

His voice rumbled around them, but his eyes twinkled. “You had better come over here and have some hot chocolate and cookies.” Santa beamed at them. “You’ll need them to fortify you for your trip to Australia.”

“Australia!?” Ariel’s mouth dropped open. Snowla stared.

“Why, yes, you didn’t think I was going to face that madman alone, did you? He might want me to deliver a crocodile to his mother, for peat’s sake! And Rudolph will probably want to bring back a deadly spider.” Santa shook his finger at them. “You’ll have to keep a close eye on that caribou!”

The little frog trilled and clicked, and stared at Santa’s beard. “And make sure that frog gets something to eat!” Santa shouted in a worried voice.

Ariel’s eyes lit up. “Oh, Snowla, does this mean what I think it means?” Ariel was breathless, her sprig of holly was jittering about.

“I’m afraid it does, Ariel,” said Snowla. From now on, we get to ride in the Christmas sleigh with Santa.”

“And we get to meet the madman from Australia?”

Snowla stared at Ariel. “We do, Ariel, that we do.”



RUDOLPH AND THE CHRISTMAS FROG

Snowla the elf watched in dismay as a thick Arctic fog rolled over the North Pole. Thick as cotton wool. The North Pole Store disappeared in one big gulp, and the landing lights on the Christmas runway vanished in the blink of an eye.

"Omigosh!" she said, biting her lip, her tiny silver hammer forgotten for the moment.

She hoped Rudolph’s nose wouldn’t fail him tonight. Santa was due back any minute from the first Christmas Eve run to Africa, and if Rudolph couldn’t find the workshop, then Santa and the reindeer would have to spend the night in Tuktoyaktuk, or on the frozen banks of the Coppermine River. And no one else would get any presents at all.

“Snowla,” said Ariel.

“Mmmmm,” said Snowla, watching as the fog engulfed the North Pole Christmas Tree.

“Snowla,” said Ariel again, louder this time.

“What is it Ariel?” asked Snowla, biting her lip as the wall of thickfog rolled over the workshop. The whole world had disappeared.

“Snowla, you had better look.” Ariels voice sounded squeaky.

“Ariel, what is...” She stopped, astonished. Ariel was standing on top of the Amazon Rainforest workbench, Pringle’s workbench. Her tiny silver hammer was held out in front of her and she was staring fixedly at the floor on the other side of the bench. “Ariel! Whatever is the matter?”

Ariel gulped, but didn’t take her eyes off the floor. She pointed with the silver hammer. “Snowla, there’s a frog on the floor,” she said. Her face was flushed a bright pink, and her eyelashes were batting furiously. The sprig of holly in her green elf cap was quaking and shaking.

“A frog? Here?” asked Snowla in surprise. “There can’t be! Why frogs are all asleep now, under the mud, or



frozen into an ice cube waiting for spring.”

“Not this one, Snowla.” said Ariel, shaking her head, and shaking the holly sprig too. The red berries whipped back and forth. “This one is sitting right here, staring at me.”

Snowla stood on tip toes, trying to see over the workbench. “And its not just a frog, Snowla,” Ariel added, shaking her head “Its a blue and yellow, sucker-toed, Amazon Rainforest, Poison Dart Frog.”

“A what?” asked Snowla in astonishment. “How on earth would you know its a poison dart frog, Ariel?”

“I’ve watched Discovery Channel Snowla,” said Ariel, turning to glare at her friend, the little hammer waving wildly in her hand. “Besides, it says so, right here in Pingle’s book.” She nodded her head, pointing at a book lying on Pringle’s workbench. Its a poison dart frog Snowla, and its hopping in circles speaking a very strange language.”

“A strange language?” asked Snowla. “Ariel, frogs don’t speak strange languages, they croak.” She wondered what on earth had gotten into her friend.

“Well, this one does Snowla,” said Ariel, waving the hammer in the air and taking a step backwards. “I know strange frog language when I hear it. You had better come and take a look!”

Snowla stared at her. Maybe the Christmas rush had addled her brains, or maybe she was overtired, *very* overtired. Christmas was such an exhausting time for elves.

