



CATCH A CHRISTMAS STARFLY

THE QUEST FOR THE ANCIENT MONSTER

The PM Saga, Book XXVII

By Susan Kirby

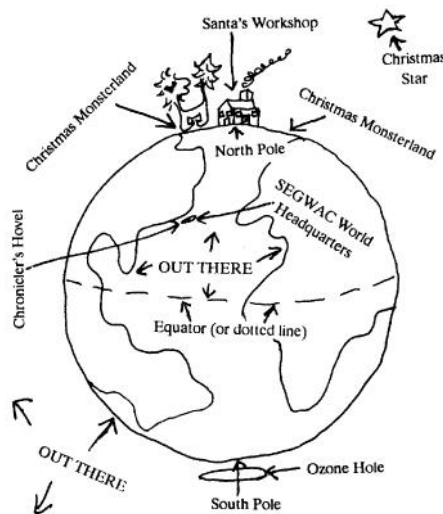


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In the more remote reaches of the world, somewhat east of Hollywood and north of Broadway, there is a land of Christmas Monsters. But before there was Christmas Monsterland, before Santa settled in at the North Pole and changed everything, there was only—Monsterland.

This Saga takes us back to that time, and into the future.



Dear Reader, you may have noticed that there was no Saga last year—or to be precise, your Chronicler didn't chronicle the comings and goings, to-ings and fro-ings, of PM (Purple Monster, Santa's lead sleigh puller and the North Pole Ambassador), the heroine of these (usually) annual holiday reportings.

Did you think your Chronicler had been fired? Or would no longer scribe for a measly three calories a word? Or was still in a catatonic depression after

the 2004 elections?

Nope.

Did you assume there was no Christmas Crisis—without which the holidays are happy, but the literature lousy. Really? Come on! Knowing the negative influence of SEGWAC (the Society for the Elimination of Good Will And Christmas, Santa's nemesis and the institutional villain of these Sagas), and looking at the world today, *every* day is a Christmas Crisis.

No. There was no story last year because ... this tale took two years to tell. Some mythological mysteries just can't be rushed.



Return to a pivotal day in 2004, right after Thanksgiving. Your Chronicler, as per usual on a Saturday, was diligently watching CNN and the wires, vigilant for breaking news that would require me to jump into action, transforming myself from Creative Christmas Chronicler into Capable Copy Editor. With no whiff of a catastrophe in the air, I shifted from computer pinball to FreeCell, to keep the mental faculties sharp. I was prepared for surprises.

What to my wondering eyes should appear on my terminal but a furry fuchsia countenance.

"Chronicler! Did you see it!" blared through the speakers.

"What?" I yawned. (I'm not a morning person.)

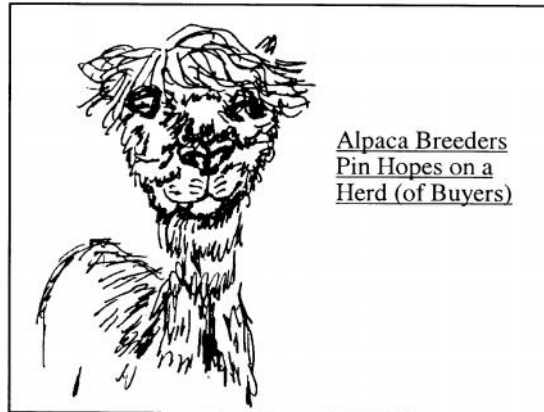
"The New York Times Web site!" PM brayed—oops!—sonorously sang out. (Might as well fix this now, or PM will do her own editing later.)

"That's my job," I yawned again.

"The picture! In color! For the world to see! What are you going to do

about it? Alabaster is beside himself.”

“Huh?” I opened a browser window.



“Oh, that,” I ennuied. “Read the piece earlier in the national desk queue.”

“How could you let this happen? Al thought he’d put that horrible experience at the zoo behind him.”

“First of all, I work *for* The Times. I am *not* The Times. I am not responsible for every word that goes into the paper or on the Web site. I just watch over my little portion of my two pages.”

“Are you not my amanuesis? When you placed my future husband in the San Diego Zoo after SEGWAC kidnapped him and before I rescued him, you stuck him in an enclosure marked ‘Alpaca?’ My silver-maned ermine hunk of a handsome Monster looks not a bit like that photo!”

“My goodness—that was, what?—in Book IV, back in, what?—Christmas 1980? That’s 24 years ago! And only *now* you bother to see what an alpaca *really* looks like?”

“I depend on you for accurate research.”

“Why didn’t you bring this up 20 years ago, when Alabaster Eggshell was writing *My Life in the Zoo: Five Years as an ‘Alpaca?’*? Isn’t there a statute of limitations on corrections? And what’s to correct? I see a faint resemblance, and it’s not my fault the zoo keepers misgenused or misspecied or whatever it is zoo keepers do.”

Not to be appeased, PM seethed through my plasma screen. “What about this sentence in the article: ‘The alpacas, wooly, long-necked cousins of the llama, came trotting forth on their two-toed feet, a few of them neck wrestling each other along the way’?”

“Hrrmph,” I harrumphed, “that just bolsters my contention that it was not unreasonable to mistake Al for an alpaca.”

“It says here that alpacas have offspring only once every 11 months! The

gestation period of a Christmas Monster is a year. It also says alpacas screech! I don't screech!" PM screeched.

"Now I can see the similarities," I noted, re-reading the article. "Ah, it also says, 'Their most common sound is a kind of humming.' You must admit, you *do* hum. A lot," I said. "One of the many things I admire about you. I see nothing here to be so upset about."

"It says that the females spit!" PM spit, not to be assuaged. "Don't you see what this means? Can't you see that SEGWAC will use your slip of the quill a quarter century ago and this article to confuse People into thinking that Christmas Monsters are domesticated livestock, not *magical* partners with Santa? Must I appeal to the Big Guy to get you to write a true rendition of my travels and travails?" the livid lilac Monster grrred. "I'm BOING!ing down when you get off work. We're going to settle this."

"Just teletransport me back in time for my Philharmonic concert." I resigned myself to another disintegration of my molecules, which might or might not reassemble satisfactorily.

As promised, that evening PM appeared at my desk, glared, grabbed my arm, and twitched her tail. We reappeared in the foyer of the Eggshell stalactite-decorated cave residence in Christmas Monsterland, as I heard:

"Free-e-e-e-e them, free-e-e-e-e the alpacas! Let's free the enclosed ones, release to follow their hearts." Lapis Snowflake, jamming a freshly harvested Douglas fir into its holder, was crooning the refrain over and over again as he decorated the tree. PM's and Al's blue-maned-and-tailed white twin progeny, at that time almost 19, hadn't wanted to stop singing since the previous Christmas, when the lost chord lodged in his long throat was liberated,



allowing his baritone to vibrato those dulcet tones.

As Alabaster untangled a cord of lights and then tested the bulbs, the perturbed paternal parent grouched, "Son, isn't it time you found a place of your own? If you're going to make jokes at your father's expense, take your sleigh-pulling earnings and rent out Carmine's old cave on the other side of the hamlet."

"Touchy, touchy, Dad," Geranium Amethyst, Lapis's red-maned-and-tailed purple-furred twin sister, chided. She climbed on a stool and took a strand, clipping the lights to the branches as Al circled the tree. "Lap isn't making fun of you. Ever since he read about all those alpacas being herded, bought, and sold, he's been on a mission to buy them up and set them free."

PM ahem'd our arrival.

"You've made me the laughing stock of all of Christmas Monsterland!" Al bellowed at me, his silver mane tinseling in the tree lights. "When I wrote my book, I had the whole of Christmas Monsterland behind me, 'cause they knew what I had suffered at the nefarious hands of SEGWAC. But now they say, 'Howdy, Al. That's Al for 'Alpaca?'' No one is taking me seriously anymore."

"I'm *not* The Times," I grunted in greeting.

Al's tirade was cut off by Rudolph's snort as he shook off the snow from his antlers and clip-clopped into the cave, followed by Santa Claus and Mrs. C., Clyde Elf, and Elvira Fernhat. "There's more coming, PM. Hope you don't mind!" Mr. C. announced.

"More the merrier," PM nodded. She passed me, humming "You're Gettin' Nuttin' for Christmas" sotto voce, and gathered candy canes, cookies, and eggnog to fete the assembling assemblage.

A swish of another sleigh, and Lapis teetered and tottered on the stepladder, where he'd perched to place the star, when Emeralda Olivine skated in on the arm of Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd.

"Thanks, Emeralda, for picking up my dear, dear friend," greeted Santa. "Old Monster, how are you? Ready for Christmas Eve?"

The wizened codger let Santa help him to a futon by the fire. You may remember Smaragd from a Christmas tale long, long ago, when Lapis and Geranium were not yet one year old. As unformed little Monsters, the twins had caused their parents much grief when they discovered their nascent teletransportation powers long before anyone could have anticipated even for such precocious pups. When they first linked their tails, then BOING!ed OUT THERE away from the safety of the North Pole's Invisible Protective Shield, they wreaked havoc wherever they went before almost falling into the clutches of SEGWAC. After their rescue, we discovered that there's a yearly tradition, on Christmas Eve, when Great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd does THE READING OF THE STORY.

Dear Reader, a brief pause for a bit of recycling, taken from *The PM Saga, Book X, The Parable of the Lost Christmas Monsters*. If you remember the story, skip past the inset and continue on. If not, trust me, you need to know a bit of the history of Christmas Monsterland to grasp what's to come.

To set the scene: Lapis and Geranium, just after their adventure OUT THERE, were returned home. On Christmas Eve, they were joined at the Egg-shell home by the other Monster one-year-olds.

From The Saga Archives

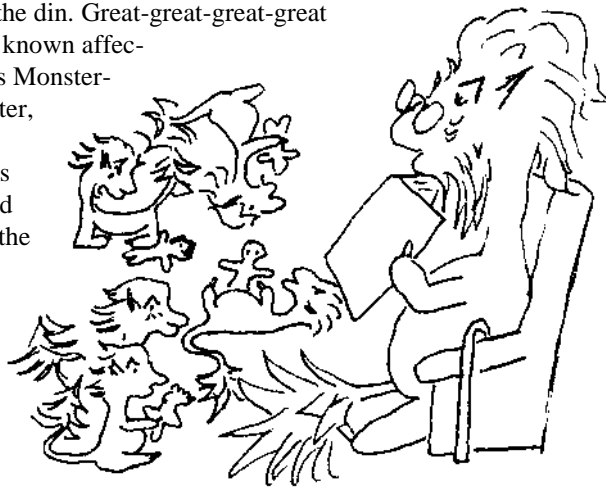
Christmas Eve afternoon PM and Al's abode was chockfull of Christmas creatures. All the family and friends of the Monster yearlings (five total, including Lapis and Geranium) were present for the great occasion. The harried parents herded the young Monsters into the center of the cave, PM and Al careful to keep the twins separated lest they join forces for another journey.

