

Before We Were Brittle

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Before We Were Brittle

by [kalima](#)

Summary

Before heading off to Starfleet Academy, Spock agrees to meet T'Pring in the the cave they used to play in as children. They are not children anymore. They are also not adults.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

*Maybe we should move someplace new,
and build time machines to go and get us back.*

The rock outcropping where they are to meet is on his family's ancestral lands. It is not the most spectacular rock formation in the area, though tourists occasionally wander across it, turned around or lost, mistaking it for a more famous landmark and leaving disappointed. As it is the height of summer, few off-world visitors venture out before sunset, if at all.

Yellow sand sweeps across the balcony-like overhang, blowing off to the east. The balcony itself is pale dusty orange, with layers of compressed sediment in varying shades, reminding him of the laminated pastry he'd indulged in on his recent visit to Earth. Crisp-edged and buttery.

It is on that balcony that T'Pring, in all her child glory, had looked out over the land and commanded the world (and him) to her bidding. Spock hadn't minded so much then. Her certainty that the universe should fall into order for her convenience had been oddly reassuring when he was nine.

Twenty meters back from the edge of the overhang, massive boulders and red-orange stone pillars form the talus caves. Eight million years since they'd tumbled into this formation, weathering eons of quakes, dust storms and flash floods, yet still they lean into each other like old friends—

He groans.

Even from a distance she has managed to extrude sentimentality from him in the form of cozy human similes. *Old friends? Laminated pastry? Really, Spock?* He chides himself in the echo of her voice, feels that undercurrent of her fond exasperation tugging at his consciousness like a

Damn it!

He takes a moment to banish the use of figurative language and repress any further urges to swear in his mother's native tongue. Casual profanity is common in Seattle, and he only returned from Earth yesterday. This human devolution probably had nothing to do with T'Pring.

Merely residual effects from exposure.

His cousins had been eager to provide a cover story. “We have your back, man,” one assured him. “Your dad’s a dick,” the other added. (Spock *may* have given an impression of his father’s intractability that was somewhat...extreme.) While his cousins maintained the appearance of his participation in quality family time, he went to San Francisco to meet with advisors and finalize his matriculation.

The ease of his own deceitfulness should trouble him more than it does. Unlike human children, Vulcan children have less reason to prevaricate. And once a child has mastered the mental disciplines that keep thoughts private, the only thing that prevents lying is moral imperative.

He’s certain T’Pring is unconcerned about the morality of his actions. She already knows adults can lie given sufficient reason. It’s one of many secrets you learn upon becoming one. Rather, it is his sense of nostalgia she hopes to arouse with this meeting. Why else would she specify the talus caves where they’d once engaged in the unstructured activity Humans called play? It is uncharacteristically nostalgic of her. Therefore suspect.

Memories rush in. Countless small humiliations and betrayals of trust that marred an otherwise contented childhood. Tricks played on him. Gifts offered and withdrawn as he reached for them. That niggling desire for favorable opinions and a dependency on the good will of people who harbored none.

Though she’d long claimed her own behavior towards him was perfectly logical, most of her edicts and demands were mere capriciousness. “You are *my* half-human boy,” she’d once admitted after he confronted her about it. “Only *I* am permitted to torment you.”

Well. He is no longer a child. He’s seventeen years of age. His life is all his own now.

The awareness of that truth hits him suddenly and he stops mid-stride, sucks in a breath, tries to shake out the anxiety tingling in his fingertips. He has made an adult decision. Has committed to a course far different from the one set him by his father.

T’Pring swore she would not reveal his decision to attend Star Fleet Academy to anyone—

“*Military* academy,” she’d pointed out before he extracted that promise. None of his assurances about Star Fleet’s dedication to peace and scientific exploration convinced her otherwise. Vulcan’s own Expeditionary Group was also devoted to scientific exploration, she reminded him, and *not* militaristic in the least. “Your reasons for attending Star Fleet Academy rather than the VSA are specious.” But she’d agreed to keep his secret.

It is possible she changed her mind while he was gone. Perhaps she waited *until* he was gone to betray him—

No matter. Spock will know how the sands have shifted when he sees his father tonight. And she’d made no promise not to try to change *his* mind.

The two of them will be together. Alone. Undisturbed. Which is a different concern altogether.

He closes his eyes and takes another deep calming breath before beginning the climb up the hillside.