“Ariel, maybe you need a steaming mug of hot chocolate. It’s been a *very* stressful day,” she said. “Pingle’s Amazon Rainforest workbench is full of bean bag frogs, and there are a lot of blue and yellow one’s there.”

“*Snowla!* There’s a poison dart frog on the floor of the workshop, right beside Pingle’s Amazon Rainforest cushions!” She paused. “A *real* poison dart frog! You’d better get up here and take a look!”

Snowla sighed and put down her own silver screwdriver, and climbed up on the workbench, gingerly ‘stepping over the pile of giant banana cushions, then tripping over a pile of pink fishing flies. They flew into the air like a giant pink cloud, floating in every direction, but mostly towards the floor.

There was a sudden blur of movement in front of them.

“Eek!” squealed Ariel, leaping backwards and sending Snowla into a spin.

they have plenty of insects in the outback! And plenty of other poisonous creatures. There’s a mad man over there who’s not afraid of anything.”

Mrs. Claus pointed to the blue garbage can. “Don’t forget the snake dear, it can go to Australia too.”

“And tell Rudolph not to forget that snake! The mad man at Australia Zoo *likes* snakes!”

Suddenly the room was filled with cheering, dancing elves, though they kept their distance from the tiny frog.

“Itsgreatisntitsnowlasavedthefrog”

“Thefroggoingtoaustralia.”

“Tothemadmaninaustraliaitheonewithallthecrocodiles.”

Snowla blinked furiously trying to decipher the words. Ariel blinked and held on to her sprig of holly, just in case someone tried to take it.

The frog sat contentedly in the middle of the floor.

Santa sat down on his stool and stared at the chocolate cookies and his nearly empty mug of hot chocolate.

“Christmas,” he said.. “Everything that can go wrong usually does,” he rumbled. “Especially if that mad caribou is about.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Claus. “So many details, and so many surprises, every single year.”

Santa looked at her. “Most of them planned by the caribou,” he said.

Mrs. Claus smiled. “Why, Rudolph is just trying to find you the perfect Christmas gift, husband.”

“Well, next year, could you tell Rudolph that I would prefer fresh coconut for Christmas? Or lemon pie? Or a box of licorice all-sorts? No snakes, no poison frogs, no Komodo dragons, no tarantulas, no black widow spiders, no penguins, no Kangaroos and definitely no African killer bees.” He paused. “And if it’s at all possible, can’t we send Rudolph to the south Pole? I’m sure we could start a second Christmas tradition.

He looked around the kitchen, at the dancing elves, at the tiny blue and yellow frog that was sitting happily in the middle of the room waiting to be taken home, at Snowla and Ariel.

“Well now,” he said, frowning at them. “Snowla and Ariel, eh?”

“That’s right dear,” said Mrs. Claus, nodding.

Ariel quivered, and tried very hard to disappear behind Snowla.

“It seems that you two elves have saved Christmas again!”

from behind Snowla's left shoulder. "The frog is *very* hungry."

Snowla bit her lip. There had to be a solution.

"It's not like the Kangaroo, is it Snowla," Ariel whispered.

"He could go almost anywhere and be okay. Even stay here. But the frog can't stay here. There are no insects."

"The kangaroo." Suddenly Snowla's eyes lit up. "Oh, the kangaroo. That's it! I know what we can do."

"Oh," said Ariel. "You do?"

"Wonderful, dear," said Mrs. Santa, watching the frog. "I think Santa will be very happy if you have a solution."

Santa frowned, his eyes riveted on the frog. He tugged at his left mustache. "But I'm not going back to South America tonight, frog or no frog.

"Australia," said Snowla.. "We can take the poison dart frog to Australia," she said, beaming. "They have insects there and the frog can eat, and then tomorrow we can arrange for a regular flight back to South America."

Mrs. Claus nodded. "Well, husband, what have you got to say about that?"

"It's a *poison* dart frog!" said Santa, exasperated. "How do I transport something like that?"

"Why whichever way Rudolph brought him here, dear." said Mrs. Claus calmly, handing Santa another steaming mug of hot chocolate. "He probably has a heated travelling case somewhere. Rudolph usually plans ahead in these matters."