A loud "Ho-ho-ho!" heralded the entrance of Santa and his entourage. The quintet of one-year-olds surrounded jolly St. Nick, tugging on his beard and pulling at his sack. Santa merrily pulled up a pouf in front of the fireplace, set down his bag, and reached inside. Five dolls emerged and were handed out, one to each tiny toddler.

The youngsters grabbed the proffered gifts, stared at them, then started to cry, a cacophony of caterwauling wails that reverberated from stalactite to stalagmite. "It's ugly!" bellowed Geranium, holding her rag doll by its foot and thumping its yarn-topped head on the floor. Lapis screamed, "Mine's gross!" and chucked his across the room. PM retrieved the toy, raising her brows with maternal understanding.

Mr. and Mrs. Claus wordlessly watched the screaming, ranting, raving, whimpering, simpering, snuffling, and sniffing little ones abuse their presents. They exchanged a smile when the tap-tap-tap of an approaching cane was heard over the din. Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd, known affectionately in Christmas Monsterland as the Old Monster, had arrived. The Old Monster nodded to his North Pole friends and lowered himself into the vacant armchair in front of the fire.

"Hr-r-r-mph,"
Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd cleared his throat. "Young



Monsters,” he began, clutching a worn leatherbound book in his wrinkled paws, “gather ’round and shush your ornery muzzles. You hold them toys tightly, whiles I reads you this here story.” And since he had a magical presence about him, and since the parents of the five soon-to-be-initiated-into-Christmas-Monsterhood little Monsters had anchored the tots to the ground with a firmly placed paw on each head, the one-year-olds shut up and listened.

THE DOLL WITH THE SAD EYES

Once upon a time, long before history even, there was a vast, chillingly cold place up north. It had no boundaries, just stretched on and on. This place was called Monsterland, and was inhabited by a bunch of beasties known as Monsters. These was my ancestors and your ancestors, quite nasty creatures with no carin’ or concern about them.

Now these critters had every terrible trait one could imagine, and no redeemin’ ones. They was also incapable of bein’ badly injured or of ... this may be a new word for you, they was incapable of dyin’. So they constantly bickered, beatin’ and pummelin’ the heck out of each other, but no one could ever win. You’d knock one of them varmints down and he’d just get right up again and knock you down. Them was real unpleasant times, and them was real unpleasant Monsters.

Throughout the centuries, nay, throughout the millennia, they battled and fought, fought and battled, ’til they’d separated into two factions, those who’d turned red with rage, and those that were green with envy. The Red Monsters took over the east side of Monsterland and proceeded to whup the Green ones to the west side. Then they erected a high fence between ’em.

One day, can’t say zactly when ’cause we didn’t have calendars, POOF!—an old geezer in a red suit, his mate, a whole mess of teeny-weeny green-garbed leprechauns, a herd of caribou, a sled, and a workshop just appeared where that fence had been.

The Old Monster winked at Santa Claus, who returned the wink, remembering vividly that time so long ago.

It irked the heck out of the Green Monsters and the Red Monsters that some intruder had just plunked himself down in the middle of their feudin’. They forgot their own squabblin’ for a while and set about peltin’ this white-whiskered gent with every sharp and blunt instrument they could lay their



paws on. But these attacks was met with a smile, and everythin' thrown at the old codger or his crew bounced right off.

Unable to evict this usurper by force, the Monsters sent representatives—one from Green Monsterland, one from Red Monsterland—to confront the trespasser. Jade Green (my papa) and Madder Red met in the center of the old dude's house, glared at one another, then glowered at the grizzled gaffer.

"Who is you?" demanded Jade.

"I'm Santa Claus, and this is Mrs. Claus," the jolly old man replied, shakin' his belly like it was a tub of strawberry jam or somethin'.

"Where you come from?" commanded Madder.

Ol' Santa pondered that question a bit, then said, "How do I explain? One day, one beautiful, glorious day, someone OUT THERE imagined us, and we became—me, Mrs. Claus, the elves, the reindeer, the workshop, the candy canes. We have no memory of birth, childhood, or parents. We just ... are."

This existential explanation didn't satisfy your furry forefathers. "Whatcha doin' in our territory?" Madder menaced. Jade, not to be outdone, jabbed, "Whatcha here for?"

"I'm here to spread love, good will, charity, and peace to the People of the world," Mr. Claus politely responded. "I'm here to remind the folks OUT THERE of the meaning and spirit of CHRISTMAS."

Since Jade and Madder didn't know the meanin' of them words—love, good will, charity, Christmas, or People for that matter—they wasn't impressed, and away they stomped with a bad-tempered "Beat it buster, or else!" But no matter what them Monsters tried, they couldn't budge the bearded fat man off their property. In fact, Mr. Claus put up a big sign in front which declared "Welcome to the North Pole." There was no mistakin' his intentions: he was gonna stay.

The ol' guy never gave up tryin' to be neighborly. He was always sendin' his elves with mint jelly to Red Monsterland and his reindeer with candy canes to Green Monsterland. But these presents, though voraciously englutted, was never 'preciated. Monsters didn't know the meanin' of "thanks," so ole Kris Kringle never received any.

Year after year Mr. Claus did his work, makin' toys, packin' the sled, takin' off each December 24th and coming back each December 25th, regular as the calendar. But with the increasin' People population, he one day realized he just didn't have enough workers to supply the demand for new toys. He came up with a new strategy: He'd recycle the old toys, ones that had been grown out of, lost, or just plain tossed aside. So his helpers began diggin' through trashcans and garbage dumps, brought the broken toys back to the North Pole, and rebuilt them for the next year.

"The rejects, like we got," groused Lapis. One threatening twitch of the Old Monster's tail was enough to silence the young Monster, and the story continued.

Santa's new system seemed to work. However, somethin' strange was happenin'. Every now and again this one toy returned to the North Pole—a cloth doll with button eyes and a stitched smile. Mrs. C.'d replace the stuffin', make a new dress, and off the doll would go to a new home. But each time the doll came back, Mrs. Santa noticed her cheeks were tearstained, the corners of her mouth needed turnin' up, and her eyes kept gettin' sadder and sadder. It nearly broke that kindly gray-haired lady's heart, so she and Santa decided to interview the tiny toy.

"Little doll," Mrs. Claus said, "you keep comin' back lookin' worse and worse for wear. Tell us about it, maybe we can help."

The doll at first couldn't speak. But after an encouraging nod from the Clauses, she whispered, "I'm sorry. But the children you give me to make me so sad."

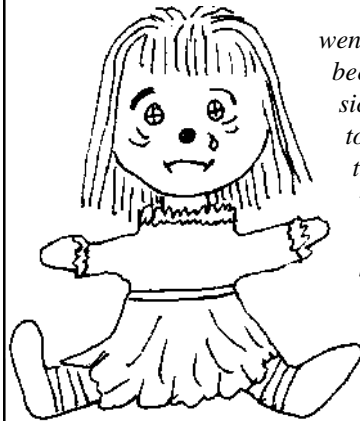
"Why?" asked Santa. "Didn't I give you to good little boys and girls? Let me check my list."

Clyde's great-great-great grandpappy brought over the record book. "The first year I gave you to young Prudence. It says here she was a very good girl. How'd she make you unhappy? Didn't she like you?"

"Oh yes!" the doll answered. "She loved me very much, and I loved her. But when I arrived she was very sad. Her puppy had died right before Christmas, and she hugged me so very tight and cried and cried. So I cried and cried, too. I did what I could to cheer her up, but I saw that not everyone is merry on Christmas Day."

"Oh dear," said Mr. Claus. "Next you went to Hortense. What happened there?"

"Hortense was wonderful, sir. But he was an orphan and very lonely. He needed me, but he needed a family more."



Santa, Mrs. Santa, and the sad-eyed doll went through the list of the children. One had been abused, one handicapped, another very sick, another poor and hungry. "They all talked to me," the doll explained. "Sometimes I was the only one they could share their troubles with."

One time the doll had been discarded by a spoiled little girl on Christmas Day and was found by a man searchin' for presents for his children. He'd lost his job and was heartbroken he couldn't give his kids anythin'. "That was one of the best homes I ever went to, 'cause I was so much loved. Why, sir," the doll inquired, tryin' ever-so-hard not to sound critical, "did you give me to someone who had so much, and miss the family that had so little?"

Santa sighed, then replied, "That's not an easy question to answer. The child I gave you to needed a friend. All the toys her parents bought her were expensive and fragile, and were not allowed off the shelf. I'd hoped she'd see past your cloth face and hug your heart of gold. You see, that little girl in truth had less of what really matters than the girl you stayed with. But I admit I miss some families—it's so hard to keep track of the homeless, the wanderers." A snuffle crept into his voice.

The doll's biography included so many for whom Christmas was a time of tragedy, pain, and sorrow. For many People, the doll observed, the holiday's glitz and glitter reminded them how lonely they were, how hurt, how hungry. The doll gave all the love she had, and shared all the sadness she could. Now she was tired.

Santa sat silently, lost in thought. Finally he spoke. "Would you be willing to try an experiment? I'd like you to stay with one of our neighboring Monsters for a bit. See what happens."

"Whatever you say, sir," the doll agreed, never one to disobey the wishes of her elders. Santa hitched up the sleigh, drove it west, and rang Jade Green's bell. "I have a gift for your one-year-old," St. Nick announced when Papa opened the door. It was Christmas Eve, just like today. Santa handed the doll with the sad eyes to me, and I took it, shook it, bit its arm, and pulled its straggly hair. "Mr. Green, do me a favor, please," Santa said to my dad. "I want little Smaragd to sleep with this doll. For one month, every night."

"What's in it for me?" Jade asked, always one to make a deal.

Mr. Claus scratched his beard. "If Smaragd does what I ask, and returns the doll to me in a month, I'll give you two cases of candy canes."

"Don't seem like 'nough t'me, makin' a sissy outa my boy for two cases of candy canes."

"So be it," Santa shrugged his shoulders. "I'll go across the way and make the offer to Madder Red." That was a clever, clever move on Kris Kringle's part. The wise ancient knew Jade would be even greener with envy if Madder Red got somethin' he didn't. Papa's paw shook Santa's hand, and I was stuck with that tattered ol' toy.



