

RAIDERS OF THE LOST CHRISTMAS CAVERN

-OR-

HOW IGGY, YUGO AND SAM FOUND A SPRING IN DECEMBER

Yugo popped the clutch on the shiny red snowmobile and slipped it into fourth gear. The engine rumbled comfortably and the snowmobile skimmed along the snow-crustrated plains of the southwestern rim of the North Pole. To the right was an ice-covered ridge. It was a cold night at the Pole, much like every other night. The wind had teeth that bit into Yugo's cheek and chewed on it greedily. Yugo turned up the heat and settled slightly into seat.

"Are we there yet?" asked Sam from the back seat.

"Almost," said Yugo. "It should be just around this knoll. He downshifted and turned easily around the knoll and headed onto a rocky stretch. "It was just along here ... there it is!" Yugo shouted, pointing to a dark spot along the icy wall.

"I see it too," said Iggy. Yugo pulled the snowmobile up to the spot and ground to a halt. The three elves climbed out of the snowmobile and walked up to the spot. As they approached, they could see that the spot was actually the entrance of a cave.

Yugo had found this cave a few days previously while test-driving the snowmobile. He had mentioned it that night to Iggy in the Elf Cafeteria over a steaming bowl of lima bean stew and sausages. "Beanies and weenies," Sam called it.

"You found a cave?" asked Iggy.

"Yes, it's in the south west sector, near the ice ridge. I shined my headlights inside it. It looks like it goes on for a long ways."

"You know," said Iggy. "I read in the library last summer about a lost cave that is supposed to be at the North Pole. It said it was the entrance to an

underground spring and that the spring contains the magic of Christmas, the most powerful magic in the world!”

“Wow,” breathed Yugo.

“Oh no,” said Sam, shaking his head. “I can see where this is heading.”

“If we could find that spring,” said Iggy, “we could make a real difference in the world this Christmas. It seems like there just isn’t enough Christmas magic out there anymore.”

“I’m in,” said Yugo.

“And just when did you plan on making this little expedition,” interrupted Sam. “In case you two have forgotten, Christmas is only one week away and we’re all scheduled to work overtime right up to the big day.”

“We can’t wait until after Christmas, that would be too late,” said Iggy. He scowled into his beanies and weenies. “I’ve got it! We’ll go to the cave after work!”

Sam gasped. “Are you crazy? After putting in a fourteen hour day, you expect me to root around some dark cold cave looking for a puddle that you read about in some old book?” If that’s what you think, you should spend your time after work with a shrink, not rooting around in caves.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” said Yugo. “If we could find the source of Christmas magic, we’ll be able to use it to do our work for us.”

Sam started to protest, but the more he thought about it, the more the idea of using magic to do his work appealed to him. “All right,” he grumbled, almost certain that he was going to regret it later, “count me in.”

It was decided to leave three days later. This gave the elves time to prepare for the trip. Yugo claimed he needed that time to “put a few ideas together.”

That was three days ago. Now the elves stood outside the entrance to the cave. Yugo was the last to leave the snowmobile. He carried a bulky green bag over one shoulder. He held two similar bags in either hand, which he passed to Iggy and Sam. “Just a few ideas I’ve been working on,” he explained.

Iggy looked at the entrance. “That big blizzard in the fall must have cleared the opening. I bet that’s why we have never noticed it before.”

“I knew that blizzard was bad news,” said Sam.

Yugo looked at his watch. It was a timepiece of his own design; a thick and lumpy thing with all manner of buttons and dials. It even had a cuckoo. “I guess we had better get a move on. We have to be back at the workshop in eight hours.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a white helmet with a big light on the front. He motioned to the others to look into their bags and they each retrieved similar headgear. They donned their helmets and Yugo showed them how to turn on the lights.

Iggy started laughing. “It’s a head light! Get it, head ... light ... it’s a joke!”

“Hilarious,” growled Sam sarcastically. They turned to the cave and Yugo led the way inside.

The cave turned sharply downhill. The elves were forced to climb on their hands and knees to avoid falling. They reached the bottom and the cave wound to the left and then to the right. Soon the intrepid elves lost track of which way they were going. But, their ‘headlights’ illuminated the path ahead of them clearly and they proceeded quickly through the cavern.

Soon they reached a stairway and marched to the top. As soon as they stepped on the top stair, they heard a loud click. The stair started to shift beneath their feet and a moment later the entire stairway had tilted together to form a continuous slide. The elves lost their footing and slid, tumbling over each other down the ramp.

