



The seconds ticked into minutes, the minutes into hours.

Kirk remained standing, even after his companions had long since sunk wearily to the ground. He stood quietly, his eyes hardly wavering from the two figures on the platform. The barely discernible rise and fall of each friend's chest reassured Kirk that they were still barely alive. His mind wandered unbidden to another who would never breathe again.

David! He swayed with the thought, but caught himself before anyone could notice. *Why? Why not me? All this because of Khan...because of me! Carol was right to keep him away from me. If he had never...if I....* His thoughts trailed off, and he had to close his eyes tightly until the lump in his throat eased. He could not dwell on this now, could not chance negative emotions affecting the transfer.

Turning to pace, he caught himself; maybe even the pacing would disturb the Vulcans assembled around them. A movement near him caught Kirk's eye and he glanced down to find Uhura shivering in the cool night wind. He had not even noticed the change from the blistering heat to almost chilly air.

Placing his jacket around Uhura, Kirk rested a hand lightly on her shoulder, his mind turned again to the multitude of problems that had resulted from him attempting to reach this place, this moment.

The Admiral shook his head sadly as he studied each of his crewmen. Their careers had undoubtedly been ruined. Commander Morrow had been right when he had said that the intellectual chaos would destroy his career, but the Commander had neglected to remind him that it was not only Kirk it would destroy. He was ready to deal with the loss of *his* career, but how could he ever justify ruining the lives of four other fine Starfleet officers and friends?

And my ship? The thought was quickly pushed back, and he straightened abruptly. His head swam, dots dancing before his eyes; the effects of having no food or rest since leaving Earth. Kirk smiled grimly as he brought his attention back to the

still figures on the platform. He could just hear McCoy lecturing him, 'Jim, I don't even know why I bother, I've given this lecture to you so many times I have it filed away for quick reference. When will you realize you're human...not a superman or even a Vulcan! You can't go for days without sleep or nourishment.'

Kirk's smile faded with the memory that this was no mission from which he would return to the safety of his ship...he had lost his ship, and his career... and perhaps even his two closest friends would not survive what was happening.

T'Lar faltered, her hands limply sliding off Spock and McCoy's faces. Two of the priestesses smoothly stepped forward and caught her as she almost fell to the ground. Within seconds, T'Lar was back in position, her hands assuming the meld position. Kirk felt the tension increase. He could see Sarek from the corner of his eye, his brow furrowing as Kirk had seen Spock do when in deep concentration.

Minutes passed, the tension eased, and T'Lar now stood unaided.

Kirk shifted, exhaustion seemed to invade every bone and every muscle ached from Kruge's beating. A flicker of movement brought his attention back to his crewmen. They were all quiet, resting in various uncomfortable positions on the ground. Checking his chronometer, Kirk was alarmed to discover fourteen hours had passed. Soon it would be dawn and he had seen no indication that the Vulcans were making any progress. But then how do you tell if a Vulcan is successful?

A slight movement caught the corner of his eye. Some instinct moved him to Saavik's side in time to catch her as she started to collapse. Her eyes focused briefly and she grated out, "Taking too...long...." before closing her eyes again in concentration. She straightened and Kirk released his hold on her. It was then that he noticed several of the other Vulcans behind them lay crumpled on the ground along the passageway to the platform. He quickly turned his attention back to the figures on the platform with alarm. The scene reassured him. T'Lar remained motionless as she had except for that one lapse, her hands still tense on Spock's and McCoy's faces.

Another Vulcan fell silently nearby and Kirk again looked around finding it hard not to panic in the tense silence. He understood the danger clearly: if the ceremony were unsuccessful McCoy would not survive. He would lose them both. Bowing his head, he silently pleaded to his own god for help.

Commander Uhura approached the slightly swaying Admiral. She knew Kirk well enough to interpret the quick flash of panic he had allowed to surface, and she could see the lines of exhaustion in his face. He would be blaming himself for all the problems that had arisen from this journey, she knew instinctively, even though each of them had freely offered their help before he even asked.

Uhura touched his arm, and Kirk lifted tired, soul-weary eyes to meet hers. For a moment, they seemed to be asking her if everything would be all right. Then he straightened, shaking off his fears so that he could comfort her. She shook her head, smiling reassuringly, managing to wrap a petite arm around his broad shoulders. Kirk responded gratefully, resting his head on hers, taking the same comfort and strength from Uhura he had so often given to her in the past.

After several minutes, they turned back to watch the figures on the platform. The long night was weighing on him and Kirk gratefully drew strength from his silent, supportive friend. It reminded him he was not alone, no matter what happened, perhaps he had been wrong earlier when he had berated himself for bringing his friends into this. After all, what were friends for but to share the bad times as well as the good. Uhura's continued support reminded him of this. Kirk squeezed her shoulder in thanks and she smiled gently at him.

Kirk felt the tension increase again. The air felt electric and as if in answer to Kirk's thoughts a flash of lightning lit the still dark sky. McCoy moaned and jerked his head away from T'Lar's hand. Another priestess approached to hold McCoy steady while T'Lar firmly replaced her hand on his tossing head.

The rest of the crew were awakened by the lightning. They stood, glancing around uneasily. All of the fallen Vulcans were standing as well and there was almost a tangible presence of power surrounding them. The air seemed heavier, somehow ominous.