Now your Great-great-great-great Grand-papa Smaragd was a real cantankerous critter in those days. I tried to get rid of the li'l doll—crammed it in the coal bin and covered it with cinders. But Papa found it and threatened to lock me in the cellar if I didn't obey, so that night I put the doll next to me and went to sleep. Next mornin' I woke up feelin' different. When a neighbor pup beat on me, I whacked at him all right, but when I knocked him down I felt worse 'stead of better. After the next night, I began to act strange, too. Two of my pals were whackin' each other over the head, an event which usually made me crow with glee. But this day I stuck my

neck 'tween 'em and stopped the fight. See, instead of enjoyin' the brawl—here's the kicker—I felt sad.

This continued the rest of the month, gettin' weirder and weirder each day. To speed up this tale, I'll just tell you by the time I made the journey to the North Pole to return the doll I was huggin' it tightly. When I handed it over to St. Nick, I did something no Monster had ever done before. I cried. Real tears. And funny thing, the li'l doll, it didn't look quite as sad as it had when Santa first brung it to me.

When our neighbors caught sight of me luggin' them two crates of candy canes home and got wind of the deal, they rushed to the North Pole to get their share. Santa started handin' out other sad-eyed dolls to their younguns, with the same condition.

Meanwhile, unknownst to us Green Monsters, Mrs. Kringle had struck the same bargain (only with mint jelly) with Madder Red. Puny Pomegranate Red carried her doll around for a month, same result. Madder's neighbors got dolls and their kids carried 'em around too, and so it went. Slowly Green Monsterland and Red Monsterland began to change. We stopped beatin' each other up, 'cept occasionally, and when we did hit someone, we didn't enjoy it. If we yelled at one another, we saw how bad it made 'em feel and we felt bad too.

*One by one we started knockin' on Santa's door just to say "hi," some-
thin' no self-respectin' Monster would have dreamt of before, and Santa'd tell the story of Christmas. Meanwhile, in Christmas Monsterland, since clawin' and clubbin' wasn't as fun as it used to be, we became a trifle bored. Some Monsters volunteered—yes, volunteered!—to help Santa with his Christmas doin's. Eventually a few of our more coordinated members began climbin' in the harness to haul St. Nick on Christmas Eve. We began callin' ourselves Christmas Monsters, not Red or Green Monsters, since our two warrin' sides weren't warrin' any more.*

One day, when I was a youth (a strikin' cuss, if I do say so), I visited Mr. Claus, and who should I see but Pomegranate Red, all grown up. Such a beautiful Monster! My libido being lecherous, I introduced myself, wooed and won that gal. We had the weddin' smack in the center of the North Pole. And durin' our matin' season, which you all know corresponds with Christmas Day, we, well, we ... might as well say it straight—we snerkled. Tiny Paprika Pistache was born the followin' Christmas Eve, a Green Monster with the handsomest Red stripes you ever saw. We hoped, for we had discovered what hope meant, that our new-found feelin's would carry over to the next generation. But 'though Paprika was just as bright and smart and cute as could be, he was a terror—greedy, avaricious, and just plain ego-centered. We conjectured, discussin' the situation with Santa, that maybe the first year of development for a Monster was so rapid, intellectually, that the expandin' brain couldn't absorb good manners. It's difficult enough learnin' to stand, given the eccentricity of our anatomy. We also gotta conquer walkin', talkin', readin', and writin', all in our first year. So the following Christmas Eve Pomegranate and I got the

doll with the saddest eyes from the North Pole and passed it on to Paprika. Wonder of wonders, it worked! Paprika became a good little Christmas Monster, in even less time than his ma and pa. Thus began the tradition of the Doll With the Sad Eyes, which continues 'til today.

You see, beasties, them there ugly dolls, as you call 'em, are gonna give you somethin' very important in Christmas Monsterland. They're gonna learn you how to love. They're gonna teach you to feel pain—not your own, but the pain of others. They're gonna teach you how to share. And if you learn good, when you return your doll to Santa in a month it won't have such sad eyes, it'll be beautiful, and you'll give it back gladly and with joy, knowin' you've gained what makes a Monster a true Christmas Monster—empathy, love, compassion, and humility.

See, the joy of Christmas is in the givin', not the gettin'. The presents we help Santa deliver are nice, but the greatest gift we can give is the message of Christmas. We Christmas Monsters are lucky. We just go on and on, as long as there's one Person OUT THERE who can imagine us. But People—their life-time OUT THERE is just an eyeblink in eternity. So if People got real sadness in the Here and Now, we gotta share ourselves and the Spirit of Christmas, let People know they're loved and give 'em hope for the Time to Come.

With that Great-great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd closed his book. Santa leaned over to the Old Monster. “Gets better and better each time you tell it,” Santa complimented, slipping him a candy cane. “And works faster and faster,” Mrs. Claus added, observing the young Christmas Monsters. The five one-year-olds were holding their dolls with newfound respect. Already Lapis Snowflake was applying a bandage to his doll's bruised head, and Geranium Amethyst was stroking her doll's hair. One by one the tiny tots climbed into the laps of their parents. They snuggled up, and tentative murmurings were heard: “I love you Mommy.” “I love you Daddy.” “I'm sorry not everyone can be as happy as we are on Christmas Eve.”

The Old Monster surveyed the warm scene with misty eyes. “This is what's really important at Christmas,” he pronounced. “Family, friends, faith. My heart's full t'burstin'.”

A hhhh, it's always great to revisit the classics.

But back to PM and Al's cave on that Saturday evening last year. Another knock on the cave entrance heralded new arrivals.

“Ouch! I really gotta learn to use the bell.” Peppermint Paunch, PM's cousin, the super Sherlock and leader of the Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives rock band, entered with his wife, the lovely Carmine Poppy. With a hearty, “Hey Al! That's Al for Alpaca, right? Har-har-har,” he slapped Al on the back, the push nearly skewering the wincing Monster on Rudy's antlers.

Carmine nudged her hubby. “That's a sore spot, dear,” she whispered,



popping a large handful of chocolates and sipping Champagne (as you might suspect, and will have confirmed later, Carmine and Peppermint were preparing for a Christmas Day Super Snerkle).

Peppermint chortled jocularly. “Gotta take a joke, bud!” he said. “Besides, admit it, those alpacas are funny looking.”

“I see *no* resemblance,” Al sputtered with a petulant pout. “Here, look at these photographs: an alpaca has long legs, almost no tail,

and buggy eyes. I, on the other hand, have a grandiose tail, a long mane, and starry eyes. There’s no comparison!”

“And Dad’s one-toed,” Geranium added. “Alpacas are two-toed.”



Santa said. “Old Monster, take a peek at these pics. Ever since I saw the article, I started wondering whether there might indeed be some evolutionary connection.”

Smaragd poured over the photos and read the description of the alpacas. He tugged on his beard and closed his eyes. “You know,” he said, “that part about the two toes reminded me of somethin’. Long ago, ’fore Santa’s arrival, long before the time of the *STORY*, there was a legend told of one Forest Green, an ancestor on my papa’s side. Now my papa never talked much about ’im, for it was a sad story.”

Smaragd leaned forward and rested his paw on his candy-cane-painted cane. “As you know, Monsterland in those days was divided into a Red State and a Green State, and there was a ton of prejudice in them places. Each state was sure it had right and might on its side. But ol’ Forest, he was different, they say, ’cause he was two-toed. My goodness, you know how difficult it’s been for even *Christmas* Monsters to accept any Monster who’s different—PM had trouble for a time ’cause she’s purple, and Al hid out in his cave for years ’cause he was both greenless *and* redless—so just imagine how a two-toed Monster must have fared in a one-toed coterie back then. The Green Monsters sent him to work on border patrol, where no one had to look at ’im.

“The legend’s not clear how they met, but my guess is that Forest, as he kept those Red Monsters from the Green State, must have encountered one of them Red Monsters, a purty one named Scarlet Red, who’d been ostracized herself, for she had very long fur all over, not just on the mane and head. Instead of whackin’ each other, though, they must have seen that they were both outcasts, and them two fell in love—a scary emotion that made ’em even more unusual in Monsterland and even more dangerous to the status quo of bickerin’ and fightin’.”

“Like Romeo and Juliet!” Emeraldalda purred.

Lapis swooned, “Yeah, the star-crossed lovers!”

Smaragd nodded. “But unlike them doomed younguns, Forest and Scarlet managed to run away together. And though armies from both sides of the fence tried to track ’em, determined to club ’em to their senses, the legend says their pawprints (easy to spot with the two-toed indents) faded away somewhere near Saskatchewan and they was never heard from since. At that time, you see, they knew they couldn’t survive in any populated part of Monsterland.

“After Santa came and we changed, we tried to erase that tale of ol’ Forest and Scarlet from our history. We was ashamed of what our prejudice had done to ’em. ’Course, some time followin’ Santa and our transformation into Christmas Monsters, some wondered ’bout ’em, even set out to search for ’em. There were rumors, only rumors mind you, that an abandoned cave had been found near the Siberian border, with wall paintin’s featuring a two-toed Monster, a long-furred Monster, and many smaller Monsters. ’Course, rumors aren’t truth, and there’s no written record of any of this. Forest and Scarlet—some say they froze out there in the tundra, others that they migrated OUT THERE and perished.”

“Hmmm,” said Santa. “I wonder, could there be a connection from Forest and Scarlet to those alpacas?”

Lapis leaned in closely to Emeraldalda, who smiled a wee smile at him. “If those alpacas are related to Christmas Monsters, it might get them more respect,” he enthused.

That Saturday back in 2004, the Christmas Critters, who are, as we’ve seen, innately curious, vowed to solve the mystery and talked excitedly about the next steps.

For my part, I was pooped but determined to get to my concert. I closed my laptop (a writer never leaves home nor office without it), and PM BOING! ed me to Avery Fisher Hall.

Alabaster got to work immediately on what he dubbed the “Missing Link Project.” Sure that there would be fodder for a Saga in 2004, PM and the other holiday helpers went about their business, making toys, visiting friends, feeding the hungry, preparing for the sleigh-puller auditions, practicing singing and dancing, monitoring the naughty and nice.