Santa sighed very heavily. "Doesn't anyone at the North Pole realize how much work it is to deliver Christmas presents! I don't need mad caribou and poison frogs on top of it all!"

He took a big gulp of hot chocolate, sighed again, took another big gulp, then put his mug down. He glared around the room. Dozens of elves were staring at him. Snowla and Ariel were staring at him. His wife was not staring at him, she was packing cookies for the sleigh. But the frog was staring at him. And Santa was sure it had moved closer. And it seemed much much bigger.

"Alright!" he bellowed. "Get the frog! Get Rudolph! Get the travelling case, and have that caribou pack the frog. And tell him to make sure it's nice and warm. It's a cold polar night out there and poison dart frogs are very thin-skinned creatures. We don't want him freezing to death! And tell Rudolph to call Australia Zoo and ask them to get ready for an overnight visitor. I'm sure



"Ariel! You have to waaaaa....." Snowla's words were lost as she tumbled to the floor, taking the pile of bright yellow banana cushions with her.

"Eek!" squealed Ariel again, tumbling after her and landing with a great thump on the floor beside Snowla.

There was a moment's silence.

"Oh," said Ariel, sitting up and straightening her green elf cap, which had somehow gotten turned around. The sprig of holly hung down over her face. She peered through its leaves, and looked directly into the eyes of the blue and yellow frog, sucker toed, Amazon Rainforest, poison dart frog.

"Eek!" she said for a third time, scrambling to her feet. "Snowla, the frog! There's the frog!" She took six steps away from the frog.

Snowla sat up and straightened her own elf cap, which was covered in pink feathers, and then stared in astonishment at a very tiny blue and yellow sucker-toed frog that was sitting on the workshop floor in front of them, happily swallowing a gigantic pink feather fishing fly.

"Oh, no! Ariel," she said, "quickly, stop it! It can't swallow a fishing fly, it will die!" She jumped up and grabbed hold of the tail end of the fly before the poison dart frog could swallow all of it. The fly was bigger than the frog.

Snowla tugged and pulled, lifting the tiny frog in the air. It swivelled its large eyes towards her in alarm and began to kick and struggle. Snowla shook the fly harder. Finally the little frog let go and dropped to the floor, clearly very miffed. It sat and stared very hard at Snowla, its sucker toes splayed out in front of it.

"Whoa, Snowla, I think he's mad at you!" said Ariel, taking another step backwards.

They stared at the frog, and the frog stared at them.

There was a long moment of silence.

"It's a frog, Ariel," said Snowla, blinking.

"I know that, Snowla, that's what I *told* you," said Ariel, carefully feeling her elf cap to make sure the sprig of holly was still there.

"Frogs don't live at the North Pole, Ariel.

Ariel stared at Snowla. "This one does, Snowla," she said somberly.

Snowla peered over the top of her spectacles. "He's not gigantic, Ariel. I think he's barely two inches long."



“Well, he looked gigantic before, Snowla, he was really fearsome.”

They were very silent for a few moments, and the frog continued to glare at Snowla.

“Rudolph’s brought Santa Claus another exotic Christmas present, hasn’t he Ariel?” She asked. “And he thought he could hide it here in the Amazon rainforest work area, in the midst of the bean bag frogs in the Tropical Rainforest work bench?”

Ariel stared at the floor and then at the leaves of a pink striped prayer plant that Pingle kept on his workbench. She checked to make sure her sprig of holly was still there. Then reluctantly she nodded her head. “I think so, Snowla.”

The frog suddenly trilled at them, a long warbly sound that ended in a click and two chirps.

“See Snowla? That’s not a croak.” Ariel shook her head vigorously. “Not a croak.” The holly sprig was a blur.

Snowla stared at the frog. The frog stared back. Snowla looked at Ariel. Ariel stared back.

“It’s a lovely Christmas present, Snowla,” said Ariel, her head bobbing up and down. “Not many people will get a poison dart frog for Christmas.”

“Do we know it’s a poison dart frog, Ariel? Maybe it’s from Thailand and isn’t poisonous at all?” she asked.

