Looking out through the ice-edged window, St. Nicholas saw white snow as far as his eyes could see. Sitting at his desk with the papers -- so much left to do and so little time. No time, in fact. Life changing at the North Pole. Making and packing taking longer these days now that the elves were so wrinkled and arthritic. Still great craftspeople. The sun was going down. He must get up soon. Memories. Remembering his being about three or four, feeling a part of the spreading family warmth in the great living room, uncles, cousins, other children laughing, drinking down, bright lights. Smells wafting of foods cooking, almost ready, the gale wind outside blowing at the windows.

After all these years, he knew they had everything packed, successfully jamming the sleigh full until it squeeked. Still, something was nagging, but who knows what, he thought.

He signed a last paper, put the pen back in its holder, sighed, and, slowly, carefully got up from his desk. Not so simple to do as when he had been 20 or 30. He “oh’ed” with the crack of his knees straightening. He walked gingerly out from his room, down the hall, across the living room. He opened the outside door, was blown back in by the wind, and was touched by the wildly swirling snow before him. Ice cold out. Just right.

He went back inside, closed the door, walked down the hall which was lighted white by the high ceiling window covered with snow, to the rooms of the elves. He knocked, heard a loud elvish “Kome”, and walked in. They were all sitting there around the living room, some deep in their Hot Toddies, some smiling into their old pipes, some cackling, suddenly paying close attention to him, the smoke from their pipes circling up to the ceiling, spreading across the ceiling in a growing smoky cloud that crowned the room.

“It’s time,” called out St. Nicholas. “Let’s go!” He turned around, called out “Hey Ho!”, and walked out.

Every elf moved from rapt attention to immediate action. They all stood right up, knees creaking and snapping, many saying “Dagnabbit”, “Begleets!” and long “oooh”s, as it hurt so to stand up. But they were ready, old, crafty, and deep. They’d just finished making and wrapping all the holiday presents, and squeezing them onto the sleigh outside, and everything was ready to go. Putting on their heavy coats, their elvish hats, their high boots, they walked down the hall, some beginning to sing an ancient song about a flying dog, a flying cat, and the moon. They headed out the doors around the vast living room.
Out the center door, elves went out to see that the sleigh was utterly filled and ready to go. Out the door just to the right elves went out to the reindeer, who had been lightly fed and watered, all ready to harness up, almost jumping with reindeer energy. Out the door just to the left went the elves who would do a final/final check just to be sure that the lists of all the children had been consistently observed well and accurately, balanced with the very deep elvin knowledge that every single one of the children of the Earth had inside of them the great light. So all would get a present, bless their hearts. The workshop had followed by producing the right gifts for each one, and these, in turn, had been packed onto the sleigh in the right order so they could be distributed during the global sweep ahead of them this night.

Now the sleigh was finally all ready, all the elves reported in, those technical and scientific elves who were to go on the adventure tonight had climbed into their places around the sleigh, fastened their seat belts, and tucked themselves in under the heavy blankets. The reindeer were all in harness and pawed the snowy ground with their desire to get flying, their bells calling out: “It’s time!”

Saint Nicholas, dressed warmly in red and white, and in his best black boots, came out the door of his room, walked down the hall and across the grand living room, opened the front door braced for the gale, glad he was all bundled up, and strode out into the high wind and the freezing cold.

He slowly climbed up into his front seat on the sleigh, an elf on each side lifting him up and fitting him into his seatbelt, Saint Nicholas checking the reins, calling to those elves who were talking to the reindeer (who understood them very well). The reindeer shook their heads and began to prepare in the few moments remaining before their first leap into the air.

Administrative elves final-checked the GPS equipment and locked in final preparations for tonight’s space Skype. They final-checked to see that the several computers on the sleigh were in complete sync.

In bright red and white, inside his suit warm in the icy wind, hands in his big wool gloves, feet warm inside his big black boots. St. Nicholas looked to the left, looked to the right, looked down, and, scratching his nose, looked up into the waiting sky. He called out: “Everyone ready?”

Elves who were not to be helpers on the flight leaped down from the sleigh, crunching in the snow below as they landed and then ran toward the big house. Bundled up aeronautical elves to help with the flight and gift sorting clung tighter inside the ropes around the sleigh’s huge bundle. They nuzzled further into their places.

They began to rise, faster and faster through the snow. “Aha,” St. Nick shouted. “Aha, aha, Up! you wonders, you Olympians, you dear beasts, up, up, and away!”

Their home, their workshop, and the whole North Pole was suddenly way below and disappearing in the snow.

The old man smelled the snow through his scarf, felt the high in the sky icy wind smacking into the sleigh (and sneaking icy wind through cracks under layers of his thick clothing). Up. The sun, invisible behind the snow, was quickly going down. Going out. Up they flew! And suddenly it was night.

