



Christmas Con Brio

With a Song in Our Hearts

The PM Saga, Book XXVI

by Susan Kirby



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“I want to be a sleigh puller,” Lapis Snowflake announced to no one in particular, just floating it in the air as he unwrapped the special blown-glass ornaments. He gently handed a delicate dewdrop to his father to hang on the freshly cut balsam just delivered from the nearby Christmas Monsterland tree farm and now center stage in the family cave.

“That’s nice, son,” Alabaster Eggshell said, teetering precariously on the pouffe perch he’d mounted to reach the top limbs.

PM* interrupted humming *Deck the Halls* to smile at her teenage son. “When did you decide this?” she queried. “You don’t have much time for me to coach you for the auditions.”

Her blue-maned, silver-furred progeny studied his pawnails. “From the first day I knew about them,” he mumbled. “Probably since I was one year old. I’ve always think that’s what I wanted to be.” He tossed his dad another ornament.

*PM, short for Purple Monster, is Santa’s lead sleigh puller and North Pole Ambassador, and the heroine of the PM Sagas (a bit of “duh” here, huh?). She’s married to Alabaster Eggshell, and the happy Christmas Monsterland couple have twin teenage Monsters: Lapis Snowflake and Geranium Amethyst. We’ll dispense with further descriptions in this footnote, since I’ve tried very, very hard to espouse exposition throughout our story.

Al nabbed the hanger with an incisor and used a paw to find just the right spot for the crystal angel. “Hmm,” he hummed as he reached to place it, “I thought you wanted to be a detective like your Cousin Paunch. Or a computer whiz. And you said you liked working for me at the law office. But if you want to be a sleigh puller, Lap, go for it! We Eggshell men follow our dreams.”

PM persevered. “What song are you using? Would you like me to listen, give you a few pointers?”

Geranium Amethyst passed one end of a cranberry string from her magenta paw to her mom’s mauve paw, then shook her red mane at her twin brother. “Lap, are you going to tell them, or am I?” she asked.

Lapis twiddled a glittery red-white-and-blue Nutcracker ornament, weighing his response.

* * *

What audition? You well might ask, especially if you’re relatively new to the PM Sagas. I’ll tell you (it’s my job).

December in Christmas Monsterland is the merry time of year when young and not-so-young Monsters bite their pawnails in anticipation of the annual sleigh-puller tryouts.

Dear Readers, return to the glory days of yesteryear and an excerpt from the first PM Saga:

Every year Santa Claus sent an army of his elves to hold the Sleigh-Puller tryouts, where twenty-five were weeded out for Santa’s arrival on Christmas Eve. Santa then picked thirteen to pull his sleigh, based on their gracefulness, poise, and ability to sing “Jingle Bells” and “Here Comes Santa Claus” in four-part harmony.

You may remember that PM won that famous contest—which at the time was limited to the supermajority population of red, green, green-red and red-green Christmas Monsters—despite her very obvious PURPLENESS, a victory that inspired this almost-annual allegory.

Recall, too, the profound moral of that first tale:

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

Who among you dare forget those immortal words, penned oh so many years ago? (Well, of course, not me, since I pecked them out on an I.B.M. Selectric typewriter in that primitive era, but who among you?)

As the years have progressed, we have come to know that that audition led to fame (if not fortune) for Purple Monster, who remains to this day



From the PM Saga Archives, Book I

Santa's foremost propulsive power. And because she never takes her position for granted, the magenta marvel practices daily and coaches aspiring sleigh pullers who seek the incredible lightness of flying in one of S.C.'s harnesses.

Those paying attention throughout these one score and seven years know that in addition to St. Nick's SAINT NICK I, numerous refueling sleighs are scattered high above both hemispheres on Christmas Eve. These holiday haulers also require Christmas Monster propulsion, plus additional reindeer power. (Rudy insists I remind you that reindeer, too, have their place in the North Pole's aeronautic hierarchy. The red-nosed Critter still objects to the *Reindeer no more pull sleighs than there's a little man rowing in your toilet bowl* line in *Book I*.)

The S.C. Sleigh-Puller Contract is the engine that putt-putts the economy of Christmas Monsterland, pouring zillions of bon bons and sugarplums into the C.M. coffers. The s.p. job proffers prodigious prestige, and the competition can be furrily ferocious.

PM has spent this year coaching her daughter. After all, Geranium Amethyst is now 17, the same age as PM when she went to her first audition. It's widely suspected throughout Monsterland that Geranium is a shoo-in. Hasn't she been preparing her whole life for this? She has plied, entrachated, ronds de jambed par a terre, grande jetéd and tap danced almost from the crib, and her mesmerizingly melodic mezzo rivals her mom's lilting low register and sultry high notes. And with several years of stage experience under her metaphorical belt (Christmas Monsters don't wear many



clothes, preferring to display their fur *au naturel*) as a Paunchette (backup singer for Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives, the rock 'n' roll band that performs the annual Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert at Madison Square Garden), Geranium has already overcome her initial stage fright and performance anxiety.

PM takes her coaching responsibility very seriously and doesn't play favorites. She and her niece Rosette, her main assistant, make their years of sleigh-pulling experience available to any and all who request their guidance. Carmine Poppy availed herself of this help a few Sagas ago and won a slot in the main sleigh. This year's wannabes, in addition to Geranium, include Brick (Rosette's brother), who's been a backup singer with P.P.&D. for years, but is finally confident enough to go for a sleigh-puller position after years of analysis with Freudinella Jung to get to the root of his audition jitters. And PM has popped over at least once a month to AINT NICK to work with the figure-skating, sleigh-painting Emeralda Olivine, who plans to try out again this year (her probation has been lifted for trying to turn Santa over to the Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas, also known as SEGWAC—more about this nefarious organization later—three years ago).



Sleigh pullers, once selected, remain sleigh pullers as long as they desire the job, with no need to re-audition (Emeralda is the first winner to be required to re-audition, definitely not something she wants on her résumé). But many previous selectees compete at the Christmas Eve finals to re-earn a place at the main sled or to put in a pitch for a preferred restocking station. Even PM, whose place is secure at the front and in Santa's heart, loves to outperform her fellow Monsters each year. Thus only a smattering of new empty harnesses are available every Christmas for S.C.'s sleigh and the refuelers.

But back to the beginning of this tale—what of Lapis? And his dream? Return to the cozy cavern and listen in on the Eggshell family as a well-kept secret is revealed.

* * *

Lapis (still nervously juggling the Nutcracker ornament, whose jaw was about to drop off) stuttered: "I c-c-can't sing."

PM choked on a handful of popcorn she'd just propelled into her mouth. "What? Don't be ridiculous. Of course you can sing. You're my son."

"I told you she'd never understand," Lapis muttered to Geranium. He turned back to his mother. "I can't sing—not on pitch, anyway."

"Nonsense," Al said. "I hear you all the time, when you've got the

earphones on, wailing along with those Monster Rap CD's you're always listening to—" Al stopped, then sank down slowly on the pouffe. The stereo was playing *Run, Run Rudolph*. "You know this song," Al encouraged with growing trepidation. "Let's see what you can do."

Lapis breathed deeply, opened his mouth—and produced an atonal screech that only Schönberg aficionados would find remotely musical. The young Monster had managed to add a thirteenth tone to the twelve-tone scale.

Alabaster, stunned, said: "Oh my, you're right. I thought that caterwauling when you had the earphones on was just the Walkman Syndrome—nobody ever sounds good singing that way."

"This is so mortifying," Lapis groused to Geranium.

PM, a pasty pale pastel puce, poured out, "It's all my fault. But I played Bach, Brahms, Berlioz and the Beatles continuously from Super Snerkle to the Oops! of the twins' birth! How could we not have known? Lapis, you've sung in the choir your whole life! I've heard you!"

"You *saw* me, Mom," Lapis lashed out. "I knew you expected me to sing, so I stood on the risers and mouthed along with the *Hallelujah Chorus*."

"It's gotta be that blue gene!" PM sighed dejectedly, beginning to appreciate the ramifications of her son's traumatic confession. "Your Grandfather Spruce has always loved to hear me sing, but he could never find a pitch to call his own. And your Uncle Viridian is tone deaf. Oh woe, what have I done to my boy?" She was sobbing now, whether from Lapis's assault on her sensitive ears or mother's guilt, we may never know.

Al soothed, "Now, now, PM, you know my voice isn't great, either. I'd always hoped my family's silver genes would yield silver tones, but son, I guess biology *is* destiny. I've got great rhythm, that's why I'm a drummer, but I couldn't carry a tune if Santa himself loaded it in a backpack for me. At least you've inherited my tam-tam-thumping expertise. Hey! Maybe Geranium can sing *Little Drummer Boy* and you can tickle the snare?"

PM was in despair. "That won't work, Al," she sobbed. "The rules are clear: *ability to sing 'Jingle Bells' and 'Here Comes Santa Claus' in four-part harmony*. The elves who judge the preliminaries will never push him past the fourth round. They may have dropped the color barrier, but they'll never forsake their polyphonic prejudice. Lapis, I'm *soooooo* sorry," she warbled.

"Told you so, bro," Geranium snickered with sibling snottiness. "You



never really wanted to be a sleigh puller anyway, you just wanted to be near that hussy Emeraldalda.”

“You don’t know nuthin’!” Lapis blared, then stormed out, scattering and stomping a cluster of candy canes into sugar dust as he fled the cave.