The climb takes less time, and the edifice at the top seems far less formidable to his adult perspective. Yet with each step closer this adult perspective seems more like a loss than a gain.

Alone in an expanse of desert with nothing but rocks to stand in judgment, he is overcome by longing, a *yearning* so earnest and deep, wistful, and melancholy it’s as if he’s been gone years instead of days. This familiar hillside with pebbles sliding and grit crunching beneath his shoes is part of a home already misremembered, one he can never return to, or one that he merely imagined, that never existed at all.

His mother’s race no doubt has a word for such a feeling.

When he reaches the plateau, he rushes to the pillars, presses his hand to the stone, dragging his fingers along the rough and the smooth, trailing radiant heat as he moves around to the cave’s entrance. An acute need to engage all his sensory faculties engulfs him – to lick the rocks, to inhale the shadows, to press the whole of himself into the hot stone until it has absorbed him completely.

He doesn’t know when he’ll be back. *If* he’ll be back.

A nibbling at the edges of his sensorium tells him T’Pring is close. The barrier between their minds is permeable, like mesh. He ducks into the entrance.

^^^

Even on Vulcan fashions change. Despite how it appears to outsiders, theirs is not a homogeneous culture.

In cities like Kir or Vulcana Regar (where T’Pring is certain everything of interest on Vulcan occurs), fashion is an acceptable form of creative expression. There are cultural enclaves in Shi’Kahr where Science is mere underpinning for Art. Still, all the boring aspects of Vulcan are in Shi’Kahr. Her family. Spock’s family. *Old Families*. Government. Most of Shi’Kahr bends toward the conservative. T’Pring is not daring enough to buck those expectations. At least not in public view.

It’s high summer and the atmosphere is weighty with warnings of heat lightning and monsoon. The robes she wears are also unseasonably heavy, conventional, dull, not fashionable *in the least*. It was this conventionality that rendered her virtually invisible on her journey to the talus caves. Hood up, like an old woman, she’d cut a path through the public commons between Briesh Road and the Mnah. People

automatically shifted out of her way. Even at the public transit station she attracted no attention, barely gave her a second glance. It was shamefully thrilling.

But now she must still her mind or risk this final opportunity to prove how misguided is Spock's intention to join Star Fleet. To demonstrate why he needn't leave home to fulfill his contravening desires. For beneath these garments is a bold sartorial choice based on traditional uniforms once worn by a Human cultural sub-group on Earth (or so the description in the catalogue claimed).

Even the name of the subgroup is transgressive.

Cheerleaders.

^^^

The last time he'd entered the caves there'd been less stooping and crawling involved. But the passage opens quicker than he remembered, and soon he's drawing himself up to his full height.

Threads of light leak through the space between the stones overhead and warrens of narrow passages snake out before him, sprouting irregular small caves with uneven cubbyholes tucked into the walls. They'd once stored snacks and scientific discoveries in those depressions.

Farther within, there would be a vaulted corridor that opened into the largest cavern. There, rocks of varying shapes were conveniently arranged by nature – or so it had seemed when they were younger – serving as furnishings for a house or as laboratory benches or the seats in dune skimmer. He remembers lying stretched out on a narrow slab, ostensibly practicing the Mind Rules, watching a sliver of sunlight move across the cavern walls, the floor, until it finally touched his body, and it was time to go home.

He considers it now, going back to the house. He's not in the mood for T'Pring's trickster logic. But if she's betrayed his trust or intends to extract some equal promise from him for her continued silence it would be best to stay and let it play out. His decision will be known to all relevant parties soon enough. He'd only wished to mitigate the fall-out.

Trepidation flutters at the edges of his mind – *her* trepidation, not his.

He wonders what could make a force of nature hesitate and follows the thread to the hooded figure in the chamber. There is ambient light enough to tell that it's her beneath those robes, yet he's beset with a strange cognitive dissonance.

When they were in school T'Pring was known to strip off the uniform as soon as they were out the doors, revealing something bright beneath. Pink copper, platinum blue, green bronze, diaphanous, or sleek. Colorful headbands or ribbons woven in her hair to compliment the clothes she'd been required to cover all day. Their instructors cautioned against such overt displays. But as she was widely recognized to be pleasing in form and figure, she argued that there was no logic in false modesty, therefore no reason to deny what is plainly evident to anyone with eyes. And she never has. Until now.