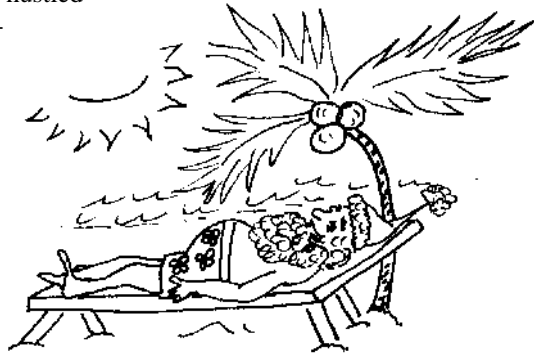
The calendar flipped pages toward Christmas 2004. SEGWAC, usually a grave threat to the North Pole crowd, was strangely nonthreatening, at least as far as Santa and his contingent were concerned. Perhaps Lucifer Trinode, the evil ET IT with the three antennae and the devastating Isolator Ray, hadn’t returned from his Milky Way forced exile of the previous year. Perhaps Viper Carrion and his underlings at the U.S. Headquarters of SEGWAC were too busy celebrating their election victories or plotting the demise of Social Security. But while there were acts of unkindness too numerous to count that sea-

son, SEGWAC revealed no overt interest in exploiting the alpaca incident, and a Saga-level Crisis never blipped loudly on the North Pole radar.

I expected PM to get back to me about her activities, and she expected me to come up with the Saga's Christmas Crisis. Perhaps we should just chalk it up to a failure to communicate. Christmas 2004 came. Christmas 2004 went. No solution to the alpaca puzzle. No Chronicle. (It's not my fault.)

Let's fast-forward through the après Christmas exposition. On Christmas Day '04, Santa, Mrs. C, and the elves took off after the ride for their annual post-holiday recuperation in the Bermuda Triangle. No sooner had they landed in their undisclosed secure location when the tsunami devastated South Asia, and the North Pole crowd hustled home to arrange relief contributions. (Bet you thought it was just Papa George and Arkansas Bill raising all that money.)

The tsunami consumed so much of the Christmas characters' time that Alabaster back-burnered the Missing Link Project. I was supposed to do some more research, but the first months of the year went by so fast, and, I admit, I forgot. Hey, Mom needed me, I was working hard, I had to junket to enjoy a new ballet in Chemnitz, listen to the bells of the restored Frauenkirche in Dresden, visit with my Swiss friend in Leipzig, and otherwise pack my cultural calendar. I had Carnegie Hall to support. And the Philharmonic. And ABT, NYCB, and the NYY(ankees).



C'mon, you gotta understand that PM was also distracted from the project, for she was round-the-clocking as North Pole Ambassador, trying to reinject the meaning of Christmas into a world gone bonkers. But yet again, the United Nations refused to accept her diplomatic credentials.

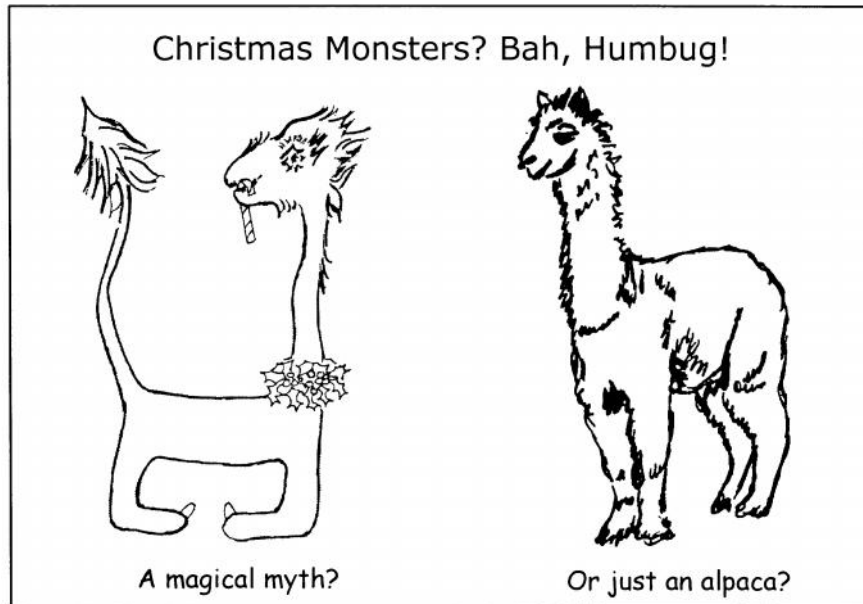
So the weeks and months rolled on. Must have been near Thanksgiving, then, after the Christmas critters had remobilized to help the hurricane victims and earthquake survivors (a bad year for natural disasters, for sure), that the anti-Christmas Monster crowd began a stealth campaign that re-commanded the Monsters' attention, refocusing them on the MLP.



PM, on a junket to Capitol Hill to confer with some Santa-sympathizer lawmakers, found the aides exceedingly chilly. A staffer for Senator Tessie Tiller (see *A Very Moral Christmas Story*, *The PM Saga*, Book 5) whispered to the amaranth ambassador, "We

can't be seen with you. You're not real. The bloggers are making fun of us for ever even mentioning you."

PM rushed back to the cave to warn Alabaster, who Googled up the first blog.



"You're being Swift-boated," Dove (the good SEGWACian friend of Christmas, dual resident of New York and the ice pyramid on the North Pole border, and the estranged son of Viper Carrion) counseled. "It's the new rage. My father's an expert at it. When someone's built up, it's a race to see who can tear him—or her—down first."

PM nodded. "Don't I know it. You tell People a truth they don't want to believe, and the SEGWACians don't want you to know, and they attack the messenger."

Clyde Elf, clicking away at Lapis's terminal, piped in. "oH! oH! Ho no! SEGWAC is flooding the Net with rumors insisting there's no such thing as Christmas Monsters, that they're just alpacas gussied up to fool the world. Look! oH, oH, oH! This says if Christmas Monsters are a lie, then Santa is a lie!"



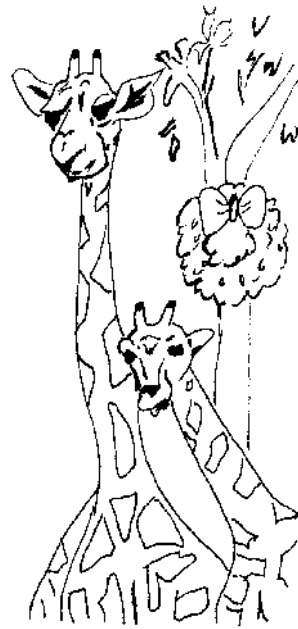
Cinnabar Celadon, the great Explorer Monster who'd been enlisted to help with the MLP, appeared at the end of Clyde's distressed dissertation. "People will believe what they want," she said, "and look for someone to agree with them. Once they find agreeers, they call that proof. Even if they're shown the scientific evidence, if they *want* to believe lies, they will."

(You may remember Cinnabar from *The Wonders of Christmas Monsterland, The PM Saga, Book XVI*. She's the one who explored the resting room of the Cave Of The Time To Come, the place where Christmas Monsters go after they've reached the State of the Sublime and want to enter the State of Serenity and Bliss. Her expedition reassured those who had worried about their departed Monsters, for she saw they were in peaceful repose, frozen for the eras, their blissful faces assuring that they were where they wanted to be.)

Al's dander rose to action status. His need to know recharged, he got Geranium to take a break from her ballroom dancing and teletransport him to visit Gerald and Geoffrey Giraffe, his fellow zoo mates, and caught up to them munching on some high branches. "A white Christmas Monster's so unusual," he explained. "I wonder if Monsters of all colors, or their evolutionary descendants, are OUT HERE. Could you ask around and see if your friends share characteristics of Christmas Monsters? I'm trying to trace my genetic genealogy."

Peppermint Paunch added his detective prowess, though he was a tad distracted (after a successful Super Snerkle on Christmas Day '04, Carmine was expecting come Christmas Eve). Lapis, now remotivated to liberate what he called "my alpaca cousins," BOING!ed Peppermint and Clyde to the Central Park Zoo. Paula and Paul R. Bear, hearing the story, got in touch with their arctic relatives, and soon e-mailed Clyde that a second cousin (on Paula's side) was jibber-jabbering about spotting a wandering arctic azalea and a peripatetic poinsettia. But the Central Park polar bears discounted that

report. "My cousin is nearsighted, prone to exaggeration, and can't tell a caribou from a penguin," warned Paula.



Sometime post-Turkey Day and pre-Rockefeller Center Tree Lighting, Cinnabar text-messed Al and PM, summoning them to the Cave Of The Time To Come. Outside the cavern, Al, PM, and the Explorer Monster donned their down apparel. Once insulated in the special protective gear, they reverently ventured inside. They were shivering as they bent to crawl through the last narrow passage, gently touching the names of the early Christmas Monsters who had chosen to await The Time To Come as calm cryogenic Monsters.

Cinnabar stopped next to a set of names in Old Monster, her breathing eerily echoing inside her mask.

“Ever since you told me Great-great-great-great Grand-papa Smaragd’s history of Scarlet and Forest, I’ve been trying to see if I could translate these markings. Here, at almost the final steps down, I rubbed off a layer of ice and found this.” She crawled further so Al and PM could see:



Al studied the engraving. Then he sighed, his breath freezing over the wall. “I think you’re right. That’s Scarlet and Forest. It looks as if they came in together, must be a long, long, long time ago. I fear this is the last clue to our missing link.”

PM comfortingly massaged his mane with her mukluk. “We’ll keep looking, Al,” she encouraged.

Cinnabar stretched her neck behind to speak. “I wondered if they left a message. So I took a couple of steps to”—she pointed toward the main chamber. “Follow me, but we can stay only a few seconds, then PM had better teletransport us out before we become one with our ancestors.”

She lay on her tummy and spotlighted ahead of her. Al and PM scrunched over her shoulder. In the permafrost:



With teeth chattering, PM linked tails with Cinnabar and Al and teletransported them back outside the COTTTC.

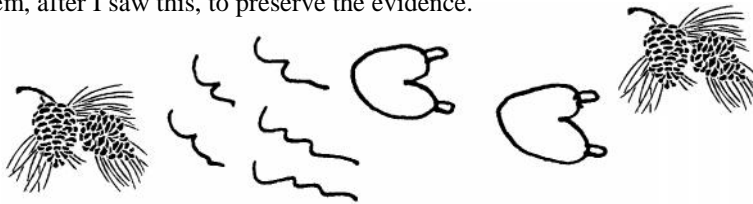
Al, molars still clattering, commented, “T-t-those pawprints are much larger than the prints on the wall.”

