



HECATE'S HEARTH

He did not know what had awakened him. The finger-trees of Hecate were as still under the brooding moons as the humans asleep in their sleeping bags around the guttering campfire. The silence was complete. Yet, something had changed. The temperature had dropped. That would be logical, as the heat of the day would escape quickly through the planet's thin atmosphere. But the temperature was frigid--unnaturally so, as though an arm of arctic air had curved around the little world to pierce this equatorial tropic. It was most odd. Spock reached beside him in the moss for his tricorder--and stopped.

At the edge of the clearing stood a slender female humanoid, a blue glow shimmering around her nude form. As somber as the moons, she stood unmoving, gazing at the bundled explorers.

Spock reached over and prodded the Captain.

"Sir? Jim?"

Kirk's arm was limp. He did not stir.

With one eye on the apparition, the Vulcan quickly scanned Kirk with his tricorder. The Captain, and all the other members of the landing party, seemed to be in some deep trance-like sleep. Spock turned the tricorder on the alien. His eyebrows crept upwards. The tricorder registered organic matter, but no life. While sensor scans made from the now-absent ship had revealed no animal or sentient life on Hecate, the form before him nevertheless gave every appearance of being a living being.

Determined to follow standard procedure, Spock climbed out of his sleeping bag, shivering in the chill air.

"I am Spock. These are my companions. We are here on a peaceful mission, and intend no hostile--"

But the being, if such it were, turned slowly on its heel and walked away from the clearing back into the forest.

Spock stooped to shake McCoy.

"Doctor. Doctor McCoy, you must awaken."

McCoy was as insensate as Kirk.

Moving quickly now, lest he lose track of their visitor, Spock found McCoy's medical kit and snapped a cartridge of potent stimulant into the hypo-spray. He needed a backup. He would not leave the others there, unconscious, if there were an alternative.

The hypo hissed home, and the medical tricorder immediately registered an increase in pulse, blood pressure, and metabolism, but the human did not awaken. He was in the grip of some state that seemed to be beyond medical intervention.

Spock glanced up at the retreating humanoid, and the being paused, turning her head to gaze back at him, then resumed her gliding walk. She moved as though sleep-walking, passing through the hedge of sickle-brush, and painting the foliage with a faint blue phosphorescence where she had touched. Her footprints were soft pools of light in the damp forest floor.

Logically, Spock knew he must follow the being. There was a high probability that her appearance was associated with the unexplained condition of the humans, and their recovery quite possibly depended on his discovering who the humanoid was and where she had come from. She was out of his line of sight already, despite her languid pace, and the glimmering markings of her passage were beginning to fade and wink out. Shouldering his tricorder, Spock pushed through the sickle-brush and hurried after the distant blue aura.

He saw her disappear behind another hedge, and ran full out to catch up to her. She seemed to glide over the ground, soundlessly, as though not touching it, while the forest floor under Spock protested with loud crackling twigs and squishing finger-tree pods as he hurried. He stumbled in the undergrowth, unable to see well for the tears that the cold breeze brought. If the cold held through the night, much of the tropical forest would be severely damaged. It was fortunate, Spock thought, that the landing party's sleeping bags were responsive in their insulating properties to extreme fluctuations in temperature.

The glow behind the hedge ahead of him seemed much brighter--more so than the humanoid had been generating previously--and Spock burst through the foliage into a circle of blue light. The light plunged at him and wrapped him in brilliance, and he found himself suddenly unable to move, his limbs caught and held as though with bonds of neutronium.

His lips were sealed shut, and only his eyes responded, flicking around to encompass the bright clearing in which he stood immobilized. He was surrounded by a multitude of beings identical in sex and appearance to the being he had followed. On the periphery, partially draped forms held bizarre, phallic lanterns. The somber, icy eyes were intent upon him, yet no one moved, no one spoke. Then, as on a signal, arms and antennae extended, focussing on him, and the silent beings glided toward him as though in a dream.

Hands like frost enfolded him and lifted him like a corpse upon a bier. He struggled to move, to speak, but he was frozen in the force-field's rigor. He was laid on a huge flat stone where there had not been a stone before, and the gelid fingers roved over his body like centipedes, and still he was unable to make his muscles obey him in the slightest. It was as though his brain had been disconnected from his body without actually being removed.

The tricorder was pulled off over his head, and the seal of his tunic parted under the cold, creeping hands. The garment was peeled off of him slowly. He seemed to be losing sensation in his lower body, unable to feel pressure, but still sensitive to temperature. He knew that his boots and trousers had been drawn off by the cutting cold that caressed his thighs. The thousand fingers played along his exposed skin, fingers that were losing their languid, dispassionate manner, fingers that grew hungry. And, impossibly, he realized that his copulatory organ was responding.

Except for the brushing sounds of skin upon skin, and the low moan of the freezing wind, there was no sound. The cold was invading Spock's brain, and a deadly numbness spread through him. His consciousness seemed to contract into a core within his mind, with only vision left to him, and still the fingers smoothed along his nerveless body. The faces hovering over him were inanimate, showing no semblance of emotion, not even the veneer of Vulcan control. But the hands skimmed, kneaded, probed with increasing desperation.

With something akin to his own desperation, Spock reached out mentally in a strong, deliberate stab at the consciousness clustered around him--and encountered nothing ... nothing at all, no need, desire, purpose. No thought. There were no minds to touch. It stunned him. Even had there been minds behind impenetrable shields, he would have sensed something. Not this ... nonexistence. But the beings were real--they had registered as organic constructs on the tricorder. It was as though the beings were mere hulls of living creatures, puppets without an apparent puppeteer. Dead. Yet the cold hulls did have a purpose, for the ministrations to his numbed body grew ever more intense.

He did not feel it. He saw it. One of the beings climbed up onto the rock beside him, then straddled him and lowered herself onto him--and onto his penis. He might as well have been dead below the neck, yet his body seemed to have a will of its own, for he could see that as the being ground herself onto him in a dreamy, mechanical rhythm, that his hips were bucking upwards as though in sensual response. It was impossible, illogical--and undeniable. He heard his own breaths begin to quicken, realized that his lips were drawing back from his teeth, but all he could feel was a terrible, encroaching coldness. Then, distantly, a flood of the cold burst in on him as some part of him--his life-force?--drained out of him in a violent rush.

A piercing sense of loss overwhelmed his mind, and he could not resist the emotion. Outside, in the senseless reality, the creature had slipped off of him and back to the ground.

There must be some way to reach ... someone. He reached out frantically with his mind, knowing beyond a doubt that his only hope lay in countering this bizarre ritual before it robbed him of all his senses.

//Jim--McCoy--//

And he touched something--a tiny, flickering warmth of life. But it wasn't Kirk or the doctor--it was within the being, the one who had mated with him--and he recognized with profound horror the familiar pattern of his own life-force.

Another of the creatures was mounting him, and his genitals seemed enthusiastic to the task. Again, the being conjured response from his disconnected body. And the insanity of what was happening struck him: they were somehow draining away his life-force in increments, exchanging the awful coldness within themselves for portions of the spark within him.

He fought. He screamed. He pleaded. He lay hopelessly immobile as one after the other, the vampires wrung his life out of him, and the cold seeped in and displaced everything.

Soon after, they made a torch of the dessicated corpse with which to warm their frigid hands.