

# More Than a Starsong

*by Lynda Carraher*

Standing in line at the transcenter, waiting for a vacant booth, Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott shivered and drew the dress uniform plaid more tightly around his shoulders.

It was the fog, he told himself. He'd forgotten how penetrating New Glasgow's mists could be. No wonder his forebears had named this planet after their home-ground on Earth. New Hebrides could be ever bit as raw as Scotland.

And he knew even as he formed the thought that it was a lie. It was not the curling fog that pulled the warmth from his body. The chill came as much from within as from without, and it centered around the parcel he carried in his hands.

It was not a large bundle; it was pitifully small, when you thought what it contained. But he had promised McKenzie, and it was not the kind of promise a man like Scott could break.

The light on the booth signaled ready, and Scott stepped onto the pad. He was always a bit- uncomfortable in public transporters; he preferred a flesh- and-blood operator within his view to the impersonal ministrations of a busy controller in some hidden nerve center.

Then the effect took him, and he felt his bones and blood and substance become one with the pearly fog.

There was no fog when he re-formed. There was gentle afternoon sunlight, and a vagrant breeze that made the heads of the flowers dance. Before him was nothing but rolling land, carpeted with a riot of grass and flowers, and he knew an instant of panic.

*Tha' haggis-brained operator*, he thought, and then he turned and saw the cottage.

It was not what he'd expected. There had been some money -- not a fortune, but certainly enough to provide more than this. It looked like a fisherman's cot from the history holes, and he was sure the transporter operator's setting had somehow been wrong.

Right or wrong, he had to approach the house, if only to ask not due get directions to the nearest transcenter. His automatic pickup was not due for another half-hour, and home-leave time was too precious to squander standing on a hillside gawking at flowers.

Grumbling, he started down the hill. He was still five meters from the doorway when the woman came around the corner of the building, her arms full of some long-stemmed grasses, and then he knew he was in the right place, despite its unlikely appearance. He'd seen that face framed often enough in McKenzie's hands, though the pocket hole hadn't caught the vibrancy of Meghan McKenzie. Not by far.

She was startled, and he hastened to put down her fear at the sudden appearance of a stranger.

"Mrs. McKenzie, my name is Scott. I knew your husband."

"Aye." The voice was calm, unquestioning, and he realized he'd read fear into her reaction when it wasn't there at all.

"I've some things for ye -- things I promised McKenzie I'd bring by."

She stood watching him, a slim woman, clean-limbed and quietly graceful, turning something over in her mind before she replied.

"Come in, then," she said, swinging the door open with a push of her hip.

Inside was more than he'd expected. The furnishings were clean and sturdy, functional rather than decorative, but there were other things, too. A wall of books, embracing an empty fireplace, the mantelpiece bare only in a spot large enough to hold a set of pipes that marked their passage with a barely-audible sigh. Smooth polished floors that gave off a dark light of their own, like honey in a jar, and a window framed by a vine he knew was not native to New Hebrides. A loom in the corner, with a length of McKenzie tartan taking shape on it, and behind that, a compact, self-contained radio comm.

The woman moved through the room, so much a part of it that she seemed almost a figure in a carefully-designed painting. The grasses in her hands smelled like wild thyme, and woke a parade of childhood memories in Scott. The sights and sounds and smells of his birthplace were things he thought he'd left behind when he left New Hebrides for

schooling on Earth. Why should a simple bundle of weedstalk bring them back so sharply now?

"Ye'll be havin' tea," she said from the sun-washed kitchen, interrupting his reverie.

"No, ma'am," he blurted, and immediately regretted the brusqueness of "I meant, I dinna mean to cause ye--"

"Ye're not." She filled a kettle from a barrel and put it on the great dark iron stove.

Peat stoves and radio comms? Hand looms and Capricorn vines? What sort of mad world had he brought himself to?

He -had no time to consider that before a big-eyed girl of perhaps eight, tugging a toddler by one hand, pushed open the heavy back door. She surveyed him with the same solemnity her mother had shown.

Meghan was slicing bread, spreading it with jam. She knelt to hand the slices to the children.

"Gwen, take Jordy down to the stream for his sweetie. And dinna come back till ye're called, hear?"