Cinnabar removed her protective hood. “And not as old, either, if the depth of the ice covering each is compared. I didn’t notice them the first time I explored the cave, for I had a different mission then. And Toulidine Troglodyte says he’s never guided a two-toed Monster since he’s been the Keeper of the Cave.”

PM nuzzled Al, glad her pawtips were no longer azure and once again their normal lavender. “Do you think ...?”

“That there was *another* two-toed Monster?” Al nuzzled back. “But did he—or she—join Forest and Scarlet later on? Are we too late?”

Cinnabar, flipping on her flashlight again, shrugged. “Could be. But recall, one print went forward, the other away. That led me to hypothesize that maybe she—or he—ultimately decided *not* to go in. So I did a gridded search of the landscape out here.” She took off, PM and Al galumphing to keep up, toward a wooded area, then stopped before a pile of pine cones, denuded of their nuts. Cinnabar brushed away the empty cones, explaining, “I replaced them, after I saw this, to preserve the evidence.



“I think she—or he—has been back to visit, and had one last nibble before heading away from the cave and the North Pole border. I think our visitor came—and left.” Cinnabar ventured farther into the woods and waved her light at a towering fir tree. “See!”

Haloed by the beam, snagged on a branch, was a long, long strand of knotted fur, red and green, covered with snow.

“This is relatively recent, otherwise the puffins and ptarmigans would have grabbed it to warm their nests by now.”

Al, reinspired, declared, “The quest is on!!” Those of us who understand quests knew he was not to be deterred.

Alabaster Eggshell, with his numerous Ph.D.’s earned as a youth and later, is a scientist as well as a geographer and cartographer. He poured over

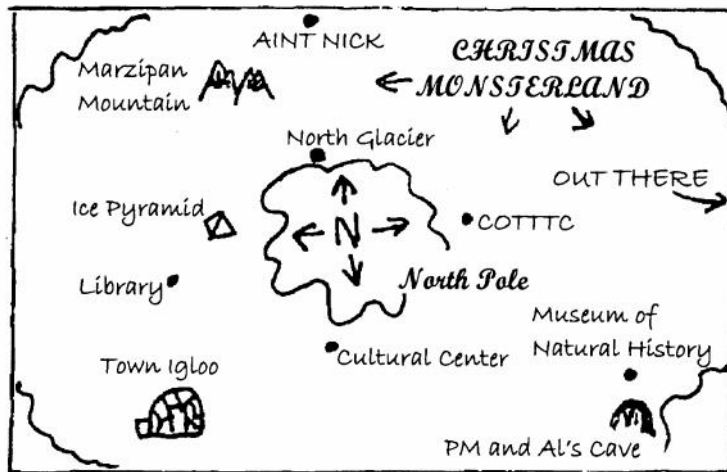
maps of Christmas Monsterland, then consulted Monsters far and wide, and commenced a methodical charting of the Christmas Monsterland topography they knew, the better to see what areas they didn't know.

This, of course, was difficult, for Christmas Monsterland is everchanging. All your Chronicler has to do is imagine a new locale, like AINT NICK (Arctic Isle Near the Tundra, Not In any way Close to Kalamazoo, the charming artists' hamlet where Santa's sleighs are crafted), and it appears, complete with population.

It probably won't astonish you to hear, after that bit of info, that PM and Al cornered me in my 76th Street hovel (not hard to do in the 6-foot-by-6-foot abode) to enlist my help. They conveyed all that had happened (which I dutifully recorded on my new mighty Gateway computer, with all its bells and whistles and even a DVD player and CD burner) and requested my expertise.

"Can't. Not me. I'm booked solid!" I protested. Before I could whine one more word, PM twitched us North.

Al laid out his map:



"Well, I haven't really thought about other Christmas Monsterland places," I said, pondering the papyrus. "Now, if I were uncharted territory, where a missing Monster could dwell, where would I be?" I closed my eyes to dream up a spot, and promptly zonked out (hey, I'd been working *really* hard).

I was rudely awakened by PM's powerful paw pummeling my noggin. Freudinella Jung and Pimento Poppy, the Christmas Monster shrinks, had been summoned to hypnotize me.

"Ve count back from 10," instructed the analyst.

"No, we imagine a restful place," the child psychologist dissented.

I retreated again into dreamland.



“Chronicler, where on the map would you put them?” Al pushed.

“Ugga-ugga ummm,” I snored, and Ouija-boarded my index finger over the map. “Here—NYTN (Not Yet Thunk Up)—here—MPWMMD (Magical Place Where Missing Monsters Dwell)—here—CIGHN (Can I Go Home Now?).”

I was BOING!ed, adenoids still resounding, back to Gotham.

Christmas was drawing nigh. The anti-Christmas Monster crusade had intensified, only minimally counter-P.R.’d by PM. Our heroine was frantic that yet another year could go by without a Saga, and she would be forgotten, her world fading away as her Dear Readers replaced their long-term memory cells jammed with Christmas Sagas past with short-term cells sans hyacinth heroine.

Relicta, the extraterrestrial intergalactic traveler who some time ago joined the Christmas Gang, and her good SEGWACian husband, Dove, volunteered to do a little reconnaissance work to see if SEGWAC’s misinformation campaign could be stymied, and to find out if SEGWAC had gotten wind of the MLP.

On the day of the Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert at Madison Square Garden, Relicta and Dove, with their teenage daughter, Crystal Camellia, and their son, almost two-year-old Nick Yule, took a break from their Salvation Army work in New Orleans to twirl in Relicta’s midasmetal spaceship back to the Big A. They arrived early, giving them time for their yearly attempt-at-reconciliation visit with Dove’s parents, Viper and Lucretia Carrion, deep in the bowels of the AOL Time Warner Center.

The nuclear family warily descended full four fathoms deep below the renovated Columbus Circle fountain into the sub-sub-subterranean sewer ’neath the glassy monument to consumer excess and media monopoly. They



squished and squashed their way through the dark, pungent tunnel to the denizens' dungeon dwelling.

"Still do-gooding, huh? Loved it when that levee broke," Anaconda Adder said as he raised the portcullis to admit them. "Showed our people here that their work to infiltrate the government with incompetents and to destroy the infrastructure of the New Deal and Great Society was not in vain. Now hundreds of thousands will have a hellish holiday season, just as we always intended."



Parasite, Dove's demonic twin, was lolling on a nail-studded settee when they entered the study. He snickered satanic satisfaction, "Who would have thought jus-s-s-t five years-s-s ago that America would be willing to let a great unique c-c-city jus-s-st was-s-sh away, s-s-shrug its collective shoulders-s-s, and go back to s-s-shopping as usual. S-S-S-SEGWAC has won!"

"Suffer the little brat to come unto me,"

snarled Lucretia Carrion, gingerly grabbing Nick from Relicta's arms to study the squirming tot intently.

Nick bawled a blue-teared streak then grasped Lucretia's beak and gurgled gleefully.



Viper Carrion looked up from his book, *Torture for Fun and Profit*, by A. Gonzales and D. Cheney, to scowl at his prodigal son and the rest of the quartet. “Hmmm, Vulture, I thought you’d returned to the exurbs-s-s to live out your monotonous-s-s exis-s-stenc-c-ce,” he sneered.



“Father,” Dove began, “yet one more year, I must remind you, my name is now Dove! You really must stop all this blogging and flogging, for—” He was interrupted by his Uncle Virus, the computer maven, who whirlwinded in, oblivious to the gathering, and announced, “Vipe, I’ve hacked into the s-s-scribbler’s computer, and the sh-sh-shield can be breached! I’ve got her PIN to the NPN—”

His brother batted and smacked him away. “Dolt, can’t you s-s-see there are s-s-spies-s-s here?”

Virus, unrepentant (SEGWACians always are), glowered at Dove et al., then slinked out.

Viper yanked Nick from his wife and addressed the youngster. “Now you’re in your terrible twos-s-s-s, you lis-s-sten to me! A Carrion you are, and a Carrion you’ll be. Your father is delus-s-s-sional if he thinks-s-s his-s-s holiday hedonis-s-sts-s-s can win the War Agains-s-st Evil.

“Believe me, S-S-SEGWAC and our aides-s-s are licking our lips-s-s on a victory lap. Look at Darfur! The world s-s-sits on its-s-s metaphorical ars-s-se as genocide goes-s-s on. It elects-s-s leaders-s-s who s-s-say that evil is-s-s good. The electorate in my domain now has-s-s an imperial pres-s-s-sident, bought and paid for by S-S-SEGWACian allies-s-s-s. The war in Iraq—our fines-s-st achievement! Death and carnage everywhere!” Viper chortled.

“The religious-s-s right claims-s-s that if you don’t s-s-support the war, you’re anti-Xmas-s-s,” the head of SEGWAC continued to gloat. “The war-mongers-s-s are s-s-so inept, they’ve traded a nonthreatening Iraq for a s-s-second Iran! And with war—agains-s-st anything and everything—cons-s-stantly invoked, people are s-s-so s-s-skittish and s-s-scared, they’re more than willing to trade *other* people’s c-c-civil rights-s-s for their own puny pers-s-sonal s-s-safety! What do they think they’re fighting for? And what does-s-s your hyped-up crims-s-son-garbed fat menac-c-ce s-s-say to that? After all, he s-s-spies on people and judges-s-s if they’re naughty or nic-c-ce.”

Relicta retrieved her son before he disappeared into the black hole of Viper’s negativity. “Mr. C. doesn’t spy! He just knows Peoples’ hearts. He says good will prevail, as it has before and can again.”

“Bah!” Viper blared, releasing a stench that seeped and crept along the mildewed floorboards, nearly sucking the ET IT family with it into the drainage grates. “Everywhere, people are s-s-suffering and dying, and what’s-s-s the loudes-s-st debate going on? The pus-s-sh by the ‘Merry Xmas-s-s’ carolers-s to des-s-stroy the ‘Happy Holiday’ heathens-s-s. We’ve got them duking it out in the s-s-shopping mall and dis-s-scount s-s-stores-s-s, s-s-screaming out their

chos-s-sen greetings-s-s at the top of their hypocritical lungs-s-s. Meanwhile, S-S-SEGWAC rakes-s-s in the dough, chortling as the detes-s-sed ‘charity’ and ‘good will’ and ‘peace on earth’ contingent is-s-s drowned out by the chattering classes-s-s of trickle-down advocates-s-s, the I-earned-it-I-keep-it crowd, and the war profiteers-s-s-s. Ah, my firs-s-st grands-s-son, come home to the dark s-s-side! That’s-s-s where the money is-s-s! That’s-s-s where the power is-s-s. That’s-s-s where the future lies-s-s and lies-s-s-s and lies-s-s-s-s!”