Ariel shook her head and picked up Pringle’s book. “He looks a lot like this frog here,” she said, pointing to a photo of a brilliant azure blue frog. “Except he’s blue and yellow, more like,” she paused as she flipped pages in the book “Here it is, more like this one, *Dendrobates tinctorius*.” The photo was of a brilliant yellow and blue and black sucker-toed frog, with very long toes. She flipped some more. “It says here that poison dart frogs sometimes live in coco plantations, and that some of them have hairy legs.” She looked up at Snowla in wonder. “A frog with hairy legs? That’s not possible, is it Snowla?” She read on some more. “And listen to this, there are more than 160 species and they come in all sorts of colours. And, ooh, the Choco Indians of the Colombian rainforest use these tiny frogs to coat the tips of their blow darts which are used for hunting jaguars.” She looked up at Snowla, wide-eyed. “They are deadly, Snowla.” She whispered. “It even says here not to touch them. Oh,” she said, her eyes very wide. She took six more steps back from the frog.

Snowla looked at her hands. Then she looked back at the little frog with a new respect.

Snowla shook her head.

“No termites,” said Ariel, her voice a little muffled as her face was buried in Snowla’s sleeve.

“But it’s Christmas Eve!” shouted Santa. “It only comes once in 365 days! And this is it! We can’t take any detours!”

Ariel’s voice floated out from behind Snowla. She didn’t peer out this time, and her voice was very squeaky. “Poison dart frogs feed on ants, termites, tiny beetles, and other small arthropods. They capture their prey using their sight and their sticky, retractable tongue. Only, only, there’s no prey here, except fluffy pink fishing flies.” The sprig of holly was trembling on her green elf cap. “He needs food or else.....or else....” Ariel’s voice wobbled.

Suddenly a trill, a chirp and two clicks sounded behind her.

There was immediate silence.

Another trill, and the sucker-toed blue and yellow poison dart Amazon rainforest frog was suddenly sitting in front of Santa.

The elves gasped in unison, and there was a stampede to the other side of the workshop, behind Santa.

“Oh!” said Ariel, peering at it from beneath Snowla’s elbow.

“Oh, no,” said Snowla.

The frog was staring very fixedly at Santa’s beard.

Santa looked at it in alarm then looked at Ariel. “Dangerous, you said?”

Ariel nodded, speechless.

“But only if you touch him,” said Snowla, worriedly.

“My isn’t he lovely,” said Mrs. Claus, peering over her spectacles. “Why he must be very sad and lonely. The North Pole isn’t at all like the Amazon jungle. Not an orchid in sight.”

“Dangerous,” said Santa, turning very red. “The frog is *dangerous*, dear.”

“All the more reason to return this little creature to where he belongs, husband, along with the snake.”

“No detours!” said Santa, not taking his eyes off the little frog. “The next trip is going to Australia. There is no time to go back to South America. **Christmas would be in jeopardy!** At these last words, his voice soared and rumbled, all at once.

The little frog trilled again, and glared at Santa. Santa looked at the frog in alarm and took a step backwards. The frog took another step forward.

“Someone find that caribou!” bellowed Santa.

“Ooooh, Snowla, what are we going to do?” whispered Ariel



Santas and Mrs. Claus looked at each other.

“Another Christmas present,” said Santa. “That caribou has been very busy tonight!” said Santa. He picked up a kitchen mallet and began to pound some cookie dough.

Mrs. Claus quickly moved the mug of chocolate out of the way.

“The frog is quite hungry, and so very small, and we thought,” Snowla paused and took another very deep breath, “we thought he should be taken home to South America right away, in the Christmas sleigh.” She paused. “He’s not like a snake, snakes don’t have to eat for months. But frogs, they have to eat all the time.”

“Taken home?” Santa stared at her. “In the Christmas Sleigh?” His voice sounded a lot like Big Ben. “Taken home to South America? During our Christmas Eve deliveries?” Santa stared at them, then suddenly sat back down, the mallet forgotten in his hand. “Did you hear that dear? Well, why not, eh?” Now he sounded like a heard of rumbling elephants. “I’m sure RUDOLPH is quite energetic and can make that flight to South America ALL OVER AGAIN!” His voice was an avalanche now.