The girl nodded silently and led the younger child out again. Neither of them had made a sound.

"Dinna stand there like a stick, Mr. Scott. Please sit down."

He did, placing the bundle in front of him. The woman seemed to notice it for the first time. Scott decided to plunge in.

"McKenzie -- your husband -- asked me to see ye got these things."

Meghan eyed the bundle as though it might contain something explosive.

"Ye could ha' sent them by post."

"Aye."

"But ye brought them yersel'. Why?"

*Because I feel responsible, tha's why, Because your husband died doin' a job I should ha' done. Because he clasped my hand dyin' an' asked me to see tha' ye had one last remembrance of him.*

He couldn't say those things, of course. He cleared his throat. "I told him I'd see how ye were keepin'."

"We're keepin' fine, Mr. Scott. The Federation doesna' begrudge the widows an' orphans it makes."

"But this place--" He broke off, wishing he hadn't said it.

"This place is wha' Jordan and I wanted for oursel's an' our bairns. We ha' land, an' a roof, an' stock. Wha' more do we need?"

"God's nightgown, woman! Runnin' water, for one thing!"

She took the steaming kettle off the fire and poured its contents into the squat earthen teapot. "Tha' will come,

when the need be."

"But wha' are ye doin' out here? Ye're a woman alone, wi' two bairns--"

"Three. Brian's wi' the sheep."

"Wi' three bairns,. then, livin' like five hundred years gone--"

"And wha' of it?" She put the teapot and mugs on the table and pulled a plate of scones from the warming oven.

"'Tis no' right, tha's wha' of it."

"'Tis right for us."

"Your husband was a *starman*, lass!"

"An' it killed him."

He fell silent at that, feeling once more the guilt he'd known when he'd pulled Jordan McKenzie's broken body from the wreckage of the recharging room.

Meghan stirred sugar into her tea and began to speak again. "Yon proud an' lovely Starfleet, Mr. Scott ... it took my father, an' it killed him. It took my husband, an' it killed him. It'll no take my bairns, no' while I draw breath."

Scott wished Captain Kirk were there. Kirk would have made the fine words fly like singing birds with sunlight flashing on their wings; would have said things about reaching for the unknown and how that was the finest thing a man could do, and that dying was sometimes the only acceptable coin to buy new knowledge for the living. Only he'd have said it with the kind of words that made a man's throat go tight and the blood sing in his ears.

For Scott, only engines sang.

The hot tea, blistering and bitter, unsweetened in his mouth, was swallowed like a medicine. He stood up, duty done, promise to a dead man kept. There was bitterness here, and anger, crawling like a nest of beetles under a stone he regretted dislodging.

"I wish ye well, Mrs. McKenzie. An' I'm sorry if I brought ye sommat ye'd rather not have. My pickup scan was coded for half an hour; I'll wait for it on the hillside."

Her eyes, regarding him, were the dusky blue of blooming heather. She might have bid him stay, or bid him go, but her birthing words were cut short by the high-pitched screams of a terrified child.

They plunged together for the back door, Meghan closer by a table's-width, Scott advantaged by being already on his feet. The soft woman-warmth of her pressed by him in the narrow framing, and then she was gone, running for the slim and screaming figure that stumbled across the grassland toward them.

It was the girl, Gwen, wet skirts plastered against legs like grass- stalk, copper curls pasted against a bony, big-eyed skull. Meghan caught her close, and Scott could catch the words "Jordy" and "creek" from the choking babble before she loosened her hold on the hysterical child and sprinted up the hillside.

He caught her at the crest of the hill and had time only to

register -- *My God, tha's nae creek!* -- at the brown and raging waters, before his own long strides carried him past her to its bank.

*He's gone*, he thought fleetingly, *If he's in tha', he's been battered to pieces*. And then saw, nearly hidden by the long gnarls of watertree root, a flash of scarlet that was the sweater toddler had worn. Too frightened even to cry, Jordy had his small fat arms locked around a root round a root, and his tiny round face flashed like a pale beacon as the muddy waves broke over it.

Scott was kicking off his boots and shrugging off his heavy cloak when the woman pushed past him into the water, her woolen skirts ballooning around her. He stripped off the kilt and yanked her back to shore.