I was ensconced in the antique easy chair in my 76th Street hovel, maneuvering my torso to encourage the protruding springs to scratch an insistent itch between my shoulder blades. The TV tray, listing listlessly before the boob tube, was bedecked with the epicurean dregs of warmed-over Velveeta Shells & Cheese garnished with broccoli and sliced fried frankfurters. I was lifting a last forkful of the coagulated glop when the strangest thing happened.

Well, you’d probably think it strange, but to be honest, it wasn’t really that strange to me. There was a shriek emanating from the PC—an incoming fax, perhaps?

Nope, it was PM, in lilac lather, hijacking my computer once again for one of her not-infrequent-enough surprise Web conferences.

Expecting the usual “Chronicler, why haven’t you written my Saga yet—I haven’t seen a gosh darn word,” or, “Chronicler, where is the cover? It’s two weeks to Christmas and you haven’t even taken a drawing to the printer,” I gnawed my pasta, batting away a small gray long-tailed furry intruder who had somehow found a way past the steel-wool-and-caulking barrier I’d taken such pains to erect in January around the radiator to keep out non-rent-paying rodents.

I took a second to move the mouse (the computer mouse this time; the real one was now boogying on the stove) to click on the video Web camera PM had insisted on installing and I insisted on disconnecting last year, or was it the year before? I wanted the larger fuchsia long-



tailed furry intruder to see what a rude interruption she'd made to my prandial ingestions and thereby temper her tantrum.

But no—no tongue-lashing, but a raspy “Chron, have you seen Lapis?” through the speakers.



“Haven’t seen either of your twins since Thanksgiving after the parade. Is he missing?”

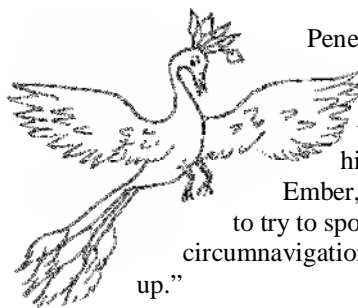
“Yes—we’ve searched all over Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole. Peppermint has every employee of the Red Green Detective Agency on the lookout, but Lap is nowhere to be found!”

“Where’s Geranium? He can’t teletransport OUT HERE unless he’s with her or with you.”

“Geranium’s with me.”

“Not to worry, then. He’s probably doing some teen thing to make you crazy,” I soothed, even though I hadn’t a clue whereof I spoke, since my memories of teenagerness were deleted from my cerebral hard drive at least a decade ago to free up space for storage of my multiple midlife crises. But I have heard that teenagers do teenage things (I do watch reruns of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to keep up).

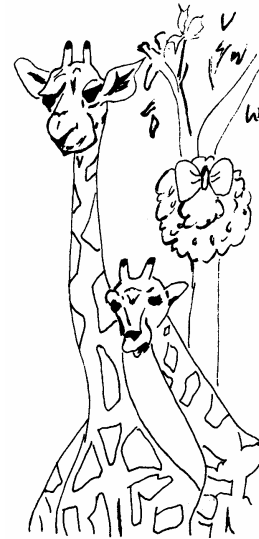
“That’s what we keep telling ourselves—he can’t BOING! OUT THERE without Geranium Amethyst. But where is he?”



“Tell ya what, PM,” I reassured her, “I’ll ask Penelope Pigeon, who’s roosting outside my window now, to send word to Gerald and Geoffrey Giraffe, Mickey, Max, Titus, and Miss Charity to keep an eye out for him. See if you can get Ember, the Christmas Firebird, to try to spot him during her next circumnavigation. I’m sure he’ll turn up.”

PM had a tear streaming down her cheek. “I’m sure I didn’t handle it well,” she confided, almost to herself, then signed off.

My “Handle what?” floated through the empty space between my ears on its way through the dark hole of cyberspace. I shrugged and turned my concentration on the Tollhouse cookie dough I was about to nuke in the microwave. I had just punched in the 45 seconds and hit START when I heard the BOING! behind me. I ignored it, not wanting to give PM the satisfaction of being surprised by her materialization into my humble



abode—she does that a lot, you know, especially around this time of year.

“Why is it that even the *whiff* of chocolate wafting from my apartment brings you here, PM?” I grumbled (how did I get so petty?). “Don’t bother looking for the Godivas. Mom said she didn’t want any this year—she’s tired of hunting for caramels sans Purple Monster molar marks.”

“Can I have a cookie, please, Aunt Chron?” (A much more masculine voice than PM’s.)

“Lapis! How’d you get in?”

“I BOINGed!” he declared proudly as the timer buzzed. I removed the cookie sludge and proffered a spoonful to the blue-maned youth before the mass transmogrified into granite.

“Where’s Geranium?” I asked, peering under the easy chair, since that was the only place she could possibly be hiding in my 6-foot-by-6-foot domicile.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Lapis answered through crumb-covered lips.

“You mean to tell me you can . . . without . . . Geranium?” I asked, astounded.

“Yep, guess so. There was quite a scene with Mom and Dad, and I took off in a tizzy toward the tundra. I galumphed across the glacier for a bit, then thought I’d talk to you. So I thunk about the blue flying tiger above your couch, twitched my tail, and—well—here I am. Cool, huh?”

“Amazing! PM didn’t discover her solitary teletransportation abilities until she was, let’s see, 19,” I reminisced as I cleared a five-foot-high stack of back issues of *The New York Times* off the sofa to offer Lapis a seat. “Your mom’s worried about you,” I noted. “I’d better call her.”

“No! She’ll pop in after me, and I’ll just have to BOING! somewhere else.”

He had a point. But obviously I couldn’t let PM and Alabaster keep worrying needlessly. Lapis and I compromised, and I sent a fax up North:

Hi ya, PM. Lapis is here, he’s fine. I told him he could hang out here for a while. I don’t advise showing up, ‘cause he’ll disappear if you appear. Must be a mother-teenage son thing. I’ll talk with him, and report back in a bit.

“Mom doesn’t like ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you’ messages,” Lapis snorted as I pushed SEND.

“She’ll listen to me,” I assured him. “She knows if she shows up, I’ll draw her fatter on the cover!”

* * *

Time for another mini digression. And an introduction. I’m Chronicler, the official purveyor of the PM Parables. I’m a writer. It’s what I do. Who I am.

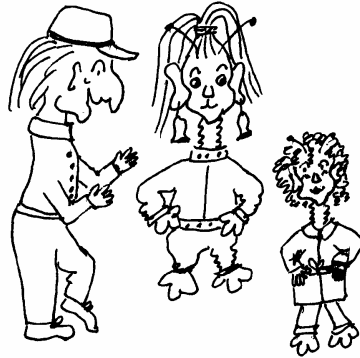
And writers provide exposition. And digressions. It's how my brain works, so get used to it. If you know all this stuff already, talk amongst yourselves or look at the pictures. We'll get back to the story in a couple of minutes.

It has reached that point when some additional Christmas Characters need re-introduction. This year, I've decided to exposit them soap-opera style.

(Scene: Chronicler's hovel. Lapis and Chronicler are seated on a rickety settee. Zoom in on Lapis.)

LAPIS: Have you seen Relicta and Dove recently? They haven't been up to their Ice Pyramid home on the border of Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole since October. Mom talks to them on the phone and sends e-mails, but I guess Relicta doesn't want to risk spinning in her midasmetal spaceship until the blessed event.

CHRONICLER: No, I haven't seen the extra-terrestrial intergalactic traveler and her ex-SEGWACian husband recently, although I did take Crystal Camellia, their almost 12-year-old daughter, to a performance of the ABT Studio Company earlier this month. Relicta must be about ready to give birth to Crystal's sibling. As we've learned, our ET IT friend has a 13-month gestation period, which is coming to a close.



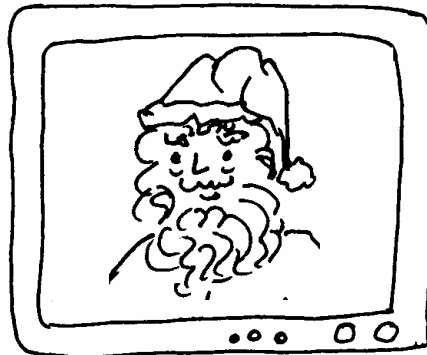
LAPIS: They must be working at the Salvation Army about now, feeding the homeless. Maybe I can see them while I'm visiting.

(See how well this exposition works? No one but soap-opera characters can pack in so much recycled explanation in one conversation. With that bit of background, we now pause for a major digression—a word from our sponsor.)

* * *

“Hi. You know me. I'm not Santa Claus, but I play him on TV. I'd like to take a moment to talk to you about CHRISTMAS. And WAR.

“An editorial recently appeared in The North Pole Times News Post Herald Gazette, which I'd like to read to you.”



Oh What an Invisible War

The new age of Reality TV is here. People who know they're being photographed for all the world to see pretend they're not on camera. Pretense parades as truth. It's not a far cry, then, to Unreality War, where truth in front of the camera is unreal, but the real truth won't be photographed. War hasn't changed—soldiers and civilians bleed and die, but it's perceived differently. If it's photographed, was it staged? If it's not on video, can it be real? Don't intrude on fantasy with coffins at Dover or injured in the V.A. hospitals or too many grieving families in Baghdad. We'd rather see nouveau celebrities eating bugs on a desert island.