Parasite sniggered. “We have dis-s-scredited that putrid purple purveyor of pacifis-s-sm and harmony. Our Operation Dis-s-s-traction is a s-s-slam dunk. We’ve debunked the Mons-s-sterland myth. No more PM the Perfect, only PM the Public-c-city-S-s-seeking Alpaca. S-S-Soon s-s-she and all the res-s-t of Mons-s-sterland will dis-s-s-appear, and then the North Pole!” He swigged a tankard of carbonated bitter bile (all that hissing dries the throat).



Dove covered little NYC’s tiny antennae, while Relicta quaked her own to soothe her now-caterwauling son.

Crystal Camellia, who’d held her tongue too long, confronted her grandfather. “You stop that right now! My brother will grow up with warmth and caring, and even though I’ll probably get in fights with him, I will also take care of him. You are my grandfather, and I L—”

“S-s-s-s-s-s, not in my hous-s-s-se!” Lucretia shrieked.

“Well, I do, and I don’t have to say the word for you all to know it. But we will learn from Mom and Dad and PM and Santa—”

“Hiiiiisssssssss!!!!” from all the assembled SEGWACians.

“And we will live a *good* life! It’s the way to live. Here’s your present.”

Crystal heaved a lead-framed portrait of Jack Abramoff and Tom DeLay at her grandpa.

With that, Crystal stomped her foot, took Relicta’s hand, and the family marched, heads up, out of the dungeon. Nick yelled out his fifty-millionth “No-No-No-No!” and trotted alongside his father.

“What do you think Virus was going to tell your father?” Relicta whispered once the still-intact family emerged into the circling traffic. They dodged an M104 bus, then caught an M10, grateful the transit strike was over and their MetroCards refilled.

“Something about the North Pole Network and the Invisible Protective Shield,” Dove whispered back, prying his toddling youngster from the leg of a disapproving mink-clad matron.

Once past backstage security in Madison Square Garden, Relicta set up her keyboard for the annual concert to benefit Save the Children and the Salvation Army. Dove tried to warn Peppermint about the slip of Virus’s forked tongue, but the striated shamus was too distracted by the pending arrival of his



first offspring to pay much attention.

Al, too, only half heard, for he was tapping on his tom-toms, banging out the frustration of his thwarted quest. And PM, la-la-laing and foo-foo-foeing her vocal warm-ups and Vaccai's, missed the meaning of the menacing message.

Crystal Camellia appealed to Lapis, but he was too goo-goo-eyed over Emeraldalda's dance routine to pay any attention. But Geranium did heed the warning and began to run a diagnostic patch on the Network, but was called away to sing harmony with PM before the results came in.

PM's performance was especially vibrant (I'm sure from auditing the CD's of my voice lessons and picking up pointers about breath control and using consonants to bounce a vowel into place). All of the Christmas Crew gained extended, well-deserved applause for their rockin' rendition of *We Three Kings*. Was the audience more sparse this year? Yes. Had SEGWAC succeeded in convincing People that a concert by recently exposed alpacas wasn't worth attending? Or were People suffering from donor fatigue? Hard to say, but the loyal fans who were there, who still believed, were enthusiastic

and gave more generously than ever.

After the concert, we headed toward my hovel for a post-concert snack. Halfway up Eighth Avenue, Al halted the entourage when Cinnabar text-messaged that an unexplained perambulating cranberry-bedecked Christmas tree surrounded by twinkling lights had been spotted in a remote region of Christmas Monsterland. "Satellite geological surveys indicate numerous disintegrating glaciers and icebergs melting into the Arctic Sea in this area. This is the most promising lead we've had!" Cinnabar urged.

The Night Before the Night Before Christmas having now tick-tocked into the wee minutes of Christmas Eve, the group agreed to change course, forgoing snowball cookies for an impending Christmas Crisis.

Relicta swirled her family, the Detectives, and the band's equipment away in her spaceship. They'd drop off Emeralda and Rudolph at AINT NICK to pick up a new refueling sleigh, its last coat of varnish now dry over Emeralda's painstakingly painted portrayal of the Sugar Plum Fairy, then drop off Peppermint to be by Carmine's side for the entrance of their new Monster. Then the ET IT crowd would change clothes at the Ice Pyramid and meet up at the North Pole.

PM set her coordinates per Cinnabar's instructions, and, with ne'er an "if you please," ordered, "Chronicler, if you want to keep your job, grab your backpack and fuzzy coat and come with us."

See ya later! hallooed, Al, Lapis, and Geranium linked tails, and BOING!ed. PM nipped my arm, and, with a flick of her tail, we, too, dissolved.

There is no cold like the cold of Christmas Monsterland. We reintegrated on a glacier, the intense silence soon interrupted by the deafening crackling and crackling of icebergs. The sky was deep indigo, but for a faint glow in the distance, many miles and another world away.

This was a place where no man, woman, nor Monster had ever before trod. What were we doing there? We huddled together, looking north (well, not north exactly, since we *were* as north as we could be), south, east, and west. Alabaster began a systematic circling, widening it as he peered for tracks. But the only prints we spotted were our own.

We trudged until the dimmest of dawns, and then trekked more circles until Christmas Eve day passed into Christmas Eve evening. I was dizzy. I was hungry. I was tired. And, above all, I was verging on icecycledom.

"There's nothing here," I shivered. "Let's go home. My toes are gone. In two seconds, my rime-bit nose will break off."

"Chronicler ..." PM began, in that way she has when she's about to criticize my lack of creativity. But I was spared the humiliation, for just then the Christmas Star peeped over the farthest icecap, its rays a golden cloud on the horizon.

The cloud was in motion, hovering over a gargantuan groaning and glis-

tening glacier floating our direction in the frigid Arctic Sea. As the massive ice cube clanked toward us, we faintly espied in the center—what? a green and red—glob? igloo? mastodon?

Vibrant chords and melancholy woodwinds cut through the frosty air, then a rich, gravelly voice.

“Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen ...”

“I know that!” I whispered in surprise. “It’s Mahler!”

“ ‘I’ve lost touch with the world,’ ” PM translated. “Yes, I know it too.”

As the ice floe neared, the golden cloud was no longer a cloud. It was an orchestra comprised of tiny glittering creatures, twinkling in the starlight, vibrating the velvet-bowed strings of Gustav’s melody.

“Mit der ich sonst viele Zeit verdorben ...”

We noiselessly approached the iceberg and listened to the lilting lieder (not a cough, program rustle, cellphone ring, or whisper on our part to be heard—we were a respectful audience).

“Ich leb’ allein in meinem Himmel, in meinem Lieben, in meinem Lied.”

“I live alone in my own heaven, in my love, in my song,” PM whispered. “Rückertlieder.”

We gazed at the source of the soulful lyrics. Before us was a green Monster with red stripes, or a red-striped Monster with long green matted fur. The Monster was more massive than any Christmas Monster I’d ever seen. His face—for yes, it was a he, from the dusky baritone we’d heard—was gruff and wrinkled, his two-toed paws big and splayed and calloused. He lumbered slowly, stopping now and then to cock his head and chortle at something only he could understand.

We stared. He stared back. He shook a little, then turned away, as if searching for an exit off the floe, which had ground to a grating halt after banging against our iceberg. The golden creatures fluttered around him and then





began one by one to twitter around us.

Those of us who were swatting at the—whatever they were—gnats? fleas?—only agitated the critters more. They had no real physical mass, and when I raised my heavily mittened hand and took a swipe, they flew right through my glove. (O.K., I was the only one swatting—the rest, used to magic, were allowing the creatures to fly above them, around them, and—yes—through them!)

“Fear not,” PM announced, as much to the old Monster as to us. “We bring tidings of great joy! I am PM, Santa Claus’s Ambassador, and we have been looking so hard for you!”

The Monster’s large eyes peered right through us. He rotated his long-maned head and lifted a long-furred paw to his ear as a number of the gilt creatures returned and communicated to him in a strange, rapid cacophony. He nodded and sighed.

Alabaster whispered to PM, “Maybe we should try German. He was singing in that. Guten Abend, mein Herr!” he shouted, his voice echoing across the expanse.

The old Monster thumped his tale thunderously, the shockwaves tearing a rift through the ice. “No need to shout,” he grunted. “I may be old—heck, I definitely *am* old—but I’m not deaf yet. And I speak all languages, thanks to my friends here. Now, get off my iceberg, and we’ll be on our way.”

“But we’ve come so far to find you,” PM said softly.

“You’re Purple Monster, aren’t you?” he said. “I’ve heard about you, but I couldn’t believe there were any purple Monsters. Or white ones, either,” he said, pointing to Al.

He peered penetratingly at Lapis and Geranium, who pondered him pensively in return. “Or lavender and red, or blue and white. What a world, what a world.”

He listened again to his golden companions. Some dove in one ear and emerged out of the other. “Now I’ve done it,” he moaned. “They told me everything about you, and now they think I doubted them. But they should know I only doubted my own dreams.”

“They can read your mind?” Geranium asked.

“Darn cool!” Lapis emitted, then presented a furry ear so some of the critters could go through his head.

“Language, Lap!” Al said. “But how?”

“An electrical thing—biology and neuroscience, the brain’s energy, and electricity, and they’re energy and electricity, and we’ve come to know each other very well.”

PM asked, “Were they your orchestra?” (Well, she is a singer, and as I’m a singer, too, I wanted to know. Vocalizers are always seeking good accompanists.)

“Yep. Now, ’bye. Got to find a new place to live, now that my old home has pretty much melted away because of global warming. My polar bear buddies are dying of hunger, and I’ve gotta help them find a new place to live and a better food source.”

Al watched the frenetic flutterers who’d just exited his ears fly back to the old Monster and buzz to him.

“They say you want to know who I am and where you come from—and if you’re really an alpaca? Hmmm. I suppose—my social skills are lacking. The only thing I know about life now I’ve learned from my friends here. So if I tell my story, will you go away and leave me be?”

“Could you please tell us someplace warmer?” I pleaded, now bereft of all feeling in my outer extremities.

“You’re one of those Humans, those People I keep hearing about? The mammals who do so much damage but make such mighty fine art? Hmmm. Not much to look at.”

“I’m a not unpleasant representative of my species,” I defended humanity. “But you’ve never seen People?”