"Stand off, lass -- ye canna reach him wi' tha' bloody dress pullin' ye down!" He didn't wait for her reply, hitting the water with a flat racer's dive and feeling the cold of it suck away his breath. The water was a live thing, rolling him in icy talons like some great snow-dragon, and he fought the cross-current that threatened to sweep him past his goal.

Something cold and soft battered into him -- he recognized it as the child only because plump fingers hooked at his

face and then were yanked away by the water's force.

He lashed out with his hand, felt his fingers lock into the wool of the sweater, which stretched but held. A wave crashed over his head, sent them both cartwheeling under the silt-laden surface. He kicked out, reaching in the direction he hoped was up, and broke the surface of the water with explosive force. He had an instant's glimpse of another tree a few meters downstream, another root-nest coiling up from eroding mud. He struck out for it, hampered by the squirming, screaming bundle in one hand.

The current worked with him for a blessed moment, and he pulled the knotted sanctuary, holding the small form free of the water at an awkward angle that drew the muscles of that arm into an agonizing cramp.

He made the mistake of relaxing for an instant when he thought the shelter of the roots to be within reach. Then the-claws of the snow-dragon batted him crazily, hurling him into the tangled thicket. One broken length caught the soft flesh below his jaw and ripped diagonally upwards to the base of his ear as he thrust Jordy upward, into the waiting arms of root. The current tore at him again, and he knew he must let go of the child's sweater or pull him back into the flood.

He let go, gulping down as much as air he could before the icy dark maw engulfed him again. His mind fastened on the irony of a man whose life was lived between the stars meeting death in the cold mud of the planet of his birth. He had time only to consider the injustice of it when something hit him hard across the base of his chest, thrusting the hoarded air past his clenched jaws to explode in a flurry of bubbles that danced like stars in the murky water.

He struck out blindly, and his hands found the round solidity of the submerged root even as the current tried to yank him away again. Grimly, he hung on, working his way hand over hand up the cold stick length of this unexpected lifeline.

His emptied lungs clamored for relief, and spangles of pain-red exploded behind his eyes. *How deep ... how long ... am I even goin' the right way?* No time to consider that. Just move... Keep moving.

He broke the surface then, and gasped for air. Too soon, and a cresting wave filled his mouth with bitter liquid. He hauled himself forward; once, twice, retching and choking, to the surface root-nest where the child huddled.

Dimly, far-off, he could hear Meghan shouting at them, but the sounds refused to form themselves into words. Some faint spark of training flared in the pain-dark regions of his brain, and he knew he was losing consciousness. The frigid water, the violent exertion, the pumping gash along his jaw, were all combining to suck the life from him, even now.

He laced his hands through the tangle of roots, twisting numbed forearms over and under the knotted skeins, wedging one leg into an underwater cleft, where the current worked to keep him stable.

*It's done*, he thought. *As much as I can do*. And there was a sudden peacefulness in that thought as the darkness closed over him, a darkness that was empty of everything, even the stars.

\* \* \*

No, not totally empty. There, in the distance, alone in the darkness, was the solitary splendor of Duncan's Sword. Eleven stars, hilt and pommel and blade, falling slowly as if to impale the far hills. Duncan's Sword, slaying the darkness, because it was the last constellation to disappear

before dawn.

Odd, the things a man dreams of. light-years away-- The stars of his childhood sky.

No. Not dreaming. Here, on New Hebrides, where he'd been born, and a terrified child, and the cold, dark water...

He must have made some sound, because there was a hand on his forehead, and soft glow of a tallow lamp.

"Hush now. 'Tis all right ye are."

"The bairn--"

"Sleepin'. As ye should be."

He started another question when the chill took him, shaking him like a rat in a terrier's jaws, and he reached for the blanket across his chest, but his fingers wouldn't respond. The shock of that brought him fully awake, bolt upright with the blanket dropping off his naked chest and the great, swollen, shapeless thing at the end of his right

arm laying useless in his lap as the soft wool fell over it.

"Wha' ha' ye done!" The hoarse, accusing words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, shaking with anger and the sudden mind-numbing fear of himself a cripple.