During World War II and the Vietnam War, there was a collective sense that the country was engaged in a momentous event. One's country was at *WAR*—not a day went by that war didn't permeate one's existence. It was a national experience. *WAR* and *NORMAL LIFE* could not co-exist. All shared the successes and victories, for everyone had something at stake. The draft. Food rations. Gas rations. War bonds. Protests. Constant reminders that the world was not as it should be, that something terrible was going on.

But with no call for sacrifice and introspection, today's wars are fading from consciousness. People have switched channels. The first days of nonstop "embedded" reality have given way to footnotes at the end of the nightly news broadcasts—"And by the way, in closing, three soldiers, two soldiers, sixteen soldiers died today. Stay tuned for *Who Wants to Be a Gadzillionaire Idol?*, coming up after this message." Without bombs bursting in air, there's no war, is there?

Where is the communal

contemplation of the consequences of war? American deaths are given in a daily newspaper box. Perhaps we learn that an Italian, or Spaniard, or U.N. worker was killed, but dead Iraqis? Or dead Afghanis (you mean there are troops still in Afghanistan)? Can you find out how many have been injured? Somewhere, maybe, if you look hard enough, but please don't intrude on my sitcom, or *Click*; I'll turn to *Friends*. Don't give me Real Reality. And don't ask me to give up anything. I'll wave the flag and let my children pay the bills when they come due.

Unless, of course, you're a soldier. Or the family of a soldier. Then real is really real, but where's the interest if it's not a political photo op? Better to create illusion: Jessica is a heroine who was winning the war all by herself, until she's captured. She's rescued by more heroes, comes home a celebrity, then returns to Baghdad to capture Saddam Hussein.

That didn't happen? Never mind. By the time the record is corrected, the unreal has become the real. Saddam and Osama ordered 9/11. Bomb! Saddam is more dangerous than Al Qaeda. Invade! Iraq has aimed weapons of mass destruction at us! Occupy!

No W.M.D.'s? Never mind, we're there to fight terrorism. No terrorist threat? We're there to capture a dictator. Can't find him? We're there to make the Mideast safe for democracy. Yeah, that's it. Never have so many reasons been proffered, proved false, withdrawn and replaced to justify a pre-emptive attack on, and occupation of, a failed country.

The great unanswered question remains: Why the rush? Why was it necessary, with troops already in Afghanistan, to start such a morally momentous war so soon? What was the imminent threat? If Iraq was invaded to help the Iraqi people, not a reason that

resonated at the time, where were the plans to protect them and their culture, their art, their health, their daily existence? If it was invaded to impose democracy, might it not have been better to see if democracy could be made to work in Afghanistan first? Quick. Change the subject.

Let's get something perfectly clear. War and Christmas are contradictions. Christmas celebrates the birth of the Prince of Peace. Christmas Characters could emulate the U.S. and pretend there is Peace on Earth, Good Will to All, that the sun rises and sets on the land of the free and home of the brave. We could pretend that the rest of the world has no stake in what is going on on Earth. We could pretend that there is no danger that the ozone layer will disappear, the Earth will warm, and Monsterland and the North Pole will melt into the Bermuda Triangle. Santa could turn on the Home Shopping Network and pretend that little children aren't hungry and homeless, repression has disappeared, rights aren't eroding, People aren't jobless, poverty has been eradicated, and that there are no very bad People who want to kill other People, or steal from them, or take as much for themselves as they can, any way

they can.

But we can't exist that way. And Santa won't. Although Monsters and elves and reindeer and other Holiday Helpers might find it less painful to exist in blessed isolation from the suffering of the world, concerned only about tryouts and marzipan and toy manufacturing, Santa knows we can't ignore what's going on OUT THERE.

For if the world insists on destroying itself, Santa and all he stands for will cease to exist. For without People who can imagine him and put Love first, who turn away from hate and violence, Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole will fade into nothingness—and SEGWAC will have won a very, very hollow victory.

Santa will read the hearts of People and adjust his Naughty & Nice list accordingly. He has to face the faces of the little children who will inherit this world. So this season, the North Pole hopes that People think hard about what's being done in their name. There are moral questions that beg attention. And the moral choices cannot be blamed on or transferred to anyone else.

"Thank you for listening. We now return you to your regularly scheduled program."

(These infomercials can be a bit preachy and irritating, I know, but in a capitalist communications system, we depend on our advertisers. Back to our story.)

* * *

Although Lapis and I didn't know it at the time, while the teen was telling me the story of his cavern confession, a few blocks downtown in the Big A, Relicta, Dove and Crystal Camellia were walking toward the new building ascending at Columbus Circle. Or, more precisely, Dove and Crystal were walking, and Relicta was waddling on her swollen three-toed feet, her belly bordering on Clausesque proportions.

"Why do I always feel such strange uneasiness when we make our annual holiday trek to visit my family?" Dove moaned, offering a hand to his wife to help her over the construction debris covering the manhole entrance to the Carriens' new dwelling far below the gleaming glass skyscraper rising to block

the sun bathing Central Park. Not that there was much sun to block. Another nor'easter was blowing through, spewing a ton of the cold white stuff over the city.

"Because your family runs the U.S. headquarters of SEGWAC and seeks to destroy Christmas for everyone, including you, me and Crystal. They are evil, Dove. You *should* be afraid—very afraid." (ET IT's are very blunt, and grumpy, when p.g.)

"I *love* Grandpa Carrion," Crystal declared. "He's not evil." She followed her mother down a rusty ladder.

"Better not let my father hear you say that," Dove gasped. "The 'L' word is forbidden around them. My darling daughter, don't be fooled. My family is dedicated to destruction. They *are* evil, dear one, and proud of it. And the Carrion alliance with Lucifer Trinode has only strengthened their resolve to annihilate the holidays and its helpers."

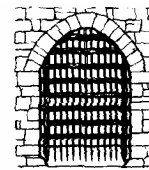
Relicta was huffing her way down the sewer tunnel, looking for the camouflaged spider hole that denoted the entrance to the Carrion family estate.

The Carrions, buoyed by the Bush tax cuts and their Halliburton and prescription drug company stock, had moved from their previous digs in the Dollar Don Trumpcard Tower to even lower digs in the new sub-sub-subterranean chamber. Dove wouldn't tell Relicta how he'd discovered the change of address, but I hear tell it had something to do with once again mingling with dastardly denizens at the Hell to Pay Bar & Grill while disguised as his twin brother, Parasite.

The hidey hole found, the trio descended further into the underworld until they reached a portcullis. Although new, an applied layer of fungus had matured enough to reek appropriately. Dove yanked the chain and the three scurried under the spiked gate toward the rotted door ahead.

"Mom must have insisted they bring the portal from the old homestead here," Dove said nostalgically, fingering the skull knocker (rumors have it that Carrions were among the original members of the Skull & Bones Society). He rat-a-tat-ka-thudded on the door.

The hinges creaked and out slithered Anaconda Adder. "Your father's-s-s expecting you," the minion hissed.



“How? We didn’t know we were coming until today,” Dove greeted his old drinking buddy.

Adder snickered. “You have no s-s-secrets from Viper, old pal. Relicta, you’re looking fetchingly fat.”

Relicta sub voced, “𐄂𐄃𐄄𐄅𐄆𐄇𐄈𐄉” (Christmas Characters aren’t allowed to curse, so I am not literarily licensed to translate this.)

As Anaconda led Dove’s family down the dingy dark hallway to Viper’s study, Dove paused by an open door and glanced in. He saw his mother, father and brother huddled in a new multimedia room, looking over his Uncle Virus’s shoulder as the hacker genius pushed buttons on a keyboard, resetting a DVD to replay on the screen.

“How can s-s-she eat that s-s-stuff?” he overheard Parasite say.

“Have you s-s-seen her bank records-s-s?” Virus sneered. “I have. Wait, here it comes-s-s. S-s-see!”

Dove lingered at the door long enough to glimpse the vision on the plasma screen, then rushed to catch up with Adder before the reptilian factotum realized he’d been lagging.

Viper’s study was chockful of new books, and Dove fingered his father’s well-worn copy of Ann Coulter’s latest. Rush Limbaugh’s irritating voice blared through the radio. A photo of the v.p. was displayed prominently, with a handwritten, “Thanks for letting me use your D.C. headquarters for one of my undisclosed locations.” There was a photo of Saddam as well, with the same inscription, but with “Tikrit” substituting for “D.C.”

“What do you think of our new video surveillance?” Parasite slimed in, slapping his brother on the back and smashing him into the gargoyle statue on the desk.

“You saw me?” Dove asked, prone on the desk.

“Of cours-s-se. We’ve got cameras-s-s everywhere, and Virus-s-s tapped us-s-s into every s-s-satellite s-s-surveillance network around. Our red-garbed nemes-s-sis-s-s ain’t the only one who wants-s-s-s to know who’s-s-s naughty & nic-c-ce.”

Relicata’s eyes widened, but she bit her tongue and settled herself uncomfortably on the iron maiden under the hanging scythe.

Viper skulked to his desk, shoving his prodigal son aside to check the gargoyle for damage. “Don’t



know what you s-s-saw, s-s-son, but it does-s-sn't matter. There'll s-s-soon be no more s-s-secrets from S-S-SEGWAC," he threatened. "Right to privac-c-cy? The threat of terroris-s-sm has s-s-scared People into ac-c-cepting more and more intrus-s-sion. Which makes-s-s my job so much eas-s-sier," he chortled.