He peered at Snowla and Ariel again, squinting this time over the top of his spectacles. “Don’t I know you two, aren’t you....”

Suddenly, Ariel stood on tip toes, and shouted over Snowla’s shoulder. “These deadly amphibians inhabit the rain forests of Central and South America and produce one of the most toxic animal poisons known.” Her voice rang out across the workshop. “They are very dangerous!” The silence in the kitchen deepened.

There was a very long pause. Ariel made herself as small as possible.

Santa picked up his cell phone again and smiled at his wife. “Could I please have the number for pest control, dear?” he said, very sweetly. “I believe we have a lunatic caribou loose at the North Pole.”

“Oh dear, oh dear,” said Mrs. Claus, taking the mallet out of Santa’s hand. “I don’t think we have that number, husband.”

Santa stood up again and smiled at Ariel. “Could you be more specific, please? Which part of South America, exactly, does this particular frog come from?” he asked. Then in the next breath, “Rudolph, get your caribou hide over here, I want to talk to you!” he bellowed.

“Oh dear,” said Mrs. Claus again. “Now husband, we must get this frog back home right away so he doesn’t starve. I don’t think we have anything here in the North Pole Store that a frog would eat.” She peered at Snowla and Ariel. “Do we?”

“Santa is sooo lucky, Snowla,” said Ariel, looking back at the colourful little frog.

Snowla stared at Ariel. “Ariel, frogs shouldn’t be given as Christmas presents! Especially not *poisonous* frogs!” She looked back at the tiny colourful deadly little frog. “Somehow I don’t think Santa will feel very lucky.”

The frog stared at them, then looked at the pink feather fishing flies scattered all over the floor.

“He is very hungry, isn’t he Snowla?” asked Ariel, her voice quavering just a bit.

Snowla nodded. “He probably can’t last long without some food and there is no poison dart frog food here at the North Pole, Ariel,” said Snowla. “He needs to go home right away.”

“Home?” Ariel looked dismayed. “But he is so adorable, Snowla.”

“He’s deadly, Ariel! We can’t have a deadly poison dart frog at the North Pole, Santa will be perturbed,” she said. She shook her head. “The frog needs to go home, and very quickly before he starves.” She paused. “There’s only one way for him to get home quickly. We will have to use the Christmas Sleigh.”

“The Christmas Sleigh? Oh, Snowla! Are you sure? Santa will be so... perturbed! And fearsome!” Her voice quivered as she spoke, her cheeks flushed a bright pink.

Snowla looked at the tiny frog, who had now turned around and was now staring very intently at the pink feather fishing flies.

“We have to Ariel,” said Snowla somberly, “for his sake.”

Ariel nodded her head, the sprig of holly bobbing wildly. “He is so small, Snowla,” her voice quavered.

Snowla nodded. She tried to picture what Santa would look like when they told him there was a poison dart frog in the Amazon Rainforest section of the workshop, and one that really needed to go home right away. On Christmas Eve. In the Christmas Sleigh. She decided she didn’t want to think about that just now.

The room fell very silent. The tick-tocking of the blue cuckoo clock on the wall was very loud. Suddenly they realized they weren’t only hearing the clock. The new sound was soft at first, and distant, but it was definitely, very definitely, the sound of sleigh bells.

“Oh, the sleigh, Snowla, the sleigh is coming!” said Ariel in a whisper, her eyes widening in alarm. “What should we do?”

“We’ll have to tell Santa as soon as he lands, Ariel.” She paused, looking at the hungry frog. “Well, maybe we’ll tell him *after*

he has had his mug of chocolate.” She looked at Ariel, who was quaking as much as her holly sprig.. “Okay, *after* he’s warmed up a bit. When he’s feeling more cozy. Then we’ll tell him.”

Ariel nodded, still quaking. The holly sprig fluttered on her green elf cap.

The bells grew louder, filling the room with jingles, and the poison dart frog chose that moment to leap into the air.

“Eek!” squealed Ariel, quickly stepping backwards and moving behind Snowla.