It is only two degrees cooler here than it is outside and those are winter robes for a much older, more practical-minded woman. He might even go so far as to say *dull*.

This much drab reeks of a trap.

She sits on one of the bench slabs in a meditation pose, the hood of the outer robe shrouding her features. She's shrouded her thoughts as well, but not fully. He can feel her mental aura vibrating. Anticipation perhaps? Agitation? All overlain by a forced attempt at her usual hauteur.

He waits for her to acknowledge his presence. Uncertainty in her flares up and is quickly tamped down. It's their usual contest of wills.

Suddenly weary, he says, "You asked to meet me here."

She pushes the hood back. Her eyes glitter, her cheeks are flushed, and her hair alight with static at the crown of her head. "Was your trip to Earth satisfactory?"

"I accomplished what I intended."

"And your Seattle cousins? Are they well?"

"What is this, T'Pring?"

"I am small-talking."

It occurs to him that he's under no obligation to participate in... whatever this is.

"I'll save you the bother." And he turns to leave—

"No!"

The edge of panic in her voice is interesting. He pivots.

"Stay." A *please* hovers, doesn't quite make past her lips.

"Explain your purpose then. I have many arrangements to make and—"

“—parents to inform?”

Right. Now we come to the blackmail. “What do you want?”

The effort to unfold her legs and free them from voluminous fabric is an entertaining slapstick, but once she’s standing firm on the ground, she has found her imperious authority again and tilts her chin up the better to look down on him. It is an affectation he secretly finds amusing, left over from when she was the taller of the two. Intriguingly, her gaze darts sideways, unwilling to look him in the eye.

She laces her hands together over her stomach and commences a well-reasoned, well-rehearsed explanation.

“You and I are bonded. We will be married partners in the future. It is appropriate that I become familiar with your mother’s family and culture. For example, Seattle city, located in the Pacific Northwest coastal region of the North American continent of Earth is known for its culture around the brewing and drinking of coffee beverages, despite the fact that its climate is not conducive to cultivation of the *coffea* genus of the [rubiaceae](#) family.”

He opens his mouth. Shuts it again.

She prompts, “Did you drink a coffee beverage?”

He did. With his cousins. Because humans enjoyed planning mild acts of rebellion over beverages. But...

“You have never before expressed an interest in my human heritage. In fact, I would venture to say you’ve expressed an active, very vocal, *disinterest*.”

T’Pring’s outwardly neutral demeanor wavers slightly. “You’ve obviously misinterpreted any comments I made on the subject.”

He hadn’t, which she knows full well. He pokes a mental finger into the barrier she’s trying so hard to maintain. Her eyes widen in alarm before she can still her reaction.

Curiouser and curiouser.

“You’ve raised your left eyebrow,” she says with a smug look from under long lashes. He cannot resist a puzzle. Which she has no doubt counted upon.

Well, there is one obvious clue.

“Why are you wearing those heavy, unattractive garments, T’Pring?” His voice sounds unnaturally gruff, pushed out through a throat gone tight and rough around the edges.

Suddenly the wall between their minds is gelatinous, its quivering mirrored by her body. Her eyelids flutter closed, her lips parting, and she sways ever-so-slightly, leaning towards him. His body supersedes his mind and takes the invitation, stepping into her sphere. But she steps back with a tiny shake of her head. Before he can even acknowledge his frustration, she has already begun removing the outer layer of her ill-suited, ill-fitting costume.

He should turn around, he thinks, or at least look elsewhere, but then ignores the urge. She asked for this meeting, probably with the intention of disrobing in front of him. It is hardly his problem if she experiences reservations at this stage of her plan.

And yet, watching her do it is... agitating. Watching how her hands tremble slightly as her fingers move over the fastenings, struggle with the knots, pull loose the ties. When she shrugs the heavy robe from her shoulders revealing another softer, pale gray garment beneath, the depths of his visual cortex ignite. The air in the cavern feels thicker, heavy, *charged* as the entirety of her person seems to yearn towards him, reeling into his sphere though she’s standing still.

He squeezes his eyes shut and when he opens them again, she’s draping the outer robe on the narrow stone slab and smoothing it out like bedding. With exquisite, maddening calm she slips out of the gray inner robe and—

His mind stalls.

“What the— what are you—?” Unable to reconcile what he *sees* with what he *expected*, he takes a deep breath through his nose and lets it out with a hum of consternation. “That is a peculiar costume.”