Lucretia and Crystal were shaking hands at the door (Dove's mom has never been to aquasize, or my mom would have taught her how to hug—and do scissor kicks). "I s-s-see a lot of the Carrion s-s-side of the family in you, C.C.," Crystal's grandmother proclaimed with satisfaction.

Relicta once again bit her tongue.

Crystal held out this year's gift. Viper grabbed it greedily, ripping off the foil wrapping to reveal a gold statue of Bill Novelli, executive director of AARP, with a plaque that read: "To Viper Carrion and SEGWAC, with thanks for helping us sell out seniors in the new Medicare bill."

The slits of Viper's eyes almost moistened. "Granddaughter, I am amaz-zed that des-s-spite your pathetic do-gooder upbringing, you s-s-seem to know ex-x-actly what I want!" He scratch the statue's surface, checking the karat.

Crystal knew her grandpa well enough to accept the compliment and expect no "thanks-s-s-s." She shook his hand, then went to the corner to play with Cerberus, the Carrion family pet, placing a dog biscuit between each of his three fang-endowed jaws. Cerberus slathered a river of appreciation before his center head chomped down on one of Crystal's antennae.

Without rising, Relicta lobbed a nearby brass-knuckle paperweight, neatly bonging Cerberus on the tail, to free her daughter. The ET IT was still biting her tongue, but her antennae were quivering overtime.

The room lapsed into dead silence, the only kind the Carrions know. After five wretched minutes, Viper rose and pointed to the door. "That's-s-s long enough for your yearly s-s-spying vis-s-sit," he growled.

"They haven't asked about Luc-c-cifer Trinode yet," Parasite complained. "We *do* have our traditions-s-s-s."

"O.K., where is the other, truly vile, relic of Relicta's exploded planet, and what's he up to?" Dove obliged in a no-answer-expected cadence.

"Don't as-s-sk, don't tell!" Parasite howled. "Buh-bye, los-s-sers!" he waved as Adder shoved the trio out the door.

Relicta waddled alongside Dove through the sewer. Every time he started to speak, she dug three fingernails into his arm. The silence remained well outside the Carrion compound and during their slow amble through the park.





Once at the Central Park Zoo, Crystal ran off to visit Paul R. and Paula Bear and chat with the penguins. Relicta lowered herself onto a bench and pulsed her antennae to erect a soundproof bubble above her and Dove's heads.

"What did you see that disturbed you so?" she asked Dove.

"They had a video of Chronicler's hovel!"

There was a closeup of her chipped nails grasped around a forkful of gunk, then a wide shot of the room. Then—they must have slowed down the replay—a blue tail, a blue mane, and finally all of Lapis. He teletransported on his own!"

"And now SEGWAC knows! He'll be in danger OUT HERE!" Relicta worried.

"And now SEGWAC knows that I know that Dad and Mom and Parasite know that we know that they know that Lapis can BOING! by himself."

"We'd better let PM and Chronicler know," Relicta whispered, "even though SEGWAC's surveillance will soon pick up that PM knows that they know that we know . . . oh, never mind."



Crystal, her antennae tuned to her mother's frequency, petted a seal and mouthed silently, "Good for you, Lapis. About time us younger Christmas Critters saw the world on our own."

* * *

Some of you Dear Readers may suspect I am once again recycling old Sagas. You may be recalling *The Return of Christmas Monsterland, Book XX*, when SEGWAC stole all the music, note by note, ensuring a monotonous holiday. But I assure you that isn't the case, for Lapis has just assured me that even before that terrible Crisis, he couldn't sing a note on pitch.

"So how can I help?" I asked Lapis when he finished retelling his tree-trimming trauma.

Lapis scratched his mane. "Didn't have a plan when I came here. Didn't known I *could* come here by myself. But Chron, I really, really, *really* want to be a sleigh puller. I know down deep inside it's what I am—my soul wants to soar. So . . . maybe you could thunk up a way to make sure I win the contest? You can do that, right? You took twenty-three Sagas to give Peppermint Paunch a girlfriend, but then you gave him a second girlfriend the next year, then last year you let him get hitched to Carmine Poppy and now they're very happy. Couldn't you just create a voice for me?"

Oh, the power of a fiction writer! “Suppose I could,” I pondered. “But don’t you want to *earn* your sleigh-puller spot, not have it handed to you? Yes, I could imagine that you have a great voice. I have fantasies about a lot of things. I’ve imagined myself skydiving, but I can guarantee you 99 percent that that isn’t going to happen—ever! The odds of my jumping out of a plane are pretty close to zilch.”

“I don’t want to skydive!” Lapis interrupted my reverie. “I want to fly!” He seemed precariously close to BOINGing away.

“O.K., O.K., let’s see what we can do. I’ve just started singing lessons again,” I revealed, “and have the tape from my last lesson. We’ll work to build your speaking voice and breath support and go from there.”

First, Lapis tried a couple of *hooo, hooo*’s, seeing if he could find a pitch. A few *oo-ee-oo-ee-oo-ee*’s later, all I could say was, “Well . . . I have been to a few concerts where your singing would be hailed as the cutting edge. But I fear the elf judges will not be so *avant garde*. The key word here is ‘key.’ And I haven’t a clue what key you’re in.”

Lapis was dejected, but I had an idea. “Think Gilbert and Sullivan, patter song, rap’s precursor. Maybe you should speak-sing your audition piece.”

We devised an arrangement of *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus* that allowed Lap to speak the words, and we worked through the evening to perfect his performance, with me changing the key on my electronic controller to whatever note he managed to hit.

(You may wonder how I could possibly have a piano in such a small apartment. So do I, and I admit I had to do an archaeological dig to unearth it under the Christmas tree, the Russian lacquer boxes and a pack of stuffed bears. Brewster growled when forced out of hibernation, but quickly calmed down and spent some male-bonding moments with Lapis mourning the Mets’ season.)

Well into the night (thank goodness I’ve got thick walls, or the neighbors might have complained; the mouse scurried out hours ago), I said, “Lap, all I can say is—when you speak-sing this song, do it with confidence! Don’t you think it’s about time you teletransported UP THERE? Before your mother wrings my neck for not calling?”

Lapis grudgingly agreed, closed his eyes and flicked his tail.

Nothing.

“Maybe you’re too pooped to visualize properly?” I suggested.



"Nope. I saw my room perfectly," Lapis said.

"Maybe your tail is too tired to twitch?"

Lapis tried again, with dramatic flair.

Again, nothing.

We prepared another fax:

Lapis is ready to come home. Could ya pick him up?

"Just when I thought I was old enough to travel by myself, I have to call Mom to come get me," Lapis moaned. "The humiliations just keep on coming."

I pressed SEND, then turned to the teen. "Three, two, one!" we counted in unison, and sure enough, BOING! PM was in my kitchen, licking the last specks from the cookie tray.

I prepared hot chocolate while explaining that Lapis had worked up an audition piece. I encouraged him to show it to his mother, and despite a few pretty-well-hidden winces from her (when I hit a wrong note on the piano, when my cellphone rang, and when Lapis forgot to speak and tried to sing), she seemed pleased.

"I never did understand that song," she said. "Al has seen me kiss Santa many times, and never got jealous. Except maybe that one year. No, that was me who got jealous. Anyway, son, you have worked very hard and are doing the best you can. I must be honest—the singing contestants are outstanding this year, and you will have an uphill climb. But your passion may pull you through, especially if you get high scores in all the other rounds."

"That's what I want, Ma," Lapis yawned, "a chance to follow my dream." He followed his dream into a deep sleep on my sofa.

PM motioned for me to step outside.

"Thanks for your help, Chron," she whispered. "Nothing is more painful than admitting that your child may not be able to do what he wants to do. The world of the performing arts can be so cruel! I fear that Lapis's efforts will not get him as far as he wants to go. You know how strict the elves can be, and the singing portion makes up half the final score."

"I admit," I admitted, "that I've never heard anything quite like Lapis's singing voice. In all my years of concert going, he's a first. He knows the sounds—he's not



tone deaf. He just can't get his vocal chords to coordinate with his ears."

PM pensively pondered Lapis's predicament. "I'm going to have Dr. Arké check him out," she said, referring to the N.P. veterinarian. Then another thought, almost to herself: "I wonder why Lap couldn't teletransport home by himself. He got OUT HERE on his own."

We tiptoed back into the hovel, and PM quietly linked tails with her son and waved goodbye. Lapis would wake up on his own futon.

* * *

As PM BOING!ed away, a "You've got mail" blasted through my speakers. I found a report from Relicta and Dove of their family reunion (that's why I was able to describe it to you, with appropriate adjectives appended). Parsing the facts, I predicted that a Christmas Crisis was coming to town (for a Crisisless Christmas makes for happy holidays, but lousy literature).

PM had been cc'd, and soon her face popped up on my computer screen. "How could SEGWAC have known about Lapis's solo teletransportation ability? By the way, I like your new nightie."

Simultaneously, we turned off our Web cams. "It's not my fault!" I Instant Messaged. "*You* wanted that darn video surveillance!"

"But *you* turned it back on, for petty purposes!" she countered (why bother writing, since she reads my mind?).

"You should convince Lapis to not twitch his tail for a while," I suggested. "It's too dangerous for him OUT HERE. And you might convince Geranium, too. She'll be trying to take off by herself as soon as Lapis tells her how he did it."