The frog leapt as high and far as it could, reaching for another of the pink fishing flies. Quickly Snowla reached forward and, in one quick movement, swooshed all the flies away. The little frog’s mouth closed on air, and it landed once again on the floor in front of them.

It was really glaring at them now. A fairly murderous look.

“He looks upset Snowla,” said Ariel.

“Well, so would you be, Ariel, if you needed flies to eat and there weren’t any.”

Ariel sniffled a little. “Termites, Snowla,” she said. “He eats termites.”

“Well, we don’t have any termites at the North Pole either, Ariel. What was Rudolph thinking?” She peered over her spectacles at the cuckoo clock. Two hours past midnight. “There are still a lot of deliveries to be made tonight. Maybe Santa hasn’t done the Caribbean yet.”

“That’s not far from the Amazon, is it Snowla?” asked Ariel.

“Well, it’s closer than China,” said Snowla. Maybe it wouldn’t be too great a detour, and maybe Santa wouldn’t be perturbed. At least, not really really perturbed.

“Oh, Snowla, this is awful!” Ariel’s eyes were wide and glistening.

“Well, it could be worse, Ariel,” said Snowla. “Remember the time Rudolph brought home the Kangaroo? It tried to box with the polar bears and there was an uproar out on the runway. The sleigh crash landed in the big snowbank.”

“The kangaroo didn’t like the cold, Snowla, he was just agitated,” said Ariel, sniffing again. “He was a nice kangaroo.”

“But then it boxed Santa’s ears, Ariel.”

“Oh,” said Ariel. “I forgot about that. Santa was really upset that year, wasn’t he?”

Snowla looked at the frog. “And then there was the penguin that wanted to immigrate to the North Pole, along with it’s entire

Before Ariel could protest, Snowla gripped her arm and the two of them walked into the kitchen, past the bakers counter and the dozens of trays of cookies, and straight towards Santa and Mrs. Claus. They stopped directly in front of Mrs. Claus. Snowla thought it might be safest to address her first. Ariel shook like a leaf, one hand clasping the holly sprig in her green elf cap. Snowla kept a grip on her, just in case.

Mrs. Claus smiled at them. Santa stared at them. Snowla had the distinct impression he thought they were two very large pests. Nervously, she cleared her throat. “Ahem,” she said. “Excuse me. Mrs. Claus?”

“Yes, dear?” said Mrs. Claus, peering at the two elves over the rims of her spectacles. “Is there something you would like?” She looked so—calm, and had a lovely smile. Very reassuring.

“Um, well, it’s....just that...well....” Snowla struggled to find the right words.

Santa took a drink of his hot chocolate, and the leaned over the bench and smiled at them, a bit of twinkle in his eye. “We’ve caught the snake, you know. Never fear. We clear out all pests up here.”

“Oh!” said Ariel, tugging on the sprig of holly.

Snowla swallowed.

“It’s alright dears, go ahead. Don’t worry, Santa won’t bite.” She glanced at her husband. “And he won’t be calling pest control on anyone.”

“Well,” said Snowla, taking a deep breath. “It’s just that...it’s just that....”

“There’s a blue and yellow sucker-toed poison dart Amazon rainforest frog in our workshop!” Ariel blurted out, unable to contain herself any longer.

There was sudden silence in the kitchen. Not a peep from any elf. Ariel clapped a hand over her mouth and stepped sideways until she was behind Snowla. The sprig of holly was quaking all by itself.

Mrs. Claus remained calm. “I see,” she said.

Santa put down his mug of chocolate, stood up slowly and peered over the counter at them.

He was silent a moment, then he leaned forward.

“What did you say?” His voice was rumbly now. “Don’t I know you?”

“Well, my friend Ariel is right, Santa,” said Snowla. “There is an Amazon Rainforest, sucker-toed, poison dart frog in our workshop.”

“Ohthankgoodness,” said the elf nearest them, who was looking rather faint. “Thegreenmambaisthemostpoisonoussnake inAfricaotherthantheblackmamba. Thankgoodnessitwasn’tthat!”

