

Christmas on Cassandra IV

by Keith West

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Gareth Barstow checked his chronometer. He had set it for Earth time, Central Time Zone in the US. He still had half an hour before midnight on Earth. Sharon would be getting ready to leave for the midnight mass. If Gareth couldn't join her in person, he intended to join her in spirit. He continued to trudge uphill. This planet's equivalent of trees were beginning to thin out, and the snow was thicker.

From back in the trees, something whickered. Gareth turned around. A group of animals emerged into the far end of the clearing. Gareth was downwind of them, so they would most likely leave him alone. The beasts had shaggy coats, six legs, and horns spreading out from their heads. They weren't dangerous as long as they weren't provoked or cornered. The animals weren't reindeer, but the resemblance was strong. Gareth pretended that's what they were.

The animals drifted back into the trees. Gareth stared at where they had been until he heard the horns knocking Cassandra IV's version of moss off a tree. He continued on his way.

Cassandra was a double star system. The stars were widely spaced enough that Cassandra A had formed a stable solar system. Astronomers were still debating whether Cassandra B had formed at the same time and place as A, or if B had been captured when it passed by.

Gareth was a geologist and didn't really care how the system formed. He only cared that B would be rising over the crest of the slope he was climbing.

The snow was thicker here near the crest. Gareth forced his way through a particularly deep drift. His lungs burned from the cold, thin air. The stars were brilliant. Cassandra IV had

two small moons. Both were on the other side of the planet tonight. Gareth was glad. He didn't want to be reminded he wasn't on Earth.

As he reached the summit, a meteor burned through the atmosphere. They were rare in this system. The gravitational influence of Cassandra B tended to pull them into unstable orbits and most had burned up in the planet's atmosphere.

That star was visible above the far horizon. It was the brightest object in the sky due to its nearness but was still far enough away to appear as a point, not a dot. Its brilliance illuminated the snow covered plain below him.

Gareth checked his chronometer again.

Midnight, Christmas Eve back home on Earth. The midnight mass would be starting.

Gareth wished he were there with Sharon to worship with her. But he was here, exploring an alien world. That didn't mean he couldn't worship, though, or celebrate the season. He began to sing "Silent Night".