PM agreed. "Both of the twins have way too much practicing to do in the next few days if they want to be ready for the tryouts. And now that SEGWAC knows that Lapis can't sing—since *you* left your camera on while he was there—who knows what awful use they'll make of that information? I'll insist that the twins not leave C.M."

(Not leave C.M.? Good for the twins, but what of the story? For many years, these Sagas have traveled the world, reporting from Israel, Egypt, South Africa, Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany, England, China, Japan, the Netherlands, Bermuda, the Caribbean, Russia, and Finland, and don't forget St. Louis, Washington, Boston, Philadelphia, San Diego and Milwaukee. Where, or where, have the travelogs gone? Why have last year's, and now this year's, Sagas been Big-Apple- and Christmas-Monsterland-bound?

(Believe me, it's not what I want. But it *is* my fault. I'm in debt up to my gray roots. I'm on a cash-only basis now, and have to make fiscally wise choices—I just typed these words, but have no clue what they mean. For the time being, I have to choose between being a travel or an arts junkie, since I

can't be both. I've decided to explore the vistas of music and dance at home. Maybe next year I'll dust off my passport again. Oh, I miss those escargots!



(Oh dear, too much information. Back to the story.)

* * *

The next few days, I toiled at The Times and did the yearly pilgrimage to Alvin Ailey (oh, those Ailey men!) and the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree. I also removed the Web cam and tossed it in the laundry bag (take *those* dirty pictures, SEGWAC!) and scanned my computer for Virus's viruses. I wasn't taking any chances.

Up at the North Pole, Clyde Elf enlisted the aid of Peppermint and Lapis to beef up security, and issued Secure ID cards for access to the N.P. Network. (I found mine on the lid of a box of truffles an extremely gracious client had sent, a box that now contained only cocoa dust, so PM must have dropped it off while I was listening to Prokofiev at the New York Philharmonic.)



When Lapis wasn't assisting Peppermint, he reported in e-mail messages, he was practicing, practicing, practicing. "But so are Geranium and Emeraldal, not that she needs to, she's purrfect." (Geranium is right about that, he *is* smitten.) "But Santa always says that hope and faith brighten the Christmas Star, so I'm hoping that I do the best I can and have faith that that will be enough."

PM faxed a note that Dr. Arké had examined Lapis's throat and ordered an M.M.R.I. There was a shadow on his larynx that the good doctor couldn't diagnose the cause of. Exploratory surgery might be required. Although I couldn't grasp the details, it seems that the larynx is somewhere down the long C.M. neck and very difficult to get to—not that I'd know, since Dr. Arké still hasn't even revealed whether Christmas Monsters have bones. They planned to wait until after the holidays for further tests. (Even though Christmas Monsters can live forever, as long as someone imagines them, they do have various and sundry ills and ailments. Fortunately, they're covered by the N.P.'s universal health plan, so PM will pay no out-of-Christmas-stocking expense beyond the 300-calorie deductible. The N.P. is such a civilized society.)

* * *

The elimination tryouts began a week before Christmas. Elvira Fernhat and Clyde Elf led the judge contingent, and the long table in the Monsterland Community Center was wired for their portable ranking PC's.

Before the auditions began, the candidates were quizzed on their language fluency, since sleigh pullers must be prepared should a sleigh crash land anywhere OUT THERE. (Your Chronicler's communication skills, such as they are, are English only, with an occasional *bon mot* thrown in for the delusion of erudite linguisticity.)

Three hundred Monsters arrived from all corners of Monsterland. After passing the language test, they were ready for the first round: Movement. (Monsters must be very agile and in excellent shape for synchronous flying.)

Geranium gained straight 10's with her charming dance to *Joy to the World*, her tap shoes dotted with ruby doodads that sparkled in the klieg lights.

Emeralda's quintuple salchows to *Good King Wenceslaus* wowed the jury, also gaining 10's.

Lapis performed a dramatic ballet to Debussy's *Poissons d'or*, recorded by Emanuel Ax. The lyrical solo was

choreographed by the dynamic young soon-to-wow-the-dance world P.Q. Monster, who'd traveled all the way from the Canadian border to set the piece on Lap. The blue-maned Monster's bateaus, brise volés and tour en l'airs had the judges tapping in 10's.

Brick, never particularly coordinated, barely eked through the round with a creative but somewhat cloddy soft-shoe to *Jingle Bell Rock*.

After Round I, 150 disappointed Monsters were eliminated, with personal critiques from PM and Rosette and encouragement to persevere for next year.

Two days later came the second round: Joke Telling. (Humor is a must for sleigh pullers, for the hours in the air are long and refueling stations extremely isolated. The s.p.'s must be able to entertain each other or they'll fall from the sky from sheer boredom.)

Geranium's sense of humor was of the ironic nature, and her rambling anecdote about the California recall election, while clever, went over the heads of some judges (not difficult, given how short elves are). But she evoked enough pixiated chuckles to make the cut.

Emeralda had them rolling in the aisles with an imitation of Van Gogh Monster in conversation with the Breughel Monster family. (You have to hear her do it to appreciate it—and also know something about Flemish and Post-Impressionist art.)



Lapis won the round, with a cocky standup routine, replete with his own “Pa-rum-pums” on the snare.

Three days later, trimmed to 100 contestants, the third round: Artistic Freedom. Monsters were permitted to show their creativity and personalities in whatever form they chose.

Geranium chose ballroom dancing, and her sultry tango in a low-cut paw-beaded gown bedazzled the judges. Dr. Arké coached from the sidelines: “You go, Ger!”

Emeralda displayed her latest lacquered sleigh panel painting, in the Palekh style, a depiction of St. Nick doing dressage with a troika. The detail was exquisite, and the judges used their teeny-tiny magnifying glasses to examine the teeny-tiny brush strokes.

Lapis’s drum solo, with a tintinnabulating tingle on the triangle finish, was boffo.

Brick composed a poem to a beloved cousin who’d chosen to enter the Cave of the Time to Come long before anyone thought he should. The poem expressed the pain of his loss, and the distress when the cousin’s beautiful grandmother followed him into the Cave a week later.

*Voids that cannot be filled—
Two necessary, important souls.
One bore too much sorrow,
One’s laughter lighted the sky.
Mozart, Beethoven, odes for joy,
To send our spirits soaring.
But this has been a Mahler year,
Too much loss to mourn,
So marvel at mortality.
We must Love more deeply and without end.*

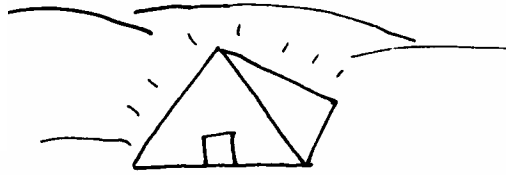
Good thing Brick was the last contestant, for his words and Mahler’s Ninth in the background left an unbroken silence.

The final final—Singing—was all that remained of the preliminary rounds, to be held at the crack of dawn the next day, Christmas Eve morning. From the 50 remaining, the elves would pick 25 for Santa’s perusal at noon. Christmas Monsterland was abuzz with restless anticipation.

* * *

Nerves weren’t on the agenda for the Gang, for the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert was only hours away. Rehearsals at the Ice Pyramid occupied the band members, with new arrangements required since Dove and Relicta remained in Gotham awaiting her labor.

PM had BOING!ed me up to report on the auditions, and I hung around



the Pyramid during the practice, tap-tapping on my laptop (a writer never leaves home without one).

My click-click-click was interrupted by an I.M. from Dove: “Chronicler, it’s time. I’m hovering overhead with Relicta. We’re landing in a flash.”

“I bet you want me to take over Relicta’s place at the synthesizer. No problem,” I tapped back.

“No! Maraschino”—that’s PM’s Mom—“has the flu and can’t midwife, ’fraid of contagion with our incoming, outgoing, whatever youngun.”

“I’ve said this before,” I tapped back, “and I’ll say it again. I don’t know anything about birthing extraterrestrials. No way. Uh-huh. Nix.”

“Too late. We’ve just landed.”

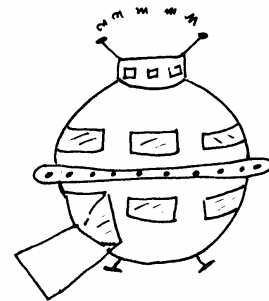
The band and assorted groupies scampered outside to greet Dove and Relicta. The mom-to-be was yelping (I think, since I’d never heard such a sound from any earthly creature). Dove grabbed me, shoved me in the spaceship’s driver’s seat and ordered, “Take the controls, Chron,” with a stern tone so unlike his usual meditative om-m-m-m’s.

“PM, please take me back to Gotham!” Dove asked PM. “Crystal’s run away. When Relicta had her first contraction, my darling wife yelled at Crystal to turn off the TV, and Crystal yelled back that she knew where she wasn’t wanted, and that if we were going to replace her, she was going to her grandma’s. Where did we go wrong?”

PM sympathized with innate empathy. “I’ve been asking myself that a lot these days.” Dove grasped her mane and the two disappeared.

Well, here we go again, I thought. I took the controls, majorly displeased to be centrifuging yet another time into the ether. “So, what’s new, Relicta,” I asked to make conversation, pulling out drawers on the console to find the Dramamine.