There was a doorway in the floor at the bottom of the ramp, which opened as the elves slid helplessly toward it. The elves fell through the doorway and into a chamber below. They landed roughly on the floor of the chamber. Iggy looked up at the hole in the ceiling above them. His spirits sank as the door rolled shut, trapping them in the underground chamber. By the light from his headlight Iggy was unable to distinguish any crack between the door and the ceiling around it. There would be no return by that route.

They were in a four-sided room, about five metres square on each side. There was no door on any wall. The floor was equally solid. Iggy sat down on a round object to collect his thoughts. Sam squealed and pointed. Iggy was not sitting on a stool as he thought; the round object was a skull!

For the first time, the elves noticed that the floor was littered with bones. Apparently they were not the first to come this way. Iggy leapt up from the skull and backed against a wall. He leaned on the wall, and then lost his balance.

“That’s odd,” he said. “It feels like the wall is moving.”

Yugo and Sam looked around at the room. Iggy was right – the room which previously had been perfectly square was now rectangular, and roughly half its original size. Two of the walls were creeping quietly closer together. So quietly, the elves had not noticed it at first. In a few minutes, they would be crushed to paste, and their bones would join the others on the floor.

“Great,” complained Sam. “The old crushing wall trap. I just knew this would happen if we started rooting around in this old cave.”

“Fortunately, so did I,” said Yugo. He was digging around in his green shoulder bag. He pulled out a metal rod about 50 centimetres long, with round flat attachments on either end. There was a crank in the middle. Yugo set one end of the rod against one of the moving walls. The other end faced the opposite wall, which was slowly creeping towards it. Yugo turned the crank and the flat end extended to the far wall. Yugo kept cranking until the rod stretched across the room and was firmly wedged between the walls.

“It’s a wall separator,” said Yugo. “I invented it myself. If we just turn this crank, the separator will force the walls back apart. Come on, give me a hand.” The others scrambled over to help Yugo turn the crank.

The walls pressed closer, compressing the wall separator. Yugo leaned on the crank. There was a loud pop and sparks burst from the crank mechanism. The separator made a whining sound, collapsed and fell to the floor. Yugo smiled sheepishly. “I guess I should have tested it a little more before actually using it,” he said.

The walls closed in with renewed energy. They were now scarcely a metre apart and the room was becoming very narrow and crowded. Iggy found a leg bone on the floor and wedged it between the walls. It held for a moment and then splintered with a loud snap. Sam looked down at his own legs and winced. There was scarcely enough room to turn around now.

Yugo slapped his forehead and said, “what a dummy I am.” He reached back into his bag and pulled out what appeared to be a power drill with a large round drill bit. He placed the bit against the wall and turned on the device. The bit squealed and dug into the wall. In a moment, Yugo had drilled a hole in the

wall just big enough for an elf to squeeze through. He dropped the drill and scrambled through the hole, with Iggy and Sam close behind.

As the elves fell onto the other side of the wall, there was a loud clap as the two walls came together at last. Iggy shuddered.

They were in a long passageway. "I'm glad you brought that drill," said Iggy. "Now we can use it to tunnel our way out."

"That might prove difficult," said Yugo. "I was in such a hurry to escape, I left it behind."

"Oh great," said Sam. "Now we'll never get out of here! How could you be so dumb?" He sat down on the rocky ground. "I'm starving. Let's stop here for a snack."

"Good idea," said Yugo, anxious to make amends. "I packed some sandwiches in your bag." Sam looked about. Iggy and Yugo's bags were slung over their shoulders. Sam looked back through the hole in the wall. Somewhere in the room they just left, he realized that there was a flattened power drill and a green bag with half a dozen very flat ham sandwiches, three wafer thin Twinkies and a thermos jar that now resembled a penny left on a railroad track. He cleared his throat and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I wasn't really that hungry anyway," he said. Iggy and Yugo glared at him and started making their way down the passageway. Sam followed a few paces behind, his stomach growling.

"We'll just have to find a new way out," said Yugo. They made their way down the passage, which grew into a wide cavern. Ice tipped stalactites hung above them, with ice bats circling among them. Sam was still muttering when a stalactite broke loose and stabbed into the ground just beside him. He decided to quit complaining for a while.

After some considerable walking, they reached a fork in the cave. A new cavern opened up to the left and wound downhill. The elves stood at the opening and listened. Drumbeats filtered up from the gloomy depths.