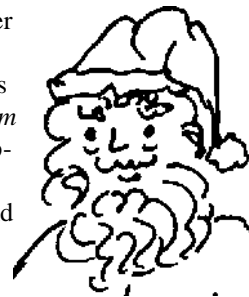
“Only through the help of my friends here.” On cue, thousands of them darted and dodged, merged and separated, then formed the shape of—who?—ah, Derek Jeter, in his Yankees uniform, that No. 2 on his pinstripe jersey.

“You’re not gold, though. My friends can’t show me hues, they just describe the color,” the Monster commented.

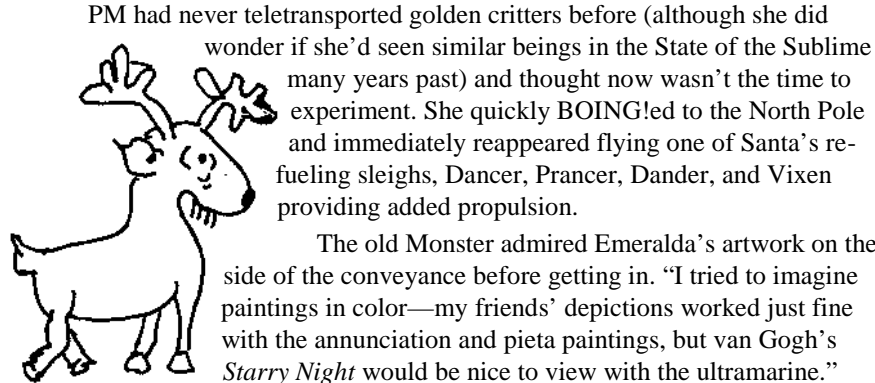
“I’ll be colorless and lifeless soon if we don’t find a warmer spot,” I chattered. When more of the teensy-weensy flying whatever came toward me again, I stuck frozen fingers in both ears, gritting, “Who do you think you are, you little bugs, the N.S.A.?”

“Can I take you to meet Mr. Claus—St. Nick?” PM asked.

“Ahhh, the great mythological guy who’s taken over the North Pole and climbs up and down chimneys giving presents to People? I’ve heard about him, too. My friends here have told me the *Saga of PM* and added *A Visit From Saint Nicholas* to fill in the blanks. He’s the one who supposedly brought the Monsters together? Hmmm. Well, might as well. Maybe the guy can find me a new cave and safer habitats for the other endangered Arctic residents. Can’t go without my buddies, though. We’re co-



dependents.”



Once we were all positioned snugly in and in front of the sleigh, the reindeer snorted and took off over the permafrost and through the woods, anxious to get back to the Pole. The wizened Monster absorbed all the sights as we sledged on.

“Santa, I'd like you to meet ... What is your name, sir?” PM inquired, as Santa and Mrs. C hustled out of the cottage to greet the visitors. Relicta landed her spaceship at about the same time, and the old Monster saw his first ET IT in person (or whatever).

“Monster—Forest-Scarlet Two-Toed Long-Furred Monster. Named after my parents. But you can call me Ancient Monster—less of a mouthful. And these are my compadres, the Starflies.”

“What can I get you?” Mrs. C asked as Ancient Monster and his rays settled around the hearth's blazing fire. The Starflies flitted in and out of the flames.

“My friends said something about chocolate—“

“Hot cocoa, then,” Mrs. C smiled.

“I was thinking—truffles?”

PM looked at me.

“But they're for Mom!” I objected.

PM intoned beatifically, “Christmas is for sharing.”

I unzipped my backpack and removed my laptop (never, ever leave home without it—I'm a writer, what I do, who I am) and, from under that, a box of Parisian truffles I'd hidden away. I untied the red ribbon, removed the lid, and passed the box to Ancient Monster. He took one in his two-toed paw and popped it in his mouth.

“Sure beats pine nuts,” he smacked. (The



look of rapture was worth it, Mom!)

Al was pacing impatiently. “Ancient Monster, please, we want to know. Tell us your story.”

Ancient Monster, licking the remaining cocoa powder off his paw, began his story.

“When I was born, my mother and father were the only beings in my existence. Although we had no word for it at the time in the Old Monster language, my parents were greatly in Love. And they loved me. The three of us were nomads for a time, wandering the outer realms of Monsterland. The years went by, and our family grew, and grew, and grew.

“Some of my siblings were two-toed, some one-toed, some yellow, some brown, some red, some green, some long-haired, some short-haired. But I was the only one with long red and green fur and two toes.

“We all thought we’d live forever, but as we wandered through the centuries, my brothers and sisters left our pack, and Monsterland, to find mates, some in what is now called Siberia, others in Lapland and Alaska. They’d often come back to visit, if we hadn’t picked up and moved. My nieces, nephews, grand-nieces, and grand-nephews were remarkable new beings, and I saw the wonder of evolution first hand.”

Al broke in. “Do you think some of your relatives evolved into alpacas?”

“Could be,” replied Ancient Monster. “Some did look a lot like what the Starflies have shown me are llamas. Perhaps my siblings were the ancient ancestors of alpacas, who knows? Or, consider, perhaps we Monsters are descendants of the alpacas? Some say the alpacas were prized by ancient Incan civilizations. And a thousand years before the Great Pyramids were built, Incan ancestors measured their wealth by the number of alpacas they owned. (A little factoid my friends brought me from a Web site.) Perhaps the next step in the alpacas’ evolution was the magic of Monsterland? Nature is very fascinating.

“Ah yes, that magic of Monsterland—we learned soon enough that as my extended family ventured farther and farther south, they became mortal. They chose to stay OUT THERE, though, and to have a limited life so they could create new, unimagined life, and so they could explore.

“My parents urged, ‘Go south, my son, take a chance and find a new life!’ But I didn’t have the courage. I feared I would be reviled, and I *knew* I would not come back. Life with Scarlet and Forest was joyful. I didn’t want to give it up.

“So Mom and Dad went on and on, and I went on with them. Centuries came, centuries went, perhaps a millennium, and I never met any other Monster inhabitants of Monsterland.

“One day, finally, my parents sat me down and told me about a story they’d heard in their youth about the Cave Of The Time To Come. They said that they were very tired, their bodies hurt, they didn’t want to keep wandering

and wandering. They wanted to seek that Cave and wait for the Time To Come. We set out to find it, and we did. I watched them scratch their symbols on the wall near the chamber of elders, and we nuzzled necks to say, 'Until we meet again.' Then they went in.

"For the first time in my existence, I was by myself. I finally had the courage and curiosity to venture out, search for some distant relatives OUT THERE, start anew. I gathered a large supply of tamarack seeds and trudged until I reached the edge of Monsterland ... and ran smack into an invisible barrier. Something in Monsterland had changed. My time had come and gone.

"My world was suddenly very, very small. Should I go to the Red state or the Green state? Scarlet and Forest had warned me of the beatings and the prejudice. I couldn't face that. Maybe, I told myself, it is my time to go to the COTTTC. Life as a lonely nomad was unbearable. I tromped through the woods, on what I was to discover later was a Christmas night, until I was so weary I could not take another step. I rested in a grove of pines and fell asleep.

"I awoke at that moment when Monsterland hovers between darkness and dawn and found myself covered with golden dust. Had it fallen from the trees? I stood and shook off the powder, but instead of falling to the ground, thousands of tiny particles fluttered and flew about me, making a beautiful sound, like leaves rustling, ice cracking, a quiet wind through the arctic willows. Music—I'd never heard such music before. And I tell you, these critters seemed as surprised by me as I was by them. Did they think I was a holly bush? Who knows." Ancient Monster listened again to his flickering friends.

"They tell me," he continued, "that I'm a great narrator, but perhaps I should speed this up! Turns out, we discovered later, these beings were rays from the Christmas Star, trapped inside Monsterland—or, Christmas Monsterland, which it was called by this time—by the Invisible Protective Shield, just as I had been.

"These creatures' confusion was so moving that I decided to postpone the Cave. We stayed together that first year. Whenever I moved on, they'd hover



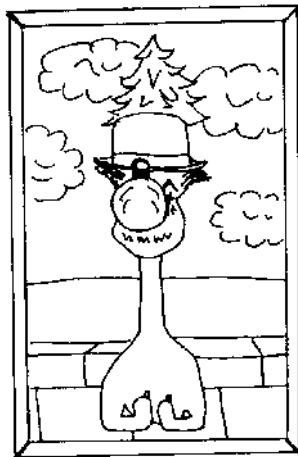
around me. When I slept, they made music to dream by. They didn't seem to know what had happened to them, and I didn't know what would happen to me.

"Over time, we learned to communicate. They told me they were part of a huge energy force, and longed to return. They called themselves Starflies.

"The planet spun round the sun, and the next Christmas, my companions were joined by even more soaring rays, who quickly joined our group. Some began to take off to explore Monsterland, seeking a way 'home,' but they returned to report that there was this place, called the North Pole, where a guy in a red velvet suit served hot chocolate, candy canes, and mint jelly to red Monsters, green Monsters, red and green Monsters, and green and red Monsters. At first, I didn't believe them, but they insisted.

"I don't know how long it took, but one day, near the border, the Starflies gathered together and concentrated their energy. Suddenly they could travel outside the shield. I trotted along after them, but pounded my pate on the barrier and had only a huge bump on my pride to show for it. So some of the Starflies came back to stay with me, while others explored OUT THERE and brought back tales of nature and wondrous creatures. They described humans, and the lives they created and the environment they destroyed.

"Before these humans ever imagined these technological treats, I had my own Internet, cellphone, newspaper, radio, and TV. The Starflies were my reality and my virtual reality. They showed me droughts, tsunamis, earthquakes, cruelty, famine, the genocide in Darfur, AIDS, viruses, cancer. They taught me about Christmas, and what it means. They sang carols, and duplicated the Boston Symphony performing Mahler and the Met Orchestra playing Beethoven. They've transported me, opened my horizons. Why, just this past November, they performed 'Kaleidoscope,' that lovely new ballet commissioned for American Ballet Theater. The Starflies reproduced the patterns especially well."



"I know the choreographer!" I cried out in great satisfaction. "Peter Quanz. Absolutely brilliant. But you didn't see the blue costumes," I sympathized.

The Ancient Monster sighed with satisfaction. "Ah, that Saint-Saëns concerto! The Starflies have staged Shakespeare and Albee for me, and read Aristotle and Wilfred Owen. I just need to ask, and I can watch reruns of 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer.'

"I've traveled through the Starflies to China and Japan, Switzerland and Holland, Russia and South Africa, and they've shown me the Great Wall and the Louvre. I've seen Monet's lily pond, Magritte's surrealism, Ernst's bridal

robing, van Gogh's drawings, Noah Jemison's Venice, Judith Bush's wild dogs."