“Oh, ouch!” ouches Relicta. “Hurry! I need to be



upside down. Dove, I'll get you for this!"

I guided the spinning midasmetal orb toward the ozone hole directly overhead. As we ascended, Relicta screamed, then rotated until all six toes were twitching in the air. Every now and then she vibrated her antennae to send a supersonic signal. "If only Crystal would answer my call," Relicta moaned, "I would apologize and tell her how much I love her." A turquoise tear floated through the craft.

* * *

While I was off in space, turning a darker shade of green by the second, PM and Dove, in long black hoods all the better to hide themselves, were sneaking in the shadows toward the entrance to the Carrion compound. They climbed down the rusty ladder and creepy crawled through the sewer, slipping stealthily past the surveillance cameras Dove had spotted on his previous visit.

* * *

Up in Christmas Monsterland, Al, Geranium and Peppermint were getting worried. The concert was only a few hours away, and since the spaceship was being used as a maternity ward, and PM had literally disappeared, they were stranded at the Ice Pyramid with no means of conveying the band and instruments to Madison Square Garden.

So it wasn't long before my N.P. Satellite phone chimed and I was speaking with a hysterical Peppermint Paunch while a hysterical Relicta cried behind me.

"Help, Chronicler!" Peppermint pleaded. "If we don't get to the Garden soon, there'll be no concert, and The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, American Ballet Theater, the New York City Ballet, the New York Philharmonic, Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MOMA, the St. Louis Museum of Art, the . . . you know, all those wonderful recipients of the proceeds will be grievously ungratified!"

I waved to the ET IT, who was now doing zero-gravity somersaults, to get her attention. "Could we make a brief return to the Ice Pyramid, pick up a few Critters and things, and make a very short trip to M.S.G. to drop them off? Please? Won't take but a few moments," I promised.

Relicta answered with an excruciatingly loud "Ƴ°ƒ°Ƴ°ı̇," which I assumed was approval. I told Peppermint we'd be back in a flash, then asked for a favor.

It did take but a few moments to return to Christmas Monsterland. The Gang rapidly loaded instruments in the cargo bay and crammed as many band members as possible into the cabin. Al, ever more worried about PM, hesitantly agreed to allow Lapis and Geranium to BOING! with him and Peppermint, as long as they all stayed together. "There's more safety in

numbers,” Al informed the twins.

It was time to close the hatch, for Relicta was in alien agony. I yelled to Peppermint: “Did you reach her?”

“On her way by S.C. sleigh,” he assured me, and sure enough, the sled pulled up and out waltzed (Viennese style) Dr. Arké, for an emergency consult. She quickly climbed aboard the spaceship and up up and away, we whirled and twirled and swirled through the I.P.S. and on to New York.



Dr. Arké, squeezed between Rosette and Brick, worked her way to Relicta and helped the ET IT re-upside-down herself to ease the contractions.

Al, Peppermint and the twins were waiting for us when we landed on Eighth Avenue. We unloaded rapidly, then I consulted with Al, who agreed to my plan.

Lapis and Geranium climbed into the spaceship, and up we went again, aiming for the Christmas Star, for where the Christmas Star was, the North Pole Satellite would be nearby.

I wasn't sure my plan would work (but it did, or you wouldn't be reading this). I knew I would be needed to find PM or to help with the concert or to do anything, *anything*, other than help deliver extraterrestrial offspring. So once we were safely within range of the N.P.S., I made sure the communications system was working and put the golden orbiter on automatic pilot.

“If you need anything, call my satellite phone!” I instructed Dr. Arké. “But if all goes well, Relicta will soon have a new youngster, and she'll be able to land the spacecraft at the Ice Pyramid herself!”

With mucho fear for my disassembling molecules, I let the twins BOING! me back to earth.

* * *

PM and Dove slid past under the portcullis and approached the threshold. But instead of thumping, Dove used a skeleton key left over from his previous life as a SEGWACian to jimmy the lock. They suspected the cameras would spot them, but Dove theorized that dark-garbed denizens were always entering and leaving the basement headquarters, so one additional hooded pair might not raise alarms.

The duo scampered down the hall until they reached the entrance to the multimedia room. Dove peeked in, and was visibly relieved to see Crystal Camellia, by herself, quietly playing a game of computer pinball.

PM pulled back her hood and tapped the child with her pawnail. “Crystal Camellia, don't you think you want to come back home with your Dad?” she

whispered.

Crystal rubbed noses with the lavender furry creature. "Aunt PM, why are you here? You know Grandma and Grandpa don't like you very much."

Dove hugged his daughter. "Oh, Crystal, you had us so worried!"

"I'm O.K.," she said. "How's Mom?"

"I don't know," said Dove. "She's in the spaceship, with Chronicler. I haven't heard if you have a new brother or sister yet. When you ran away, I had to leave her to find you. Oh Crystal, we're not replacing you! How could you think that?"

"That's what Grandma Lucretia told me," Crystal explained with a small sigh. "She said I could come here anytime I wanted and watch television and play games and feed Cerberus, so I did!"

PM and Dove were concentrating so much on Crystal that they didn't monitor the multiple slitherings behind them until it was too late.

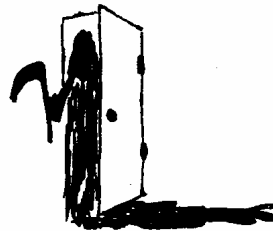
"Grab the tail!" Parasite ordered Anaconda Adder and Knave (Viper's valet), who did as they were told and immobilized PM's about-to-twitch tail. Parasite took down Dove in a chokehold and pinned him to the floor.

"Uncle Para, stop!" Crystal cried as PM and her father were dragged into the lower depths. Crystal chased behind them into a dark, dank cell surrounded by bars and an electrified force field. Parasite locked her father in the stocks while Knave and Adder threaded PM's tail through a shrew's fiddle, then tied it to a pipe.

"Don't hurt Daddy!" Crystal sobbed, pulling on her uncle's moldy cloak.

Viper crept up behind his granddaughter, tugging Cerberus on a chain leash, and patted her roughly on the head. "Don't worry, C.C., it's-s-s a game your dad and I always-s-s play. Go walk C-c-cerb."

Crystal took the chain and was yanked down the mildew-coated hall. Once at the door, she heaved a handful of biscuits as far as she could into the foyer. When Cerberus took off after them in triple directions, Crystal dropped



the chain, slipped out the door and ran as fast as her little legs could take her down the sewer drain.

* * *

It was almost 9 p.m., and the opening act for Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives had finished up. The crowd was chanting for PM and the Christmas Crew band.

"I'm so worried!" Al whispered to me, out of earshot of his children. "PM must be in trouble or she'd be here, or at least let us know what's going on. And where's Dove? And Crystal?"

"I'm worried, too," I agreed. "Have you noticed all the SEGWACians scurrying around tonight?"

Peppermint lumbered over to consult. "My operatives report there are SEGWACian evildoers everywhere: something big is going down tonight. We've detected a volley of text messages and managed to hijack a couple. One said *We got 'em. Phase II.* And the other, *Watch the blue one. If tail twitches, I.M. us.*"

Al shuddered and counted the band members preparing to make their entrance. All were present—except PM. He turned a whiter shade of pale.

The announcer was blaring through the speakers as the stage was flooded with light: "Here's what you've all been waiting for—Peppermint Paunch and the De-teeec-tivvves!"



The musicians tramped onto the stage and the opening riffs of *Coventry Carol* filled the hall. “Go on,” I pushed Al toward his kettledrums. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I had just turned around when there was a tug on my faux-fur-cuffed sleeve. “Chronicler! Daddy and PM—Grandpa caught them and put them in jail!”

She quickly blubbered the Crisis. I told her to stay put and tell Al what happened when the band finished the set. Then I determinedly departed toward Columbus Circle.

* * *

I’d left my Metrocard at the hovel and was down to my last quarter, so I power-walked to 59th Street (I’ve been walking at least 30 blocks a day since my hip healed—weight-bearing exercise is good for osteoporosis—so I made really good time).

I wasn’t sure what I’d do when I got to the Carrions, so I used the walk to devise a plan. When I reached the spider hole, I went through, not bothering to avoid the surveillance. Having “worked” for SEGWAC a few years ago as a ghostwriter, I figured I’d just go in the employees’ entrance. I pattered through the pungently putrid sewer, eeking at each rat tail sighting, and rang the gong.

Knave creaked open the door, Cerberus drooling hungrily behind him.

“Nice doggie,” I greeted. “Can’t you get breath mints for that three-headed hound from hell?”

Knave wrenched one of my hands, pressed it behind my back, and hustled me to the dungeon. My other hand was furiously clicking keys on my satellite phone, tapping Morse code to Rudy on stage, who I hoped would pass on my message to the band.

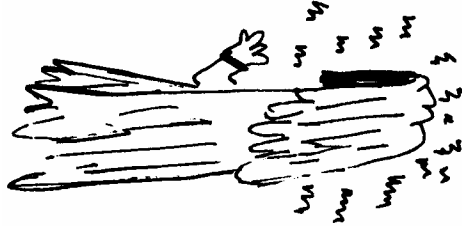
“PM!” I cried when I saw her. “You’ve got on my black fuzzy coat! Why do you have on my black fuzzy coat?”

PM looked sheepish (or as sheepish as a Christmas Monster can look). “I needed a



disguise,” she admitted, “and borrowed it from your hovel.”