There was a collective sigh from the rest of the elves, then they all burst into fits of hysterical giggling.. Santa Claus stared at his wife, then wiped his brow with a large flourescent green hankie. He put down the paper bag and sat heavily on his favourite oak stool. The cell phone in his hand rang. Startled, he stared at it. Then, collecting himself, he put it to his ear. The elves tried very hard to be quiet, but giggles just kept popping out.

“Yes?” said Santa into the phone, in a calm, level voice. He paused. “Ah, Rudolph, would you be so kind as to meet me outside the kitchen. Yes, thank you.” He put the phone down and stared around the room. Everyone fell very silent. “Would someone please call pest control,” he said in a very quiet voice, “and tell them there is a very large pest standing outside the kitchen? With Antlers, and a Red Nose?” . “Now, now, dear,” said Mrs. Claus, walking over to Santa with a steaming mug of hot chocolate. She handed it to him and carefully pushed the tassel of his Santa hat behind his back. “Rudolph meant well, dear. He brought that snake home for you as a Christmas present. He always finds such unique things, doesn’t he?” She walked over to the rows of cookie trays and carefully selected six of the most chocolate-chip filled ones she could find. She put them on a plate and gave them to Santa. “I don’t think we should call him a pest.”

“No, no, not a pest at all.” said Santa, smiling. There was silence. Then Santa’s voice boomed across the room. “JUST A MAD CARIBOU!” He paused as the tassel jumped into his hot chocolate. He stared at it morosely.

Mrs. Claus carefully fished it out and dried it off.

“He could have killed us all, or at least a few of us, the rest of us might have been able to avoid being bitten by a green mamba, one of the most deadly snakes on the planet.” Santa’s face was very red.

“Well, dear, he really did mean well, and no harm done in the end. I’m sure he’s learned his lesson, and will never again bring back strange creatures from your travels on Christmas Eve.”

“Oh!” said Ariel, her eyes very wide. She looked at Snowla. “We should leave now Snowla,” she whispered.

Snowla nodded, biting her lip “We should Ariel.” She shook her head. “But the frog will starve to death, Ariel, if it doesn’t go home right away. We have to tell them.”

“Oh,” said Ariel, her voice a tiny squeak.

family. All 5,672 penguins.”

Ariel nodded her head vigorously. “They wanted to help deliver Christmas letters.”

“They ate all the fish in Santa’s tropical fish tank, Ariel.”

“Oh,” said Ariel, “I forgot about that too.” She looked very glum. “Santa’s angel fish became penquin dinner.”

“So, it could be worse. This year we have only one blue and yellow poison dart frog that needs to go home right away. On the Christmas Sleigh.”

Ariel nodded, trying to see how this was better than the fish-eating penquins.

They could hear the sleigh land now, in a flurry of jingling bells and stomping hoofs. Someone snorted.

“Ho Ho Ho! Merry Christmas!” shouted Santa from outside the workshop window. “Come Donner and Blitzen, we’re heading for Australia next! Eat up, you’ll need your strength!”

His voice disappeared and they knew he had gone into the North Pole Kitchen for the cup of chocolate that he drank before every trip.

Snowla and Ariel looked at each other. “Australia!” they said in unison. “Oh, no!”

“Oh,” said Ariel, beginning to shake. “He’s going to be fearsome, Snowla,” she said.

Snowla wondered if there were jobs for elves down south, in Vancouver maybe, in those Christmas Shops, or in Fiji.

Suddenly the little frog trilled loudly, and began to bob and weave, staring fixedly at Snowla.

“Look, Ariel,” said Snowla. “He must be very very hungry. For his sake, we are going to have to be brave.” She nodded her head. “I’m sure Santa will understand.” She bit her lip. “He is really very nice you know.”

“Oh,” said Ariel. She nodded, and made an odd gulping sound. “He just seems fearsome.” She looked at the little frog, so colourful, so adorable, so deadly, and so very very hungry.

The frog made a clicking sound, and hopped one step towards them.

Snowla and Ariel looked at each other.

“We’d better go,” said Snowla.

Ariel nodded. “Maybe I should stay here with him?” she asked hopefully. A deadly poison dart frog, though very scary, wasn’t the same as facing a perturbed Santa. “In case someone steps on him, I



mean.”

“Ariel!”