At his frank scrutiny, she tugs at the hem of the skirt. “It is a uniform. The cadets at Star Fleet Academy wear similar uniforms.”

He presses his lips tight together because he *really* wants to laugh now. “Noooo. They most definitely do not.”

“I have researched images. Some of the females wear—”

“Not that short.” He gestures sharply at the area above her knees. “Or that...” Waves at the band of bare flesh where the top of the costume stops just below her ribcage, “—*impractical*.”

“The uniforms provided for female-identifying cadets seem quite impractical to me. Perhaps you might take this as an opportunity to familiarize yourself with the many impractical human notions you will soon encounter.”

“Mockery is a wasteful use of your creative energy, T’Pring.”

“This was not intended to mock you.’ She picks up the soft gray robe from the ground and clutches it to her chest in a futile effort to cover naked limbs. ‘It was intended as a gesture of support.’”

The color high in her cheeks is the only outward evidence of the tumult of embarrassment he senses in her. He tamps down a swell of empathy she would doubtless use against him. If experience has taught him anything it is to press his advantage while she's vulnerable, to strike now while her heart's exposed under the girdle of her own bared flesh.

But he can't. He allows himself a sigh. "Statements using actual words would have sufficed."

"I have kept *silent* for you." The underrobe is relinquished to the stone bench behind her.

He swallows, chastened. "Which is more than I expected. But why...?" He can't even frame the question. Her costume suddenly seems less cartoonish and more confusing somehow.

"I was informed, perhaps erroneously, that this uniform is fashioned after a type once worn by members of motivational organizations, to encourage success against a competitive force." She strikes a pose, hands on her hips and one knee bent with the toe of her shoe pointed at the floor. "They would perform feats of synchronized gymnastics to generate enthusiastic call and response reactions from spectators."

"This is to encourage me?"

She catches his amused skepticism and lobs it back. "Why else?"

There is a shrewd scheme yet in the making. But as they look at each other, the specter of lust he'd been pretending to ignore takes solid form. Even his eyes feel hungry, tracing the sweep of her clavicle under her tight uniform top all the way down to the lateral malleolus of her left foot under a bright white ankle sock. Still, he thinks if he can just touch that smooth band of skin around her torso, he'll be content to let the plot play out however she likes. In fact, that bare skin becomes the singular focus of all intent as he walks over to her, stands close and dares her to look away.

A slight nod of acquiescence before her gaze drifts down to follow his fingers as they brush across her ribs, trace a path to where her heart thrums.

They would always be drawn to each other. That was how the betrothal bond worked – a button spinning on a string tethered to their minds. But they had never experimented with the sexual aspect of that connection before – or at least no more than many of their peers. Furtive touches, fingers slotted between the other's fingers until that tingling, fizzy sensation was enough to threaten outward composure and they returned their hands to their pockets and walked away.

This is *very* different. All outcomes from every possible action flood Spock's senses. He's paralyzed by a decision of whether to move his hand up or down.

She makes the decision for him. Pulls his hand to her lips, and breathes on the palm until his fingers flex, open, then slips her own between them. The first kiss is hers and the barrier between their minds disappears so quickly he gasps, pushes his forehead into hers to rub at her skull.

He strokes the delicate underside of her wrist where her pulse throbs and then up to the soft skin at the bend of her elbow. There's a sizzling layer of energy between his palm and her skin. His other hand feels disconnected from autonomous will, dragging itself up her ribcage to rub the fabric over a breast. The nipple stands at attention. Her other breast wants equal attention. A tiny sound is pushed from her lips across his cheek and into his ear. Conscious and subconscious swirl together into one target objective. He leans close, pressing his mouth to a bare shoulder, the side of her neck, her jaw, her mouth—

She pulls back, gasping, "What are you doing?"

"It-it's the human ozh'esta."

She looks as dazed as he feels. In his mind, *heat*. Hers. And a flutter of trepidation that's almost... fear?

You wanted to understand human culture, he whispers inside her.

Yes, but...

When we're married it is an act I may require from time to time. If you truly wish to become more familiar with my human culture...

"It feels strange."

"If you don't like it, I'll stop." But there's a desperate edge to his voice that his rapidly fading rational mind finds worrisome.