Knave was about to put me on the bed of nails when—BOING! Geranium, Al and Peppermint came to the rescue. Paunch bopped Knave on the noggin with his bass guitar. Anaconda, drawn by the commotion, took on Al, who fenced with his drumsticks.



During the melee, Geranium untied PM’s tail and I freed Dove. Anaconda and Knave were quickly disarmed and handcuffed together on the rack. PM and Geranium linked tails, the rest of us grabbed fistfuls and pawfuls of fur, the two tails twitched, and we were out of there.

* * *

Lapis’s timpani solo had the audience hooting and hollering, but when PM chaséed onstage, the crowd erupted in a tumultuous cheer.

She took a mike from Rosette and began to sing *Jingle Bells*. The SEGWACians’ cellphones across the hall were jingling along.

Dove, holding Crystal’s hand in the wings, was joined by Lapis and Geranium, who were high-pawing it over Geranium’s first solo BOING!

“Chron tapped Rudy that Mom was in trouble and described the dungeon so I could visualize it,” Geranium chirped to her brother. “Since SEGWAC was watching you, they never missed me!”

Dove called me over. “I overheard Dad gloat that Lucifer was plotting something nefarious to annihilate Relicta. Lapis and Geranium just told me you left her up there with Dr. Arké. How could you abandon her?”

Before I could explain, my phone vibrated (I always turn the ringer off at concerts—wish everyone would).

“Chronicler, help!” Dr. Arké’s voice. “I can see another spaceship coming at us, and Relicta’s close to delivery. What do I do?”

“Sibling power!” Lapis yelled, overhearing the call. He grabbed my arm, Geranium grabbed Dove’s arm, he grabbed Crystal Camellia’s hand, the twins linked tails and twitched, and in a jiffy we were in the spaceship.

I took over the controls. Dove inverted himself to kiss Relicta, whose periwinkle perspiration was sprinkling the cabin with gelatinous drops.

“We’ll take it from here,” I told the twins. “Go back to M.S.G. You’ll be safe there!” The twins linked tails and whispered to each other.

The other golden whirling spacecraft was so close we could see Lucifer Trinode's third antenna—the dreaded and dreadful Isolator Ray—trembling, ready to zap.

"Lapis, Geranium, don't go!" I cried. "You'll get caught in the ray! The midasmetal will protect us!"

Too late. A blinding flash flew from Trinode's pate and surrounded our spacecraft.

The twins had gone. We could only hope that they'd gotten back to New York without being zapped.

The blast knocked us out of orbit and hurtled us further into space. I frantically pushed every button I could find.

"Eee-owwww-eeee!" screamed Relicta, and then a baby's cry.

"It's a boy!" Dove beamed, and kissed his wife.

* * *

PM worked the crowd into a frenzy with the closing *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*. The musicians took their bows and ran offstage.

"Where are the twins?" PM asked, looking around.

Geranium materialized, staggered a bit and collapsed.

"Where's Lapis?" Al cried. "Wasn't he with you?"

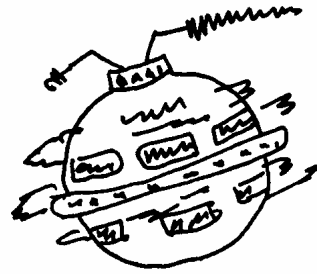
"He's saving Christmas," said Geranium, rubbing the bruise on her tailbone.

"Come on, Geranium," PM called. "You're taking lead vocals in the encore!"

* * *

Lucifer Trinode was gaining on us, and I did some fancy flying while Relicta caught her breath. "Dive, dive!" I cried, and whirled toward earth, then rose straight up again. It was almost too late before I realized what Trinode was doing: driving us toward the SEGWAC satellite that loomed before us.

I could see Lucifer through his front window. He was sneering and aiming his Isolator





Ray at the satellite's Hubble-like mirrors. He was going to use the mirrors to magnify his weapon of mass destruction and bounce it back toward the North Pole!

"We've must stop him!" I observed. "But how?"

Relicta began punching buttons on the console. "We've got to get between the satellite and the ozone hole. I fear for the Earth if such a terrible wave of gloom, doom and pessimism makes it through!"

"I fear for us if we get hit by the full blast!" I argued.

"If we can save Christmas, we have to make the sacrifice," Dove and Relicta declared.

Dr. Arké and I nodded, but we weren't happy about it.

Relicta was still positioning us in front of the satellite mirrors when another blast shot out of Trinode's ship. We braced for impact. The gloomy wave from the ray bounced off the mirror and hit—

Trinode's ship! It was hurled backward, zooming away from the evil satellite, which was emitting a very loud PM and Geranium trilling "We wish you a Merry Christmas!" We could just see Lucifer, hand over his big ears, mouthing what I imagine were very bad words indeed before his ship hurtled toward the Milky Way.

As we all gathered around the window, we spotted Lapis waving goodbye to Trinode from atop the SEGWAC satellite, grinning ear to ear. He winked at us, and BOING!ed into the ship.

Dove proudly showed off the newest Christmas Character—Nick Yule Carrion (three fingers on each hand, five toes on each foot, two antenna nodules).





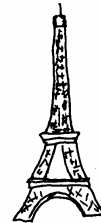
Lapis excitedly described his adventure. “Geranium and I think if Lucifer thunked we were going together, he wouldn’t notice if we went two different places. We’d figured out that to go it alone, we had to get angry. I told Geranium her tushie was titanic, which got her peeved enough to get to the Garden by herself. She told me Emeralda thought I was dorky. That irked me enough to get me to the North Pole Satellite. I used the N.P.S. computer to hack into Trinode’s ship, and discovered his plan. He was going to try to zap the Earth into despair, and if that didn’t work, he was going to broadcast the amplified tape of my singing for the whole world to hear, hoping to burst everyone’s eardrums! That got me really mad, so I BOING!ed to the SEGWAC satellite, readjusted the mirrors so they’d reflect his ray back on him, then I tapped into the concert broadcast!”

“Very clever,” Dove applauded. “But won’t Santa be displeased that you hurt Trinode, even if he is a wicked, no-good, anti-Christmas villain?”

Relicta laughed. “Oh, Trinode’s not hurt. He’s immune to his own ray. He’s just teed off he’ll have to explain why one of his master plans didn’t work—again!” She tickled little Nick’s toes, and he gurgled with her.

And the plan? Capture PM and Dove, nab Lapis when he tried to rescue them, blow up Relicta and the new offspring, destroy the N.P. Satellite and its navigation system, and win Crystal over to the Carrion cause. Santa would be so upset that he’d forgo his ride. And it might have worked, if not for the heroics of Lapis and Geranium. And a little help from PM. And Al. And Peppermint. And *moi*, as they say in France, where I wish I could have gone this year.

* * *



Peppermint, his Detectives and the Paunchettes gathered outside the concert hall with their instruments. People were talking about the big blast and the bright light and pointing to the sky. Much afraid, the Christmas Crew peered through the streetlights and saw a spaceship flying toward them.

“Is it Trinode?” PM asked nervously.

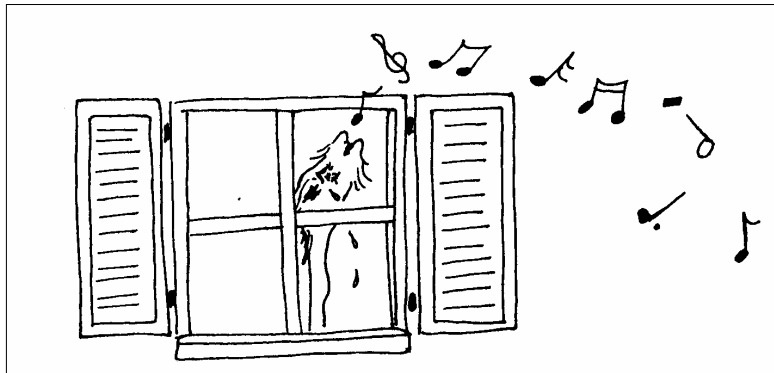
“No, it’s Relicta!” Rudy cried. “The lights are blinking *I’ll Be Home for Christmas!* Now she’s saying she’ll meet us on the landing pad on Chronicler’s roof.” They rolled the cases up Eighth Avenue.

Relicta landed with very little bouncing (I’m not allowed to park the ship anymore, since I tend to dent the midasmetal). It took a while to load the ship (the freight elevator in my building is not that big). I returned my black fuzzy coat to the hovel and grabbed a down coat for the trip north. With the various coteries of Critters assembled, Lapis and Geranium (neither upset enough anymore to go solo) took one group, another went with Relicta, Dove, Crystal and baby Nick, and PM took off with the last, including yours truly.

* * *

We landed, materialized, arrived, whatever, in Christmas Monsterland early Christmas Eve morning. It took a couple of hours to deliver all the weary travelers to their homes and get everything unpacked, and it wasn’t until the big clock wedding present from Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd in PM’s parlor bonged eight times that Lapis and Geranium realized that the final elimination round of the sleigh-puller auditions had started, and ended, without them.

I could hear their dejected wailing, so like that of their mother so many years ago when she was knocked out of the contest, and knew no words would



From the PM Saga Archives, Book I: PM cried until her heart would break. She did not go to the Sleighport for Santa’s arrival the next day. She did not watch the finals. She hid in her room and sobbed endlessly. In her agony she began to sing. “O Little Town of Bethlehem” wafted

ease their disappointment. I drifted off as PM and AI tried to soothe the distraught twins.