The little frog trilled again, and made four clicks in a row, and hopped another step towards Ariel.

Ariel took a step back. “Okay, maybe I’ll come with you Snowla,” she said, nodding, her holly sprig a green and red blur. “Poison dart frogs can look after themselves.”

Snowla took Ariel’s hand, then they walked together through the empty workshops, winding their way through the Great Room, where Mrs. Claus kept a good supply of elf toys, along the Great Corridor, with its portraits of famous elves, to the North Pole Kitchen door. Snowla’s heart was beating so fast, she was sure it was going to fly into space with Santa on the next trip. She kept a tight grip on Ariel, who she thought was going to faint at any moment. Without even an extra breath, before Ariel could change her mind, she pulled open the Kitchen Door.

“Closethatdoortheresadeadlycobraontheloose.!” shouted an elf, rushing past them.

They both froze in disbelief.

The kitchen was complete pandemonium.

Santa stood at the far end of the kitchen, frantically waving his arms and shouting what sounded like gibberish. Mrs. Claus stood at this end, calmly pouring dozens of mugs of hot chocolate at the chocolate counter. In between, there were elves everywhere, running back and forth, all carrying brooms. Dozens of elves. Even first year elves.

“Snowla,” said Ariel, eyes wide and big as saucers. “Snowla, what’s happening?”

Snowla shook her head. “I don’t know, maybe there’s an ice storm coming. You know what that does to the reindeer.”

Another two elves ran past them at full speed.

“Itsagiganticgreenmambafromafrica.” said one.

“Itsdeadlypoisonousanditssomewhereinthekitchen,” said the other.

“Someonegetasack,” shouted Santa.

“Findmywifeandtellhertobecarefulplease. Thissnakecanclimb!”

Suddenly all the elves looked up and starting pointing at the ceiling.

“Snowla,” said Ariel, her voice halfway between panic and bewilderment. Her long eyelashes were batting furiously. “Snowla, what are they saying?”

“Something about a sack?” said Snowla, peering upwards, uncertain if she’d heard that right.

“IseeitIseeititoverherequicksomeonegetasack.” shouted a tiny voice from somewhere in the middle of the room.

There was a sudden clatter as all of the elves rushed to the central counter, waving their brooms and all talking at once, only to disperse a few moments later.

“Didntseeanythingjusthystericalshouldntletfirstyearshelpatall.” said one grumbly voice.

“Checkthecupboardsandseeifitsinthefloursacksandthencheckthecoffeeperculator,” shouted Santa.

“Doesitlookanythinglikeagianteearthwormtheressomewormythingsoverhear.” said a second year.

Ten elves rushed over to inspect the wormy thing.

In front of them, at the chocolate counter, Snowla and Ariel watched Mrs. Claus put down a mug of hot chocolate and reach over and pick up some large tongs from the baker’s counter. She disappeared behind the counter for a moment, and then stood up and dropped a long wiggly green thing into a bright blue garbage can. A wiggly green thing with a Christmas tag around its neck.

Ariel gasped. “Snowla, was that, was that...a...a...”

Across the room Santa, his face bright red, shouted, “Find Rudolph, where is that reindeer!? Someonegetmeacellphoneandfindmerudolphsnumber.”

“Husband,” said Mrs. Claus in a calm quiet voice.

“Wheresthepestcontrolfindmeapestcontrolofficer,” Santa’s voice was even louder, if that was possible.

“Husband,” said Mrs. Claus again, her voice louder this time.

“Timeisflyingihavetohittheroadandgotoaustralia, someonefindthatsnake!”

“HUSBAND!” Mrs. Claus’ voice was very loud this time, and everyone in the kitchen froze where they were, including Santa, with one hand in mid-air clasping a cell phone, and one hand shaking out a large brown paper bag while he peered inside.

They all turned to look at Mrs. Claus.

“Husband,” said Mrs. Claus again, in a normal calm voice. “I have found the snake. It is in the garbage can and simply needs to be removed, and returned to wherever it came from. Africa I believe.”

“A snake!” said Snowla.

“A snake!?” gasped Ariel, her hand reaching up and tugging at the sprig of holly in her green elf cap. “It was a snake.”