He doesn't have to stop though. She melts into his mouth like candy. They kiss and kiss, with fingers and lips and thoughts and then somehow, he's on the bench and she's on his lap and he's kneading the flesh of her buttocks. Heat and pressure and rough, wet, sticky sounds fill his head as she rolls and rubs against the fabric of his trousers. All the tension gathered in his abdomen moves down, demanding, insistent until his penis is so hard it's painful.

He clutches her hips to stop them moving. "*Lift up*," he whispers, maybe in her head, maybe in her ear. Knees against his flanks she rises, shaky, like she's drugged. He undoes his flies, and his erection pops out, bobbing. She pulls at her underwear stretching the crotch until it rips.

They pause. Daring each other perhaps. She places trembling fingers to the side of his face, and he does the same with hers.

A rush of clinical information commandeers desire, but all potential consequences are examined and mutually dismissed in milliseconds. He'd be alarmed if he were less compromised.

A soft little mewling sound as she squirms in his lap. Still, he asks, formally, in the human fashion—

Do you want to continue?

She grips his shoulders, his biceps, leans her forehead into his, inhales the word 'yes.' Wheels her hips trying to aim her vulva at him without looking. By some accident of physics, it works. The head of his penis pushes through a tight ring of flesh, past pubic symphysis to seat itself in a sheath, both molten and muscular.

He feels the pain in her pleasure, the spasm of vaginal walls as they stretch around him. She feels the pressure of hard uneven stone against his buttocks, the urge to thrust and pump and push that he's barely resisting until her vagina contracts and relaxes and contracts again, sucking him in. And after that a whirl, a hot ecstatic haze of sensation.

Orgasm with another person is an illumination.

Afterwards, they sit naked on the discarded robe in the laziest of meditation poses, ostensibly meditating though his mind keeps circling back to all the other sexual activities they might indulge. He narrowly opens his eyes, gaze drifting to her mons pubis and the dark triangle of hair framed by her legs and how he would like to use his nose to nuzzle her thighs wider and maybe lick—

Her shocked, sharp inhalation reverberates inside him *everywhere*, followed by a kind of squirming sensation. She shifts her buttocks and straightens her spine.

He prepares an argument about how oral stimulation would go far to honor his human heritage if she were truly committed. But she's already crawled over to him before he finishes it. And then her thighs are pressed up against his ears and his tongue at the hoped-for location of her clitoris.

Another "afterwards" and another and now she's draped over him like a blanket. He's too languid to shift, though something jagged is digging into the back of his thigh. The atmosphere within the cave has become as torpid as he feels. His sluggish mind attempts to grasp the meaning, because it means something when the air sits heavy like this with the temperature dropping—

"My mother is concerned," she mumbles into his neck. As soon as she says it, he is aware of a vague, amorphous uneasiness.

"Were you expected to return to your home at a specific time?"

"No." She puts her palms on the ground on either side of him, pushes up and rolls gracelessly off, sits with her back against his hip. "But" she adds, reaching for the wadded up gray robe. "she knows I am often *not* where I say I will be."

Has she done this before? With someone else?

Unlikely. He would *know*. Especially now that they've—

But if she can dissemble so easily with her own mother...?

"Nevertheless, we should return," he says, trying to assert authority. Or autonomy. Or good sense.

"There's no need for haste. And now that you're staying, my mother will forgive my dissimulation."

Staying?

A base animal sensitivity in him registers the dangerous atmospheric shift around them. But that awareness is churned together and mixed up with a different sort of danger, of assumptions and contrivance and the scheme at the heart of this meeting as it's unfolding before him.

Inside the cave or out, it is all the same peril now. He'll be swept away, his life outside his control, drowning in flash flood, buried in mud, stuck here forever—

He's on his feet. "No. Wait." *Pause*, he means. *Let me stop spinning. Let me think through this logically.* Surely, she can hear his mind flailing. But her expression indicates otherwise.

She slips her arms into the sleeves of the light gray underrobe and fastens it closed. It clings to her breasts and thighs in the close humid heat that precedes all summer storms.

"I am content to indulge your human perversions," she says. Her gaze is coy, her tone sly, implying she's teasing, that they share a secret, and the secret is she likes his human perversions, his tongue in her mouth, and elsewhere. "There's no need for you to leave home. You have the best of both your worlds now."

Outside, in a darkened sky they've only just noticed, a flash of light bleeds through fissures in the cavern ceiling. A crash of thunder quickly follows. Rain rolls across the plateau and five seconds later is beating at the stone above their heads.