"My hand--"

"Saved your bloody life, ye great oaf!" Her eyes, in the lamplight, were glittering and narrow. "And ye brought it on yersel', wrapping through those roots! By the time I crossed the bridge an' got to the both of ye, the current had ye again, an' just the' one hand holdin', yanking against tha' bloody great tangle."

His anger drained as suddenly as it had flooded, leaving only the fear as he tried to will movement into the unresponsive mass. He lifted the pale and cold flesh in his left hand, and the pain that shot up his arm shrieked of broken bone and separated joint, of ligaments ripped away from moorings and bloodless fleshing bloating on its own waste.

The harsh expression fled from her face as she started a movement and then checked it abruptly. "Leave it be," she said softly.

"Leave it? Woman, wha' good is a man wi'out two good hands? I canna--" He trailed off, and his eyes found the window again, found Duncan's Sword fading as dawn brightened the sky. The stars, fading from him...

His line of vision shifted, past the window, past the woman, to the cold, clean gleam of metal half-hidden by the loom. "Ye ha' a radio. Use it. Call for help--"

"I canna."

"'Tis a simple thing." How could she own such a sophisticated piece of equipment and not know how to use it? "I'll show ye--"

"She canna use it," came another voice; a boy's voice trembling on the brink of manhood. "She canna, because she took a great bloody stick--"

"Brian, hush!" she commanded, but the boy stepped into the lamp-light and went on, his voice shaking with an anger Scott could not at first understand. "A great bloody stick," he repeated slowly. "An' she hit it an' hit it an' hit it

until the voices stopped, because they were tellin' her my Da was dead, and she didna' want to hear tha'."

Mother and son faced each other across the small room, Meghan defiant, Brian with a frustrated anger that reddened his bony face and curled his hands to fists. There was a warring in the look they gave one another, a long-standing battle interrupted as Brian turned his gaze to the man in the bed.

"So ye ken, Mr. Scott, ye're trapped here. Just like me, an' nae help for it."

\* \* \*

Breakfast was an uncomfortable meal. The eyes of the boy followed his mother sullenly about the room. She looked everywhere except at Scott, who sipped quietly at a mug of scalding tea, most of a bowl of oatmeal congealing slowly in front of him.

It wasn't only the clumsiness of trying to eat left-handed that made the food lay heavily on his stomach; it was the dark Gaelic anger simmering in him. Anger that this woman would so blithely shut herself and her children --

and now him -- away from the civilization that her husband had died trying to advance; would bar the door behind them to keep out aid, and shut herself up with hatred and fear crouching at her hearth like wolves welcomed as pet dogs, never seeing the danger that lurked in their ancient yellow eyes.

Gwen, big-eyed and silent, watched with that finely-tuned radar of the physically powerless, who bought survival with quietude when the raw emotions of the godlike other-beings in their world hung crackling in the air like lightning-filled clouds on a summer's night.

And the wee one, Jordy, with the blue veins tracing his milky skin, fussed whimpering, pushing the bowl away and sating himself with one small plump thumb. His eyes were too big, too bright, ringed with the dark of exhaustion, and the scarlet that bloomed in his cheeks held more-menace than health. When his mother tried to coax him into eating, he slapped at her hand and squirmed in the chair, drawing in on himself.

"The bairn's nae well," Scott observed.

"Tis only tired he is. Between his hackin' an' your thrashin', Mr. Scott, there's nae a one of us did much sleepin' last

night."

As if on cue, the toddler exploded in a wracking cough that nearly tumbled him from the chair. His dark blue eyes, so much like Meghan's, widened in panic as he struggled for breath, and then the spasm passed, he began to cry weakly, kicking out as the woman picked him up.

"Gwennie, put the kettle on. 'Tis a croup tent Jordy's needin'."

"'Tis a proper doctor he's needin'!" Scott burst out.

"Dinna ye tell me how to care for my own! We kept fine before ye came, an' we'll keep fine when ye've gone!"

"As ye did yesterday?"

He wished immediately he hadn't said the words. It couldn't have been easy for her, to keep to the road she'd chosen for herself and the children; her man was gone, one son in rebellion, another nearly lost to her own stubbornness, and this man standing here reminding her of it. Scott thought for a moment that she might weep. The

she straightened her spine, holding the child, and met his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Scott. I owe ye more than I can e'er repay, and ye've had naught but sorrow from it."

