

## **The Taste of Miracles**

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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### **What's a 'miracle'? Depends on where you're looking from....**

Hayes stared at the vastness of space through the freighter's window. He swiveled slightly in the pilot's chair, wincing as he banged his knees on the control panel. No matter how many times he did this run, the sight fascinated him. Even the blackness looked crisp, and the points of light appeared sharp. Thousands of stars. Thousands of possibilities.

Trish brushed his shoulder. He turned, and she handed him a steaming mug. "Cocoa," she said.

He took it, feeling the heat through the durable plastic. "I didn't know we had chocolate aboard."

She smiled and eased in the chair next to his. She was as slim and battered as the freighter, her skin lined with the effort from all the years of hauling, lifting, and loading. He had called her scrappy until he had seen her in a fight with one of the ore miners in the bar at the ass-end of the moon base. After that, Hayes decided, "tough" was too wimpy a word for Trish.

"Needed a little something special tonight," she said, then blew gently at the steam.

He glanced at her, her small, strong hands wrapped around the mug as if it would give her warmth. "Didn't think you celebrated holidays."

Her grin was tiny. She didn't look at him. "Don't. Not really, anyway. But I kinda like this run on Christmas."

Earth to the Moon and back. One of the easiest runs on the freight line. He preferred Earth to Mars because he liked Mars better. It stirred his imagination in a way the Moon never did. "I like it too," he said. "Pays triple."

"No. I don't care about that." She slurped. The entire area smelled of hot chocolate. "You celebrate Christmas, Hayes?"

"I'm not religious," he said.

"I mean as a kid. You get to celebrate? Tree and tinsel and toys?"

“Shoppers’ Mecca,” he said, remembering the tree from his twelfth year. His mom shelled out for a Grow-Your-Own, the only way to get real trees then. It had been enormous, decorated with popcorn and ornaments generations old. The lights were miniature candles that appeared to be burning, and his parents had bought so many presents that the packages spilled across the living room floor.

“Was it fun?” She huddled in the chair, her legs drawn up to her chest, mug balanced on one knee.

He shrugged and thought. It had been so long since he had done the holiday thing. He was usually on some run or another, earning extra cash. “The anticipation was great,” he said after a moment. “All month. The tree, the lights, the packages filled with surprises. The feeling that something magic could happen. That was fun.”

She was staring at the stars, like he had, only her scarred features had a touch of wistfulness. “Never had any of that. The Shoppers’ Mecca or the religious stuff.”

“Never? Not even as a kid?” He regretted the question the minute he asked it. She had spoken of her childhood enough—in the program from the age of eleven, bounced at sixteen when she became too hard to handle after her grandmother’s death, running freight ever since because she was strong and one of the best damn pilots in the business.

“Not the shopping. Not the religion.” She finished her cocoa and set the mug on the floor beside her seat. “Christmas Eve, my gram would fill a thermos with hot cocoa, then she would bundle me up, take me outside, and when we were all snug in the snow, drinking our cocoa, she’d point to the stars. She’d tell me this story about how, when she was a girl, they had this race to get to the moon, and how, one Christmas Eve, those astronauts orbited the moon for the first time, and they sent holiday wishes to Earth.”

“Apollo 8,” Hayes said. “Borman, Lovell, and Anders.”

“You know it?” she asked.

“Space history is a hobby of mine.”

She nodded, still staring at the blackness. “Anyway, Gram thought it was a miracle. A real miracle. So every year, she went outside and pretended she could see them up there, circling.”

“So that’s why you do this,” Hayes said.

She looked at him for the first time, her nut-brown eyes bright. He could almost see the little girl, bundled against the cold, holding her grandmother’s hand and staring at the night-darkened sky.

“No,” she said, her flat voice shattering the illusion. “We were born to late too be cowboys, Hayes, and there’s no such thing as miracles any more.”

She picked up her mug and straightened out her legs, then pushed out of the seat. Space was as dark as ever, the stars bright beacons of the future, waiting for him. But he would never go farther than Mars. He was a pilot who shuttled ore, equipment, and people from place to place. Not even allowed the glamour title “astronaut” anymore.

She had stopped behind his chair. He could see her reflection against the window as if she were standing in space, unsupported by the freighter.

“That’s why I like this run on Christmas,” she said. “I need to remember that once upon a time, this was the stuff of dreams.”

She touched his shoulder, a fleeting warmth, a moment, dreamer to dreamer. Then she let go.

“More cocoa?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, glad she had brought it along.

Before handing her his mug, he took one last sip. He stared at the stars, swirling the chocolate on his tongue, and savored the taste of miracles.