^^^

T'Pring can't decide which is worse – the relentless drumming of rain on rock or the rumble of Spock's outrage in her head.

But he's better than she at outward self-control (though she'd never openly concede such a thing) and save for the twitch of a masseter muscle

below his left ear, no one else would know.

Curt and cool, he says, “You cannot *possibly* believe that is my motivation for leaving.”

Oh. Has she miscalculated?

She’d merely attempted to apply humor to illustrate a logical conclusion, thereby proving how much she’s willing to adapt to his unique nature. Humor *and* sex. In fact, until a few moments ago she’d been imagining their life together as marrieds with this new physical relationship a welcome respite from social requirements and dull family obligations.

Many of their cohort no longer waited upon the whims of a biological imperative to pair-bond. Many chose their mates out of mutual interests and proven compatibility. Those people were not from influential families, of course. Even so, she and Spock were within their rights to begin married life early if they chose. They could house together in an apartment close to VSA, attend classes together as they had at the learning centers, study together in teahouses like the humans did, prepare meals together, have sexual relations whenever they liked as humans do, circumstances permitting of course—

She becomes suddenly *acutely* aware of his focused attention. He’d been following the tenor of her thoughts if not the specifics. It irritates her.

“I do not believe access to oral gratification is your primary motivator, no.”

He makes a small, telling gesture of frustration—

A trickle of water from a crevice overhead becomes a dense curtain of rain and they both jump. The water pounds the floor of hard-packed sand too fast to be absorbed. Pooling liquid accumulates rapidly, skimming the surface of the ground as it spreads as huge droplets from the downpour fly out at them like projectiles.

They scramble onto one of the stone slabs and stand, studying their predicament. Or he’s studying it. She’s studying him. Which is when he remembers he’s still naked and his clothes are somewhere on the floor. He leaps down, bare feet slapping through the water to snatch up his pants and shoes and tunic before the puddle can take them. Up on the stone bench again he pointedly ignores her, hopping one footed into his trousers and shoving his arms through the sleeves of his tunic in quiet, controlled fury.

There’s little danger of the caverns flooding enough to threaten their lives. But flash floods in the gully below are common. They won’t be able to make it home for several hours.

He’s angry about that as well.

“Apologies are illogical,” she states.

“I have not asked for one.”

“I am not responsible for the weather.”

There is the faintest hint of a smile – but it is one of rueful forbearance not agreement. He blames her for the situation, clearly, but is resigned. The urge to push against the implied assessment of her character is squelched. He closes himself off, the gates of his mind barred tight, and they do not speak again until there is a lull between the storm cells forty minutes later.

“Did you bring a comm with you?” he asks, startling her.

“I did not expect to need one.” Nor did he, apparently.

“What did you expect, T’Pring? What was your grand scheme?”

“That you would not leave home to join Star Fleet.”

“Why are you suddenly so invested in what I do? We’ve conversed only once since completing our entrance exams—” He breaks off, forcing his face to go neutral. “I should not have confided in you. I do not know why I did.”

“You wanted to be reasoned out of it I surmised.”

Spock had achieved the highest marks in the history of the VSA. His brilliance would be wasted in Star Fleet. She could not allow *that*.

“And yet you chose seduction instead.”

“You are my—”

“Half-human boy, yes, so you’ve said.”

“You are my bond mate.”

“As I will still be when I’m forced to return.”

“Forced. Of course.”

“I misspoke—”

“And you mean *if*...”

“What?”

“If you return.”

“I’ll have no choice at some point.”

“You do not know that. You could be spared by your hybridity. And I do not refer to – the, your, um, your... Time. I mean you could *die*. Out *there*.”

“You could die *here*.”

“I *will* die if you leave.”

“T’Pring...” He says her name with a sigh of exasperation. As if she’s only being manipulative, hyperbolic, and not speaking her truth, which is: Who she is now, with him, will die.

There is only one solution.

“You must release me from the bond.” He makes a dismissive noise. But she presses him. “I cannot divorce you, therefore you should release me from our bond.”

His eyes shift away, blinking fast. This too long hesitation tells her everything she needs to know. “But you will not. You care only for your own life and nothing for mine.”

For a second their minds surge together in a tangle, sticky with shame and regret, but it quickly melts away.

“Come with me,” he says.

“To Starfleet Academy?” The idea is ludicrous.