Their plan was to go relatively straight up to a specific target area so very high in the sky that it touched space, where they would adjust their instruments, retake their bearings, then head due West and begin zooming up and down to deliver presents to the incredibly long succession of households and hovels.

He held the reins tight but began thinking how he was sure they had been absolutely right in absolutely refusing to negotiate rights for an advertising company to display advertising on the sides of the sleigh. “Harumph!” he muttered. He dismissed the memory and focused in again on driving their sleigh.

In his reverie, in the massive ice winds of the upper sky, he almost missed the correction-in-the-storm change-of-direction turn called for on his lighted screen before him. Their global positioning was correcting for their planned path through the night.

They were so sure of themselves. As they and their children had learned to do over aeons, the technical elves on board connected their bearings in relationship to each discernable star, each planet, each neighbor meteor, each satellite, and, most lately, every airliner, helicopter, and drone moving silently across the night sky below.

NORAD had begun tracking, odd, a high altitude object moving at very high speed. What? They probed. A high altitude sleigh, the sensors reasoned. Oh yes, every year. Tonight in fact. The tracking station workers relaxed a little and laughed.

A frost-covered elf named Flossie, in the rear of their high flying sleigh, huddled under blankets, stared at her lighted screens, saw the first strange electronic signal when they were nearing their reckoning point. Nothing else was supposed to be there where they were planning their quick pause to check equipment and bearing. Nothing was supposed to be there. But the characteristics of the waves and icons being received suggested nothing other that there was an object of some kind next to where their sleigh had planned to stop. Might this be a security
issue for their mission tonight? Flossie told the others huddled in their rear-sleigh post. Then she texted and Skyped the others on board, telling them to stand by. Odd because all the other indicators had shown that, clearly, nothing was there ahead where they would pause.

- When they arrived, nearly to the spot where there had been that strange electronic signal, there was no scanner indication whatsoever of a physical being. Empty, as they had thought. The sleigh slid upward without sound. St. Nicholas thought: “Before starting the rounds, we better know what strange object or non-object is out here in our path. We will be floating here very briefly to check instruments – then we need to hurry up to make up our lost time.” St. Nick felt the stiffness growing in his back. He wanted to stand up and stretch.

They arrived at the planned reckoning point, and there was indeed absolutely nothing there. At that, the band of elves and St. Nick all voted to take a few minutes of rest, while the instrument checks were being done, before they zoomed off on their quest. The reindeer shook their heads up and down and agreed.

- Looking across the skies this midwinter night, high above the earth in a fast-flying, gift-filled sleigh, warm inside of the wooly folds of green, red, and white blankets, Voola the elf was having such feelings of contentment. Icy contentment, she must admit, but contentment of a very high order.

Flossie the rear elf startled awake. The strange-shaped electronic signal appeared on her screen again. Again. But they had just arrived there and the pattern on the screen had been absolutely blank, but not the signal was back. The instruments still made it clear that there was no physical presence. Somehow, something was emanating a signal that someone was there and yet nothing was there. Well,, she thought, a little break sounded good about now. Perhaps they were all going a little noodles, nothing that a good nap wouldn’t fix. And then they would fly.

- Voola knew she had work to do – She needed to help Omplaa and the others figure out how a nothing in space could make the scan go blip as it had. Wouldn’t that mean a nothing was a something? But the screens found no something. Nothing. But for the moment she was just happy where she was. There was nowhere she would rather be, in the best sleigh, high above the planet Earth, under warm blankets, and with presents for the world.

Omplaa, who was under the same blankets, leaned fondly against Voola. “First we nap, and then we go. I think we have tested it out: There’s nothing here.”
Voola thought to herself, “No. Just a little more time. Why did we get a screen report of life here, even though there is nothing here? For now, she closed her eyes and felt herself get very warm and cozy.

Suddenly, a high squeeky voice in the midst of the snow went “Eeeeeeeek!”

Omplaa and Voola sat up and instantly looked at each other in shock.

“Uh, uh, pay no attention!” said the tiny high voice.

“Ha, there it is!” she said to Omplaa.


Inside the little fold in space, a furry weasel-like creature was jumping up and down, leaping back and forth, frantically searching for the emergency speaker’s “Off” button. “Begoots!” she wailed. (She had accidentally backed into the Emergency “On” speaker button a moment ago, then had scattered the components from the table, trying to find the “Off” button.) She was flabbergasted at what she had done, was thoroughly frightened, and was jumping up and down. Ah. She saw it. She found the “Off” button and pushed it in with all her might.

It became silent. Voola and Omplaa instantly and instinctively began studying carefully all the space around them and the sleigh. Where could the sound come from here in this snow-swirling emptiness?

They kept looking. Nothing appeared. Voola immediately sent a text message to St. Nicholas and the sleigh’s elves about what they had just heard and the contradictory scan results – and to stand by.