"There must be people down there!" said Iggy. "They can help us find a way out."

“Fat chance,” said Sam. “They are probably the same guys who set that trap for us.”

“I agree with Iggy,” said Yugo. “Surely if we ask them politely for help, they cannot refuse us.”

“Surely,” Sam agreed sarcastically.

They agreed to take the new passage, but not without some whining from Sam. They worked their way down the tunnel, around some stalagmites and over a small rise. Then the tunnel wound left, right, left again, then right, further right down three steps, through a very narrow bit where Sam almost got stuck, then left again.

At last they found themselves in a much larger chamber. Inside the chamber a group of people in heavy fur overcoats sat in a circle beating on sealskin drums with their hands.

“Um ... excuse us,” shouted Yugo. The drumming stopped. As one, the twelve fur clad drummers turned to face the elves.

Iggy said, “we’ve lost our way. We were wondering if you could show us the way out.”

“Or the way to the nearest snack bar,” added Sam, who was still thinking of the lost Twinkies.”

“One of the cave dwellers rose from his drum to greet the elves. “Of course we can show you out. But first you must stay with us for dinner.” He smiled broadly. Iggy noticed that each of his teeth had been filed to a point. The other drummers grinned; all of their teeth were pointed as well. They marched towards the elves, arms outstretched.

“On second thought, perhaps we can find our own way after all,” said Iggy, taking a step backwards. The elves turned and ran to the chamber exit.

“Hoga!” shouted the lead stranger. “The net!” One of the bigger cave dwellers ran to the wall and pulled a lever. The floor beneath the elves shifted; it was covered with a fine woven mesh material. As Hoga pulled the lever, the corners of the net were pulled together and up to the ceiling. All three elves were tightly bound up in the net. There was no escape.

“I just knew this was going to happen,” groaned Sam.

Hoga lowered the net and the others helped the elves out of the tangled mesh. Then the group led the elves at spear point down a narrow passage to a room with a small cell carved into the side of the cave wall. The elves were locked inside.

“I just knew it,” said Sam. “Every Christmas I go for a ride with you guys and I always end up in jail. It never fails.”

“That’s why I brought these along,” said Yugo. He reached into his bag and pulled out what looked like a large nail file with a thick plastic handle. Yugo pressed a button on the handle and the file vibrated rapidly. “Electric file,” he explained. “Just the thing for a jail break.”

He pressed the file against the bars of the cell. In no time he had cut a hole through them. “Piece of cake,” he said.

“Please stop talking about food,” said Sam. “I’m starving.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam stepped out of the cell and into the next room. They crept quietly up to the hallway and listened for footsteps. Nothing. They stepped into the hall.

Hoga stood in the passage before them. He carried a large machete, roughly the length of an elf. He grinned his pointy-toothed grin. “You’re just in time for dinner,” he sneered. Two of the others came up behind Hoga. They also had large machetes in their huge ham hands.

Iggy, Yugo and Sam were led back into the main chamber. The drums had been removed and replaced with a large black ceramic cooking pot. A little stepladder was set up beside it, and the elves were pushed up the steps and into the pot. The water inside was warm, and soon it would be boiling hot as the cave dwellers stoked up the fire beneath it. Hoga stood at the top of the ladder and dumped a large pail of vegetables into the pot. One of the other cave dwellers sprinkled salt and pepper into the mix.

Sam plucked a carrot out of the broth and chewed on it as he tread water. “Any other bright ideas?” he asked Yugo between mouthfuls. The water was heating up.

“I’ve got an idea,” said Iggy. He reached into the water and plucked out a radish. He threw it at Hoga with all of his might. The vegetable struck Hoga on the ear and he collapsed like a badly built card house. Yugo and Sam immediately

snatched up other vegetables and began hurling them at the cave dwellers. They backed away helplessly before the barrage of turnips, potatoes and cabbages.

Yugo and Sam clambered out of the pot as Iggy kept throwing parsnips at the retreating cave dwellers. He threw one last artichoke and then scrambled out of the pot to join his friends. They turned and ran quickly to the opposite side of the chamber and back up the passageway. They made a right turn and then ran back through the narrow bit.

Yugo stopped and pulled a large jar out of his bag. "I've seen this work before," he said, dumping a large quantity of slippery goo into the narrow corridor. They turned and continued back up the tunnel. Soon, a group of cave dwellers led by Hoga came barging into the narrow bit. Hoga lost his footing on the goo and fell face first into it. The others followed, slipping and sliding into a big heap.