“To Earth. To San Francisco.” Now his face is alight with possibilities, the way it was when they were children and he’d discovered something new. How often she’d stomped on that excitement. And now she wants to gather it up like treasure and hide it from the jealous eyes of others.

“And do what?”

“Study art. Or architecture. Or fashion. Or any of those vocations you prefer over what your family has declared optimal to their ambitions.”

She considers it. For six point seven seconds.

All her notions of adventure involve familiar places. On Earth neither of them would be able to rely on the munificence of their families back home. They would not receive even minimal support. She would have to find employment. She would have to be frugal. She would have to be brave. She can be ruthlessly logical, but she is not brave.

“And when you are assigned to a vessel and leave Earth, what then? I have no human relations to give me succor when I fail.” Alluding to the possibility of his failure but still meaning her own. There is no foreseeable outcome in which she does not return to her family in disgrace. They would remind her of that disgrace for the rest of her life.

“And I do not wish to live amongst humans.”

Let him think it all comes down to that. The human part of him she loves and loathes.

^^^

It was only minutes before sunset when Spock’s father spots them. They’d been making their way southeast along the ridge to the transit station T’Pring had used to get to the caves. The storm had moved on, visible as a dark patch on the horizon, and the plateau was covered with blooming plants and all the fauna eager to take advantage of this sudden abundance. By the time the main star was high in the sky tomorrow it would all be gone.

As they climb into the hovercar, Sarek’s quick but thorough look takes in everything, from their disheveled garments and damp shoes to the charged atmosphere between them. He draws conclusions from the observable evidence.

When he alights near T’Pring’s family home (in an effort to give her opportunity to compose herself before she speaks to them) she turns to his son before exiting the vehicle.

“Spock. You have made your position clear. When we meet again – or if – it will be at the appointed place. Until then, I would prefer no further contact.”

Sarek notes that Spock barely refrains from rolling his eyes – an unpleasant affectation he no doubt acquired from his human cousins.

“You are within your rights to do so,” Spock tells her. “I regret that my actions have caused you to take this somewhat...dramatic step.”

T’Pring’s jaw tightens. Sarek suspects she is clenching her teeth. She gets out of the car and offers a small bow his direction. “I appreciate the transport, osu, as I know it was some distance out of your way.”

“A minor inconvenience.”

“But it has delayed your son from speaking with you privately. He has important news to impart.”

Spock sucks in a breath, a small sound, a tiny lapse in control that causes Sarek some consternation. Clearly, a significant occurrence has transpired between these two that he suspects runs deeper than his earlier assumptions.

They exchange one final look, Spock’s features rigidly composed and T’Pring’s, impassive almost serene. She turns her back on the car hovering on its cushion of air, and its occupants, one of whom has sunk far down into his seat, and walks the path to her house, radiating satisfaction.

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“I was pleased to learn, my daughter, that your application to Trahokma t’Tor-gav-tal has been approved. Less pleased, however, that you will be attending a campus in Vulcana Regar.”

T’Pring, idly scrolling a catalogue, replied without looking up. “You’ll have yet another legal practitioner in the family, father. Perhaps you could accept my surrender without added conditions. For once.”

But Solen knew full well why she had chosen *that* campus in *that* part of *that* city. Vulcana Regar was rife with un-Vulcan notions. Alien artists. Touring musical groups. Planet-hopping dilletantes. There were 2,326 live performance venues alone, not to mention restaurants catering to the tastes of hundreds of thousands of off-worlders.

Her current malaise was unseemly. So, the boy had run off. He’d be back when it mattered. In the meantime, any attendant shame was born by Sarek’s clan not theirs. Her duty now, was to her own family.

Enough of this nonsense.

“I did consider your petition to study fine arts when you first broached the subject with me, pursuant to demonstrable talent.” She looked up, expectantly, and he almost let the statement stand. Almost. “But your instructors informed me that your skills are not sufficiently remarkable to warrant investment in further education.”

Her lips parted slightly and she stared at him until her eyes required her to blink. A convulsive gulp. She looked down, away.

“As an *avocation*,” he continued, “any artistic practice would provide respite from your serious studies if you require it. I believe your mother found craft stitching to be meditative.”

At the sight of the color rising in her cheeks, he leaves the room to spare her further ignominy.

End Notes

song lyrics from "Back Before We Were Brittle" by Say Hi

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