"But how can they be so many places and yet be with you?" Lapis asked.

"There are millions, billions, trillions, gadzillions of Starflies," Ancient Monster replied. "They are limitless. And over the years, they discovered they could go to and from the Christmas Star, as well, and add to all the knowledge contained there."

I was still puzzling over something. "Now, you say the Starflies have been at the concerts I've been to, and seen Wendy Whelan and Julie Kent and Julio Bocca and Gillian Murphy and Ethan Stiefel and all the other great ballet stars in performance. Why couldn't I see or hear the Starflies OUT THERE, but UP HERE I can?"

Ancient Monster looked kindly at me. "You must want to hear them, need to see them, and they will tell you all you want and need to know. They can shrink themselves to almost invisibility, or expand to show themselves. They read my heart, and knew I needed them. But why do they stay with me? I think they remember that I helped them find out who they are and what their purpose is. I interpret what they see and experience to them, when I can."



PM, awestruck, exclaimed, "Oh, what stories the Starflies can tell! What songs they can sing, pirouettes portray, symphonies thunder. But do they speak of Christmas? Do they speak of Love?"

The Ancient Monster smiled. "Ah, you dear heliotropic Monster helper. The Starflies *are* Christmas. They *are* Love. They come from Love. When the Christmas Star shines brightest, heralding Christmas Day, there is more light than the world can absorb, and more than the Star needs to keep. That leftover light transmogrifies into Starflies. The glow they emit is one known to all of Christmas Monsterland, the North Pole, and to all those who look up Christmas night to be guided to that perfect light. They show the world, by their existence, that the universe provides Art, Beauty, Truth, and Hope—the power to evolve into better beings. With them, I have come to know Life—and Love—and I am content."

Ancient Monster took another truffle and savored it. "The taste of chocolate—something my friends couldn't quite describe." He opened himself to the Starflies, who discovered the sensation for themselves.

Clyde Elf, with the clanging of the North Pole grandfather clock, scurried to Santa to urge him, "oH oH, it's time to go!"

"Can we show you another world tonight?" Santa asked. "The shield is no barrier for me and my sleigh and all things Christmas on this night."

Ancient Monster listened to the Starflies, then nodded. "I'd be honored."

The group hustled and bustled, gathering up harnesses and stocking stuffers. Their preparations were interrupted by a Webcast from Monsterland. Peppermint Paunch, grinning a silly grin, announced, "Yuck, yuck, yuck, heeeerrrrre's Cranberry Swirl." He turned the camera off himself and on to Carmine Poppy, who held a bouncing baby boy Monster. Carmine was radiant, and relaxed, for birthing Christmas Monsters is basically just a matter of burping a bit and crying "Oops."

All the North Pole and Monsterland crowd applauded. "Oh, what a year you'll have!" PM called out. "You'll really be ready for THE READING OF THE STORY come next Christmas Eve," she declared.



A blast of heat radiated through Santa's cottage as a commotion was heard outside. The gang hustled outdoors to find Ember, the Christmas Firebird, flapping her wings and endangering Frosty with instant liposuction.

"SEGWAC has breached the Invisible Protective Shield at AINT NICK, captured Emeraldal and Rudolph on their way here for the ride," Ember heatedly warned. "I heard them say they're rendering them to Guantánamo Bay! I chased away some infiltrating demons aiming for the North Pole, but Lucifer Trinode's ship outflew me, so I rushed here!"

Peppermint, still online, said he'd dispatch his operatives to make sure no other intruders remained within the North Pole or Christmas Monsterland borders.

Al logged into the NPN, and with Geranium's help, swiftly found the firewall crack and plugged it with a patch. Then they rushed to join PM and Lapis at the sleigh.

Lapis, sick with worry about Emeraldal, had strapped himself into his sleigh-puller position and almost lifted the sleigh all by himself before Al finished tightening the halter buckles on PM, Geranium, Rosette, and the rest of the Christmas Monsters.

Santa climbed in back, then offered a warm hand and helped Ancient Monster into the seat beside him. Once Alabaster was settled in the back,

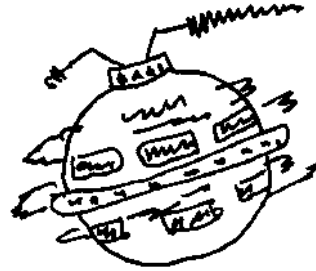


Clyde and Elvira Fernhat threw him the S.C. sack and waved as up and away they flew.

I scurried to Relicta's spaceship and scrunched myself and my backpack inside, barely in time to down a Dramamine before the ET and Dove hit the hover button. The reindeer and other Monsters strapped themselves in front of the refueling sleds, and Santa's aerodynamic support staff were off.

"If we want to catch them, we have to sing, better, louder, with more joy!" PM urged her fellow sleigh pullers.

The caravan of Christmas Characters followed Ember as she navigated toward AINT NICK and OUT THERE, the Starflies buzzing around Ancient Monster. The Firebird sped toward the hole in the IPS.



As the sleigh approached maximum altitude, the Starflies in a group flew straight up, through the hole in the ozone layer.

"Where are they going?" I radioed to Al.

"They're not giving up on us, are they?"

"Home," Al answered.

"No, they can't!" I cried. "If I can whirl and whip around, risking life and limb, so can they! That is, if they had limbs, which they don't, so wings, then," I stuttered and sputtered from nerves and airsickness.

Trinode's ship suddenly loomed ahead, and Relicta barely maneuvered out of a vicious blast of his Isolator Ray.

"That was close," I said.

PM was doing some fancy flying herself, all the while leading her fellow sleigh pullers in a lilting *Lully Lullay*. She dodged one blast, then another.

"If I can get close enough, I'll BOING in!" she called out.

"I'll come, too!" Lapis cried.

"And me!" Geranium added.

"Who'll guide my sleigh?" Santa called out, way too jolly for the parlous predicament we found ourselves in. Did he know something we didn't?

Of course he did. For as the Christmas Star rose higher in the east, the rays were vibrating and shimmering in the upper atmosphere, and making a sound of glory on the highest as they wove their way round Trinode's ship and created a golden net to ensnare



the spinning craft. The wondrous notes of *O Holy Night* echoed through the ether.

Peering into Trinode's front window, we glimpsed the three-antennaed evildoer, lighted rhythmically by Rudolph's flashing nose, batting his hands on his ears while his ship battered against the Starfly barrier.

"His word is truth and His gospel is peace!" the Starflies buzzed harmony to PM's melody line.

Trinode was seething with rage as he was forced to slowly land his ship near Lapland. Santa's sleigh and his entourage quickly parked nearby.

The Starflies circled the spacecraft, still caroling hymns of hope. The door descended, and out loped Emerald, right into Lapis's paws. Lapis gently buckled her into the harness next to his spot (there's something going on here, but perhaps we'll deal with that next year). Geranium relinquished her place and took instead a spot at the lead of one of the refueling sleighs.



"For the greater good," she smiled.

PM winked her approval as the Starflies encircled Trinode, Parasite, and Anaconda Adder until Rudy, too, was free and safely harnessed in another refueling sleigh, his nose blinking metronomically to *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

The Ancient Monster chuckled at his friends, now greatly increased in number.

"So!" he asked, turning to Santa. "What should the Starflies do with them? They could exile them to a remote glacier with me, living on lichen and seeing firsthand the results of their willful ignorance of global warming."

"Let them go. We do not torture at the North Pole," Santa winked.

"My readers want to know," I cried out when I saw they were about to take off again. "After the centuries you've been in existence, what is the most important thing you've learned?"

The Ancient Monster stroked his facial fur and squinted. "Hmmm. Let's see."

All the Christmas critters turned. A profound silence descended.

More silence. Ancient Monster cogitated, then excogitated some more.

Finally:

"Love. Learn. Live. Don't despair—that doesn't get you pine nuts. A new day can bring new marvels. Keep your sense of wonder, every moment of every day. And ... floss."

"Floss?"

"Yes. After every meal. We might not die in Monsterland, but we do deteriorate. And one of the first things to go is our gums. I recommend Scotch pine for the wisdom teeth, and Douglas fir for the molars. Sitka spruce is espe-

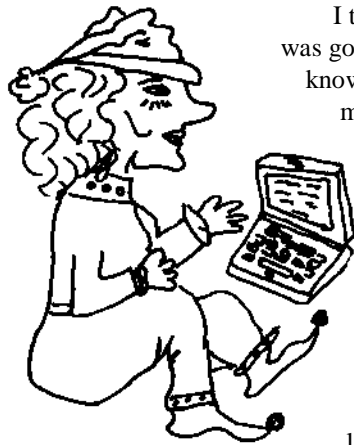
cially good for the incisors. Keeps those green things from lodging in the front, causing great embarrassment when admiring your visage in an ice slick. And a little mint for fresh breath.” He grinned perfect bicuspid in great satisfaction.

The group reflected on those words of wisdom.

Then Santa called, “Up, up, and away, we’re running behind schedule,” and off they flew. When they were safely aloft, the Starflies followed and encircled Ancient Monster and the sleigh, as a golden trail of the Christmas Star followed Santa OUT THERE to do what he does on Christmas.

Ember flapped her fiery wings over the SEGWACians until we were safely aloft in Relicta’s ship. The Firebird flew up in front of our whirling ship and waved goodbye, then zoomed away, following the Christmas Star.

Relicta nodded at Dove. “I did it when they weren’t looking.” She grinned and held up a shiny rock, then handed it to her hubby. “It’s the crystal that controls Trinode’s navigation system. I substituted a lump of coal from Santa’s stash.”



I typed away as we twirled toward Toronto. I was going to post my blog immediately so all would know that yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, and magical, mythical Christmas Monsters who pull his sleigh. Would anyone believe? Well, there are some signs that People OUT HERE are slowly being forced to remove their blinders.

“Drop me off in St. Louis,” I requested as I posted the Web log. “Mom’s waiting for me! I’ll finish the Saga later, in time to send out before the Russian Orthodox Christmas.”

I opened my backpack to return the laptop.

“Whoa! PM, what hast thou done?!” I cried. For where there had been a second, hidden box of truffles (all the better to fool the purple purloiner of all things cocoa), there was now—an empty space.

“I bet the Starflies told her about that,” I grumbled. “I wish I’d made my mind a blank when they flew through.”

Relicta and Dove exchanged a look I decided to ignore.

“Sorry, Mom.” I muttered. “It’s not my fault.”

Season’s Greetings, Happy Holidays,
Merry Christmas,
and Happy New Year!