While they untangled themselves, Iggy, Yugo and Sam ran on, up three steps, turned left, further left, right, left, right again, back over a small rise and around some stalagmites. They reached the fork in the cave where they had first heard the sound of drumbeats. They turned down the other fork, the sounds of the cave dwellers shouts echoing towards them and growing closer with each step.

The cavern widened into an enormous underground room. The elves did not dally to explore it, but ran on ahead of the screams of the cave dwellers. Yugo was in the lead when he pulled up to a sudden stop.

"What are you stopping for?" shouted Sam.

"Look!" Yugo pointed at the floor of the cavern. Their way was blocked by a wide chasm that stretched across the path ahead of them. There was no way around it. Iggy picked up a stone and dropped it into the crevasse. He listened for several moments, but never heard it hit the ground. The chasm was bottomless. "Can't go under it," Iggy said.

Sam turned and saw the cave dwellers come into the wide cavern. "I knew we would run into a bottomless pit, I just knew it," he grumbled.

Yugo rooted through his bag. "Got to go over it," he said. He pulled out a thick coil of metal cable. At one end was a shiny silver grappling hook. Yugo swung the hook around his head a few times and flung it into the air above the pit. It wrapped about a rock formation in the ceiling and held fast. A few ice bats swirled about, startled by the hook striking their resting place.

Yugo gave the cable a test pull and called out to Iggy and Sam, “hold on tight!” Iggy and Sam clung tightly to Yugo, who took a few steps and then swung out over the crevasse. The elves reached the base of their swing and swung up towards the opposite edge.

At that point they discovered that Yugo’s cable was about three metres short. They reached desperately for the far side, but it was no use. They swung back, through the bottom of their swing and out towards the near side of the pit. However, they had lost considerable momentum in their swing and did not return all of the way to that edge either. They swung back and forth, each swing shorter than the last. Soon they stopped altogether and hung stationary over the middle of the chasm. Only Yugo’s cable stood between them and certain death.

Iggy looked back to the edge of the precipice where certain death stood in another form. Hoga and his pals were aiming spears at the elves. But that was not the worst of it.

“I think I’m losing my grip,” grunted Yugo.

“I just knew that this was going to happen, said Sam.

A spear whizzed by Iggy’s head. The three elves slipped several centimetres down the cable. Yugo grimaced and tightened his grip as best he could. Another spear brushed by Sam’s shoulder.

“This would be a good time to reach into your bag and pull out an anti-gravity device,” suggested Sam.

Yugo’s eyes brightened up. “I think I have one of those,” he said. He shifted about so that Sam could reach into the bag, but as he lowered his arm, another spear flew by, hooking the bag and pulling it from his shoulder. The bag, with all of Yugo’s gadgets disappeared into the depths of the abyss.

“Well, it was a good thought,” said Iggy helpfully. Another spear snaked past.

“It’s a good thing they are lousy shots,” said Sam.

The ice bats, which had been swirling near the top of the cavern, began to circle lower, anticipating that they would soon be able to feast on fresh elf meat. Yugo strained to maintain his grip on the cable, but was weakening. He slipped down another metre or so. He was, quite literally, at the end of his rope. Two more spears flew nearby.

The ice bats circled lower. Their broad wingspans stretched fully one quarter of the width of the chasm. One floated near the elves and stared at them hungrily. Another spear whickered past. Yugo clenched his eyes and strained to hold on to the cable. His fingers slipped a bit, then a little further. Then he lost his grip entirely.

The elves plummeted into the inky black pit, and then landed roughly on the back of a low flying ice bat. The ice bat struggled to shake them off. Iggy, Yugo and Sam clung tightly to the slippery white scales. Yugo scrambled up the back of the ice bat and grabbed its ears. He pulled back hard on the beast's head and it flew up.

Yugo found that by pulling on the creature's ears he could manage some level of control over it. He steered it to the far edge of the chasm. When they got close enough, the elves leapt off the back of the ice bat and onto the cliff edge.

On the other side of the chasm, the cave dwellers shouted some foul sounding curses and turned back into the cavern. The ice bat shook his head and flew to the upper reaches of the cave. Iggy, Yugo and Sam ran down the passageway that lead away from the pit. The cavern narrowed drastically until once more it became a twisting, winding tunnel. Some of the ice bats tried to follow, but the way was too narrow for their bulk.