* * *

Santa Claus's entourage arrived at the Monsterland Community Center at the stroke of noon precisely. He listened as Monster after Monster sang out carol after carol, until the glaciers resounded with the sound of beautiful music. After the last contestant, Santa continued to face the stage.

When the footlights went off, he turned to Clyde Elf. "Where's Geranium? And Lapis? Why haven't I heard them?"

Clyde faced his boss. "They failed to show up for the Singing round this morning," he explained.

"But they were off saving Christmas, at great risk to themselves!" Santa countered. "They deserve a shot."

Elvira Fernhat rushed to Clyde's defense. "Mr. C., you've always indicated you want to see the top 25 after the elimination rounds. These are the top 25."

Clyde piped in bureaucratically, "The rules are the rules!"

"And who better to break them than me?" Santa asked. "Didn't you learn that from *Book I* of the Sagas? What is more Christmas—to follow the rules exactly or to sacrifice for others, as Lapis and Geranium have done?"

Clyde was speechless, his head bowed from the weight of Santa's disapproval.

"Oh, Clyde, perk up!" S.C. ordered. "Take me to PM's cave. I'll listen to the twins there and make my final choice."





As in the first Saga, PM's home was not a happy place. She and Al were still consoling their offspring, saying something about always being a next year and other nonhelpful platitudes.

I was napping in a sleeping bag near the entrance, and was thus the first to hear Santa's "Ho! Ho! Ho!" when his sleigh pulled up, Rudy's nose blinking the brake light.

Geranium wiped the tears from her eyes as Santa and Mrs. Claus kicked the snow off their boots and stepped inside.

"I understand there are two contestants I haven't seen yet," he winked at PM. "Mind if I use your cave for the auditions?"

Geranium rushed to hug Santa, then ran to get her accompaniment CD while the Clauses nestled on the divan. Alabaster fetched hot apple cider for the guests.

"Beautiful tree," Mrs. Claus complimented.

"Oh my, yes," Santa agreed. "Maybe turn that top light a bit so we can have a follow spot?"

By the time Al adjusted the lights, Geranium was costumed in a silver and blue bow, matching the colors of her brother's fur. She belted out the most moving *Silent Night* heard since . . . well, since the last time PM sang it. Santa et al. cheered profusely, and a whiskered nod to Clyde had him scratching in Geranium's name on the list of winners.

"Lovely, just lovely," said Mrs. C.



"Now, Lapis, your turn!" Santa smiled.

Lapis, atremble, replaced his sister in the spotlight, while I fingered the keyboard.

"I saw Mom-my kiss-ing San-an-an-ta Claus—" Lapis spoke-sung.

"What? Why aren't you *singing*? Rap can't lift the spirits enough to levitate my sleigh," Santa interrupted.

Lapis blushed, his silver fur aglow. "I can't sing," he whispered.

"Nonsense, my lad," Santa laughed. "Go ahead, try."

I hit a note for Lap and he opened his mouth. Out screeched that ear-piercing thirteenth tone. Lapis collapsed on the floor in shame.

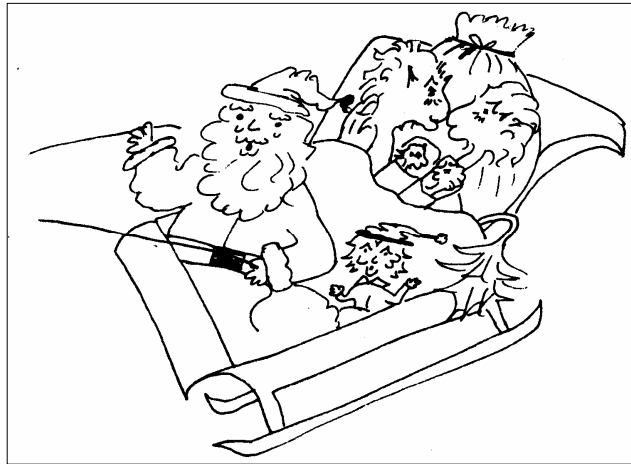
Santa looked at Mrs. C. "Dear, is the box in the sleigh?" She nodded, and waved Elvira outside to fetch it.

"Lapis Snowflake, get off the floor this instant and come here!" Lapis obeyed. "Now open wide," said Santa, and using his program light keychain, he peered down the long gullet inside the white-furred neck.

"Yep, that's the problem," Santa said to Mrs. C. He turned to PM as Elvira carried in a gorgeous golden box with a beautiful red poinsettia painted on top.

"On Christmas Eve eighteen years ago to the day," Santa announced, "when Lapis and Geranium were born, I decided to make a special gift for them for when they won their first sleigh-pulling contest. It's always good to have something to pass down from generation to generation." He pulled Lapis and Geranium to his side as Mrs. C. held the box.

"Your father and mother rode that night in the back of my sleigh, holding the two of you," he told the twins. "I secretly collected every note PM sang that ride, and every note of the choir of sleigh pullers. What transcendent music we heard as we flew with the angels. Mrs. C. and I gathered the notes in this box



Santa reigns at the reins. "It's only fitting that they spend their first day as Christmas creatures on our trip." From the PM Saga Archives, Book IX

and locked it up in the attic." Santa paused to stroke his beard.

He continued: "The year of the monotone Christmas, I admit I forgot it was up there. But even if I'd remembered, had we opened the box, we'd have lost the notes to SEGWAC's plot."

Santa smiled at Mrs. Claus. "Dear, open it. I want these young Monsters to hear that night again."

Mrs. Santa unlocked the box, and nodded to PM to do the honors.

PM carefully lifted the lid, and note after note flowed out, treble clefs, sharps, bass clefs, flats, half notes, whole notes, quarter notes, eighth notes and rests, which danced in the air until a galaxy formed the inspiring sound of *Gesù Bambino*.

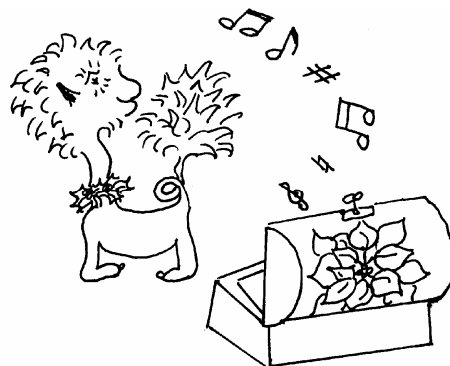
PM listened with her eyes closed, but reopened them a few moments later to peer at Santa.

"Something's missing," she said.

"Ah, you noticed! So did I that first night, but thought it was lost forever in the starlit sky."

"What, Mr. Claus?" Lapis asked.

"The lost chord. But now I



Andante mosso

VOICE ALTO or B. SOLO

When
fe -

PIANO

p

blos-soms flow-ered 'mid the snows Up - on a win - ter night — Was
su — Re - dém - ptor ó - mni - um, Quem lu - cis au - de o, - ri - gi-nem, Pa -

think I've found it," Santa laughed. "Lapis, open wide and cough!"

Lapis, confused, did as he was told. He felt something lift from his larynx and float up through his long neck and out of his mouth. Within a nanosecond there was perfect harmony in the cave.



"Lapis must have yawned deeply that night while I was collecting the notes," Santa laughed, shaking jellylike, "and the chord got stuck on his tonsils. Now, try to sing."

Lapis breathed in deeply, raised his palate, supported his breath and sang—a rich, pure baritone note, which mingled with the choir of notes in glorious song. Soon Geranium and PM were singing along, a concert to be treasured forever.

Mrs. C. did something magical, and all

the notes returned to the box, the lost chord falling in as she closed the lid. She locked the treasure chest, then handed it to Geranium and gave the key to Lapis.

“Someday when the first of your own young Monsters are ready to fly,” she said, “you open this box for them.”

Lapis was grinning ear to ear. “Thank you, Santa,” he cried, hugging the red-garbed North Polean.

“Son, you always had a song in your heart. It just had to find its way out,” Santa beamed. “Enter these two as the newest sleigh pullers,” he instructed Clyde, “with the salaries commensurate with the position. In fact, enter the other 25 names as well! They were all wonderful, and didn’t we just get two new SAINT NICK refueling stages? Everyone has earned a spot. PM will sort out who goes where on the refueling sleighs—but Lapis and Geranium, I want you with your mom tonight, in my sleigh, as you were 18 years ago. What a concert we shall have!”

Clyde checked his hourglass watch, then checked it again. “oH-oH! oH-oH! We gotta go, Santa! We promised to visit Relicta, Dove, Crystal and little Nick at the Ice Pyramid before packing the sleighs!”

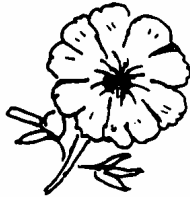
With a fond “Till tonight,” they were off. The twins were jumping up and down, screaming, “We’re sleigh pullers, we’re sleigh pullers!”

PM and Al joined them, hugging and screaming, “They’re sleigh pullers, they’re sleigh pullers!”

And Lapis sang out *O Holy Night*, with the joy that comes from creating music from within and sharing it with the world.

I closed my laptop and sang along, ready to BOING! to St. Louis.

*If tunes forsake you, don’t despair.
There are songs aplenty in the air.
For music sends the soul in flight
As Love surrounds us Christmas Night.*



Noël, Noël, Noël!