Another flash of lightning came, seeming very near McCoy and he galvanized again, his whole body twisting instead of just his head. Kirk had drawn apart from Uhura and now took a step forward without realizing it. Instantly he was faced with one of the Vulcan guards apparently posted to police the outworlder's actions. He moved back impatiently, straining to get a clear view of Spock and McCoy.

The gong rang slowly and it seemed the lightning began to flash violently with it. Kirk's tension mounted as the display came closer and closer to McCoy, his body shuddering with each brilliant flash. Kirk turned his attention to Spock, but he seemed unaffected by the movement next to him, remaining still, almost lifeless....

The lightning struck almost directly next to McCoy's head, and he cried out. Kirk started forward again, but this time was restrained by the protective presence of Scotty and Uhura on both sides of him. He closed his eyes trying to regain his control, but an indistinct rustle of movement brought them back open to focus on the Vulcans around them. Each one had lifted their hands, reaching out to touch two fingers to the Vulcan next to them, joining the hundreds of them together.

A frightening power began to vibrate around them. Uhura looked up at him with bewildered eyes and seeing the touch of fear, Kirk reached down to take her hand. On impulse he glanced at Scotty and just as easily grasped his hand as well. Almost without realizing it, Sulu and Chekov joined hands with them and they stood protectively together as the skies continued to crackle and thunder even more violently about them. Kirk, aware that Saavik was no longer near them, found that she had moved to join the Vulcans nearby, her hands joined in like manner to each neighboring figure.

Though the sky was still a velvet black, a soft glow began to appear. Kirk realized with a start that it emanated from the Vulcans around him. It seemed to spread from the Vulcans behind him up toward the altar. It enveloped Saavik and Sarek and then the priestesses. Kirk felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as the golden aura spread to include T'Lar, Spock, and McCoy. It deepened and grew until he had to close his eyes against its brilliance.

The five humans stood frozen together, holding one another's hands tightly, both awed and frightened. The sky continued to crackle and lightning flashed violently all around them. Kirk could hear chanting and knew it was the combined thoughts of the Vulcans for no one was speaking aloud. The gong continued to sound in slow rhythm, shattering their tortured nerves with each new ring. They were unaware of the time passing, feeling caught in endless space and time.

Suddenly the word "Kroykah" reverberated throughout. Kirk opened his eyes just as three flashes of lightning struck directly where Spock, T'Lar, and McCoy had been.

Then just as suddenly everything returned to the way it had been, except that now Spock and McCoy stood on the platform, on opposite sides of T'Lar. She lifted her hands and said, "It is done."

The Vulcans around him lifted their heads and silently withdrew. Kirk did not have time to wonder how hundreds of Vulcans could disappear so quickly and silently.

T'Lar was helped to her chair, and Kirk watched anxiously as Sarek approached the platform. He bowed before T'Lar and then turned to Spock, briefly touching his forehead. As Kirk watched, Sarek and two robed Vulcans helped Spock down from the platform and into the temple behind the altar, taking McCoy as well.

Kirk did not, could not, look at the others. He knew their eyes held the same questions that pounded through his own mind and heart. Did it work? Or had the death of his son and the loss of his ship been for nothing?

He moved to one of the stone seats, his legs weak and unable to support him. He felt the others move to his side, protectively as always. When this was over, he reflected, and things were sane again, if they ever were, he must tell them what they meant to him.

The seconds became minutes as his mind screamed for an end to this not knowing. The minutes became an hour and the pitch-black sky began to lighten just faintly, really more a lessening of the black. And still the temple beyond did not yield up those taken from him. For one small second, he considered going after them, but in some odd way it was almost better not to know. While he did not have certain knowledge, he could continue to hope.

Then, Kirk forced down the questions, and tried to calm his thoughts. And slowly into the eye of the storm that was his mind crept a soul forever intertwined with his own. "Spock!" he breathed quietly, looking up expectantly, knowing that they were coming. He had his answers now.

McCoy emerged first assisted by Sarek, and Kirk's eyes questioned his friend. The doctor managed a half-smile as Kirk took in his gray face and none-too-steady steps.

"I'm all right, Jim."

Kirk nodded tightly and sensing that Spock had arrived on the platform, his eyes were drawn to him. Without looking away, he asked Sarek, "What about Spock?"

"Only time will tell." Sarek paused. "Kirk, I thank thee. What you have done...."

Kirk barely heard Sarek; his whole being was focused on the slender, hooded figure on the platform. He replied almost angrily, "What I have done, I had to do."

"But at what cost? Your ship...your son...."

Kirk turned to face Sarek. He was certain now. The questions were all resolved. He replied gently, "If I hadn't tried, the cost would have been my soul."

Sarek nodded and moved to join the procession at his son's side. Kirk watched Spock pass by without acknowledgement, unable to see his features under the robe. And yet, he felt Spock's soul tug at his own as he passed and was reassured. He experienced a calmness at the center of his being, a certainty that now there was all the time in the universe. Spock's T'hy'la could patiently wait until the time was right.

And Spock's foot hesitated on the steps....



Reborn

Why am I here...what place is this....
Why is everyone looking this way?
What have I done...why this attention....
What am I expected to say?
They stand me up to bear me through
These Vulcanoid women and men.
They dress me in robes, bade me go.
I'm led past a group of Terrans.

These Earthers smile, I feel hesitation.
I see each of them and then come to him.
He stands apart...his eyes pull me back.
I know you..."Jim, your name is Jim."



Tacs