They ran some ways before Sam stopped and asked for a break. Yugo looked down at his big lumpy watch. "We don't have much time," he said. "We are supposed to be on shift in two hours."

The tunnel opened again into a wider area. The elves sat down on some boulders to take stock of their situation. They were trapped underground without food or water. Even worse, they were about to be late for work.

Their discussion was cut short by a low growl that emanated from a dark corner of the cavern. They turned and oriented their headlights in the direction of the sound. A burly hairy creature with dark eyes and gleaming white teeth shuffled out of the darkness.

"A polar ape," whispered Yugo.

"Why does everything in this cave have sharp pointy teeth?" sighed Sam.

The ape stared at the elves for a moment and then spoke. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" it asked.

The elves stared slack jawed at the ape. “You can talk!” said Iggy.

“Well of course I can talk,” said the ape, as though his gift for oral expression was the most natural and obvious thing in the world. Though, for him, it was.

“But apes can’t talk,” blinked Sam.

“Says who?” said the ape.

Sam tried to frame a reply, but soon recognized the futility of arguing the merits of whether or not an ape could speak with an ape who plainly could.

Iggy touched his friend’s shoulder. “Something strange is happening,” he said. “Something ... magical.”

“We must be close to the magic of Christmas,” said Yugo. “Magic could account for a talking ape. I can’t think of any other explanation.”

Iggy turned back to the ape. “Do you know anything about magic?” he asked.

“These caves are filled with magic,” answered the ape. “There are stones and jewels scattered throughout the cave with magical properties. The caves are filled with magical creatures. Like me. There is also a spring near here with the most marvellous power.”

“A spring?” said Iggy.

“Near here?” said Yugo.

“With power?” said Sam.

“Certainly, it’s not far. Come with me,” said the ape. The elves followed the ape through a maze of intersecting passageways. Soon they reached an opening that led to a heavy stone bridge under which flowed a bubbling brook of the clearest water the elves had ever seen. It did not simply flow; it danced beneath their feet. Iggy, Yugo and Sam grinned involuntarily at the sight of it. Truly, there was powerful magic here.

Their reverie was interrupted by a raucous burst of noise from the other side of the bridge. The elves looked up to see Hoga and the cave dwellers

charging across the bridge towards them, spears raised. They had obviously found another route through the caves to the spring.

One of the cave dwellers threw a spear at the elves. It struck the ape in the chest. His eyes went blank. He spun and fell from the bridge into the spring. There was an enormous splash and the ape sank beneath the water.

“No!” shouted Sam aghast. “He was our friend!”

The cave dweller grinned and drew a large machete from beneath his furs. He charged across the bridge at the elves, with three other machete-wielding cave dwellers at his heels.

“I just knew that this was going to happen,” said Sam.

Yugo pulled the last green bag from Iggy’s shoulder. He reached inside and pulled out three wooden objects. Each was a cylinder about ten centimetres long with a brilliant red button on the side. He flipped one to each of Iggy and Sam. He pressed the button on his cylinder and a gleaming steel blade sprang out of the end.

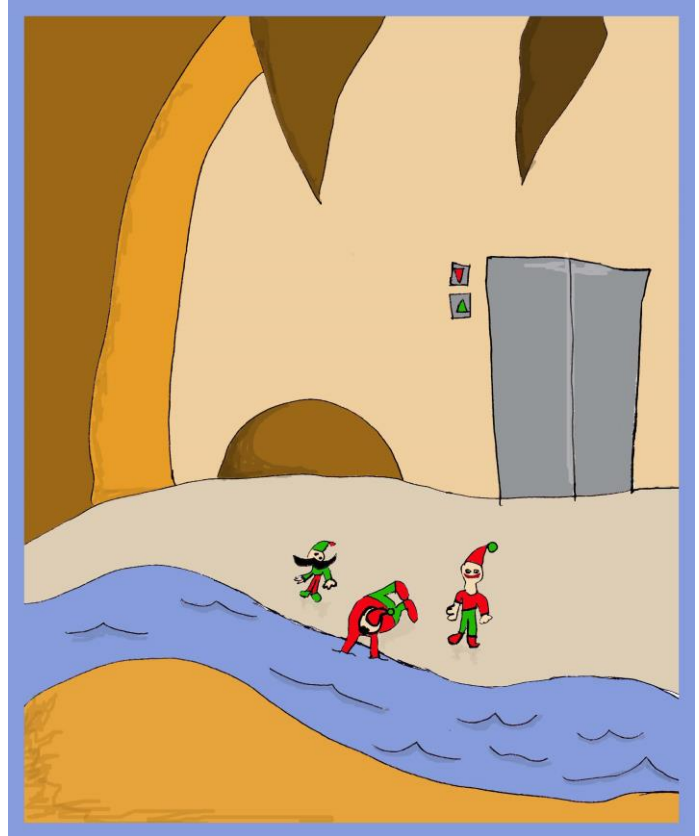
“It’s a switch-sword,” said Yugo, and charged at the cave dwellers. Iggy and Sam activated their swords and followed. Yugo met the first cave dweller. It was all that he could do to deflect the savage blow from his machete. The cave dweller swung his weapon again in a wide arc, grazing Yugo and cutting a wide swath through his tunic.

