Activities Committee by the Purity Plurality.
- [6] **A Christmas Visitor, or, The PM Saga, Book 6: Ho! Ho! Ho! A UFO!:** The North Pole is bonked by an alien spacecraft carrying Relicta, the ET IT; and PM and Alabaster get married.
- [7] **The Prodigal Elf, The PM Saga, Book VII:** Clyde Elf, blinded by Hollywood stars, deserts the North Pole to seek fame and glory, only to dredge the depths of debauchery.
- [8] **The Good SEGWACian, The PM Saga, Book VIII:** The Christmas crew receives help from an unexpected source, and PM gobbles chocolate and champagne in preparation for a Christmas Day mating ritual.
- [9] **A Christmas Soap Opera: As the North Pole Spins, The PM Saga, Episode IX:** A dastardly plot is perpetrated to kill the expectant purple parent-to-be, and we are introduced to the new progeny, Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst.
- [10] **The Parable of the Lost Christmas Monsters, The PM Saga, Book X:** The harried parents search for their wandering offspring, and we hear the legend of "The Doll With the Sad Eyes."
- [11] **Summit At the North Pole, The PM Saga, Book XI:** Viper Carrion and St. Nick confer at the North Pole, and the SEGWACian despot is presented with a magical silver ornament.
- [12] **The Chronicler's Tales, The PM Saga, Book XII:** Your storyteller, despite Literary Laryngitis, renegotiates her contract in an atmosphere of technology run amok.



- [13] **A Very Crazy Christmas**, *The PM Saga, Book XIII*: Malevolent SEGWACian microwaves cause the character traits the Christmas Characters work hardest to suppress to become dominant.
- [14] **The Sublime State of Christmasness**, *The PM Saga, Book XIV*: During teletransportation, PM evaporates into a higher level of Christmas consciousness.
- [15] **The Magic Garden of the Christmas Star**, *The PM Saga, Book XV*: The North Pole is bankrupt, and only the Christmas Star and magic flowers can save Santa's ride. Crystal Camellia is born to Relicta and Dove.
- [16] **The Wonders of Christmas Monsterland**, *The PM Saga, Book XVI*: Your Chronicler, to earn a little extra, conducts a tour of PM's homeland. The Story of the Cave of the Time to Come.
- [17] **Lights! Camera! Christmas!** *The PM Saga, Book XVII*: PM's Saga becomes a movie, almost. Lucifer Trinode, an evil alien with an isolator ray, makes his first appearance.
- [18] **Ho Ho Ho! Oh No! Yet Another Christmas Crisis!** *The PM Saga, Book XVIII*: Lucifer Trinode and SEGWAC recycle previous Saga plots to threaten Christmas once again.
- [19] **The Mystery of the Metamorphic Christmas**, *The PM Saga, Book XIX*: Where, oh where, has the Christmas Spirit gone? Lucifer Trinode and SEGWAC sucked it out with a giant vacuum cleaner.
- [\*] **Christmas 1996**. The Chronicler regrets that there's no Christmas Crisis this year.
- [20] **The Return of Christmas Monsterland**, *The PM Saga, Book XX*. PM fires Chronicler for her dereliction of duty. SEGWAC steals all the music, note by note, ensuring a monotonous holiday.
- [21] **A Roaring Good Christmas**, *In Search of a Crisis! The PM Saga, Book XXI*. The Christmas Crew goes in search of a Crisis and finds a South African lion king.
- [22] **A Transcendental Christmas**, *Ommmm for the Holidays, The PM Saga, Book XXII*. When Dove loses his Ommmm and sells all the toys, PM leads the Gang to Japan and China to find inner peace.
- [23] **All I Want for Christmas**, *Or, Hippy Holidays! The PM Saga, Book XXIII*. Peppermint Paunch falls in love with a beautiful, ambitious young Christmas Monster who almost lures Santa to his doom.
- [24] **In Serious Search of the Christmas Spirit**, *Another Chronicler's Tale, The PM Saga, Book XXIV*. A tragedy in the Big A leaves Chronicler with a Crisis of conscience and a quest for the meaning of Christmas.
- [25] **The Glow of Christmas**, *Or, The Heat Is On, The PM Saga, Boox XXV*. The Christmas Star Firebird is kidnapped, and the North Pole becomes a tropical island.