They could have so easily missed the last clue. The hand-held computer had just registered a slight thickness in the space right beside them. No big deal. Space can be a little thicker or thinner. Time to try something else, another study. It wasn’t until they took one last scroll down the data sets before leaving them -- and found just how thick this space was ---- and that how big the thickness was very unlikely but also truly recorded.

Small variations in things were as common as sand. But this space thickness was definitely suspicious. Much too thick. What’s up? So, what to do?

Voola went to her Google (The Next Generation) and asked “When one finds unusual space thickness, can one ask for an “entrance” (if there is one)?”
Only three research citations showed up, but one article looked promising.

According to the steps in the cited article she had found, they aimed their “rectifier” at the “thick” space and beamed precisely asking for the way into the thickness. It worked.

Five minutes and the two elves had themselves in front of what appeared to be a kind of “front door” into the space thickness, a tiny tiny slit, which they had pulled farther open.

Omplaa “knocked” and the two waited patiently outside the “door”.

What seemed like a long time passed in complete silence. They breathed in and out, in and out, in and out. The night was glittering bright.

The high squeaky voice again: “You might as well go away. Noone is here. In fact, noone is ever here. Disregard the weasel behind the door. In fact, what a strange delusion you are having right now! Truly strange. After all, you’re not really here. There’s nothing at all here. I don’t exist. You are making all this up. And you can’t come in.”

A long silence.

Then, “uh uh Please go away. Noone is home. Thank you.”

Another long silence, the two elves standing before the “door” quietly, without thought.

After a longer while, the “door” clicks open. The door draws back. And the elves enter, bending way down because the ceiling is low.

They find a little brown weasel-creature weeping into her whiskers sitting disconsolately on a little flower-patterned couch in the corner. The weasel holds up its front feet to cover her eyes.

She cries and cries. Finally, the weasel quiets down and lets go a long sighhhhhh.

“We are sorry this is so disquieting for you. We mean you no harm. We were trying to solve a mystery.” Voola says to the little still-whimpering beast.

The weasel picks up a tissue from its holder and honks her nose, then honks it again. She automatically sets about cleaning her whiskers, while she sniffs.

“I’m never ever to let anyone in. I’ve never done it before. No No No. I am to be here absolutely alone. Oh, but oh it’s true that I’m so very lonely” she hesitates and squeaks again. “Oh, I shall be severely punished. What shall I do?” She begins weeping again, then quiets and begins looking at her “guests”.

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“Amazing. You speak our language,” says Voola.

“Yes, I speak many languages. I need them all in my work. *They* taught me many things. She squeaks again and covers her head with her hands.”

“They?”

“Yes, my employers. I must say that they do pay me well for my work.”

“What is your work? And who are they?”

On the machinery that I run, I pick up all of the world’s e-mail, phone, and other traffic all the time and forward it all digitally on to my employers.

They are a complex life form from within our planetary system. They want to know your world’s mind.”

“But you stay here all alone all the time.”

“Yes, they insist. I was born right here on this “cloaked” space platform. I was trained from infancy on to monitor their machines. They won’t let me go.” Sigh. Whimper. “But they pay well.”

“Well,” Voola had a flash in her mind and didn’t even check with Omplaa. “Why don’t you come along with us on our adventure tonight? Say, what is the name you call yourself?”

“Pooka,” said the weasel, sniffing and honking her nose into her tissue some more.

“Well, Pooka, come with us. And when we get home together to Earth from our adventure tonight, we can help you find a good weasily home. Do come! We can have fun. I promise you, riding our sleigh together above the Earth is thrilling. OK?”

The weasel Pooka looks around her. This is the only life she had ever known. She loves these walls, these gizmos. But she is so lonely, she is always cold, she doubts the motives of her employers and doubts whether she is ever doing any good.

Pooka thinks to herself: Here all alone, have I ever tasted real life? What is full life? What must it be like to be with other lives? The idea of being with others sounds so good. What would that be like? What must the Earth be like? Is it friendly too? And besides, these creatures are nice. I like them already.

“What do you say?” asks Omplaa.
Pooka gets up from the couch and smooths her fur.

“I’ll get ready,” she says.

Within minutes, they were all on the sleigh. The other elves were treating Pooka as their very special guest. St. Nicholas was heartily pleased and suggested that, with elf help, she be allowed to give out some of the little presents herself. Now, Pooka sat all wrapped up in the blankets of green, red and white, close beside Ompaa and Voola, who were smiling at each other, all leaning together, warm as could be.

The sleigh took to the sky again, like a great Christmas bird. And all together, weasel guest, elves, and St. Nicholas, they flew off to spread goodwill and presents. They were going to all the children around their whole, spinning, beautiful world, “Ho Ho Ho” trailing along behind the sleigh.