Yugo stumbled and fell. The cave dweller stood above him, ready to deliver a killing blow. Yugo’s sword dipped into the spring. A surge of strength filled his arm. He drew the sword from the water. It glowed with iridescent fire. He leapt back up and pounced. The sword sang in Yugo’s hand as he met the cave dweller’s steel. He parried the cave dweller’s strike with a ballerina’s grace. Sparks flew from his sword as he spun and struck the machete from the cave dweller’s hand. With a delicate turn of his wrist, he flicked the point of his weapon across the cave dweller’s face, tracing a cursive letter ‘Y’ on his cheek. The brute turned and fled.

Iggy and Sam followed Yugo's lead and dipped their swords in the spring. They slashed at the cave dweller's with their magically charged blades. The crash of metal on metal echoed through the cavern. The cave dweller's shrank away from the elves' slick swordplay. In moments they had chased the cave dwellers away from the bridge and back into the labyrinth of narrow tunnels.

They retracted their sword blades and walked down to the spring. They passed a big square door set into the wall. Above the door were two lights, one shaped like an arrow pointing up and the other like an arrow pointing down.

"It looks like an elevator," said Yugo.



The down arrow illuminated with a loud 'ding'. A few seconds later the door slid open and a portly fellow in a red jacket stepped out.

"Santa Claus!" shouted Iggy.

"Iggy? Yugo? Sam?" said Santa Claus.

Iggy grabbed Santa Claus by the arm and dragged him to the spot where the polar ape had fallen. "Santa, you have to help our friend," he said. But when they reached the spring, he was shocked to see the polar ape step up out of the water. He shook himself dry and stood before Iggy. The ape appeared to be unmarked and there was no sign of any injury.

"The water here has remarkable curative properties," explained the ape. Santa Claus walked up to the ape and shook his big hairy hand.

"Cornelius, how good to see you again," he said.

"Hold everything," said Sam. "Could someone please tell me just what is going on here?"

“Ho ho ho,” chuckled Santa Claus. “He waved back towards the elevator.” This spring is 100 metres directly below the North Pole. The elevator goes directly to the Santa Claus Tower on the surface. You could consider this a form of sub-sub-sub basement. Cornelius here helps me keep the savages from polluting the spring. The water in the spring is necessary for some of our operations. It is a vital part of the reindeer diet. In the right measure, it can make a reindeer ... fly.”

“The magic of Christmas,” whispered Iggy.

“Ho ho ho,” laughed Santa Claus. “No, not nearly. The spring is magical, yes, but it is not the magic of Christmas. You cannot find Christmas in a cave or a river. You find Christmas magic in your heart.” He punctuated this last remark by poking Sam firmly in the chest.

“The magic in this water can make reindeer fly, but it can’t make your heart soar like Christmas can. Christmas is so much more than flying reindeer or supercharged swords. You find it in yourself. The magic in this spring cannot give it to you.”

Iggy, Yugo and Sam considered Santa’s message carefully for a moment.

“But enough talk,” said Santa Claus, walking back to the elevator and pressing the call button. “There is still a lot of work to get done before Christmas and I think that you three are late.”

The elevator door slid open and Santa Claus ushered the elves inside. He pressed the lobby button.

Sam poked Iggy in the ribs. “I just knew that this would happen,” he whispered hoarsely. “Now we have to go back to work with no magic to help us.”

Yugo smiled slyly and pulled the last item from Iggy’s bag. It was a plastic bottle filled with clear spring water. He slid it back into the bag. Iggy and Sam chuckled as the elevator took them back to the North Pole.