"I didna' mean--"

"Brian will take ye to the village. They ha' nae transcenter, but there's a shuttle comes tomorrow night, and ye can get to New Glasgow from there."

"And you? And the bairn?"

"We'll make out."

He rubbed at his swollen hand, but the pain made him drop it as though it were hot. It wouldn't wait two days for treatment, not if he ever wanted the use of it again. And the child...he didn't like the sound of Jordy's breathing, audible halfway across the room, wet and burbling like the last wracked exhalation of a dumb animal under the slaughterhouse knife.

The woman heard it, too, and he watched her consciousness shut him out, dismiss him, as she carried her youngest child away. Brian stirred restlessly, pushing his glass away.

"I'll go an' get the cart ready," he said. "'Tis a day's trip to the village."

A glimmer of something began to stir in Scott's mind. "Wait a bit," he said. "I've a thought tha' could save us the trip, if ye'll lend a hand."

He moved through the quiet, sun-dappled room, to the doorway where he could see the gleam of the radio. Brian stood at his shoulder, catching the thought as though it had been spoken.

"D'ye think ye can?" he whispered.

"No. Na' like this." He gestured with his ruined hand. "But we can, mayhap, wi' your hands an' my head, an' if there was a kit came wi' yon bonny machine.

Brian shouldered past him, pulling open the door of a cupboard near the loom. From behind the piles of brightly-dyed wool, he pulled a shining box. He handed it wordlessly to Scott and leaned his narrow shoulder against a corner of the set. It sighed away from the wall, revealing the thick umbilical that led to the power pack built into the wall. As Scott approached it, he could see the tooth-marks of a clumsily used tool on the heads of the screws.

He put the kit on the floor and touched the fasteners.

"Sommat's been at this a'ready," he said.

Brian colored, looking at his heavy shoes. "I wanted to see..." he stumbled. "I didna' touch anythin' inside! I only wanted--"

"Hush, son. I doubt ye could hat harmed it by lookin'." He studied the face of the set. The screen was broken, the switches shattered, most of the toggles bent. But the gain and frequency dials moved smoothly under his fingers. Self-contained units were tough, and this one, expensive as it was, should have redundancy circuits built in."

All right," he said. "Take the back off, lad. Nae, no' wi' tha';

tha's a circuit-tester."

\* \* \*

Time lost itself as it always did for him, in the delicate universe under his attention. It was drawn through microfilaments and sucked up in chips and spread like sunlight over printed circuits, until he was in his own warp envelope, as insulated from real-time as his ship was when she left light and planet-bound chronometers behind. Only this time, he was not alone.

Hands that were not his responded as he directed the, probing the secrets, locating the damage, feeling their way to rightness again. But it was slow, having to explain things he no longer thought of consciously, having to filter impressions and knowledge back through a consciousness that lacked his own perception. It was like the first time he'd worked on radiation-hot equipment with waldoes, only worse.

He said left; Brian's hand moved right; something in him snapped. "No' tha' one! Tha's the video shunt!" He moved to intervene, forgetting, and his unresponsive fingers knocked a jury-rigged microchip from its precarious mooring, deep into the dark recesses of the case. He

breathed a short curse at his own clumsiness and saw the thin, strained face of the boy take it like a slap.

"'Tis all right, lad." Real-time came back to him, complaining of an empty stomach and a knot between his shoulder blades. "'Tis time to back off now, anyway. Get yersel' sommat to eat, an' then we'll try again."

The boy was reluctant, as if this new universe he'd been given to play with might disappear if he turned his hack.

"Come along now. 'Tis nae goin' anywhere." He laid his good hand on the young shoulder, bony and spare under the thick wool shirt.

In the kitchen, Brian ate as the older man remembered eating once -- ravenously impatient to do it all, taste it all, experience it all, as if there were not enough years left in the future to grant him his share.

"How old are ye, lad?"

He cleared the crumbs from his mouth with a swallow of buttermilk before he answered.

"I'll be sixteen, come summer."

"And your schoolin'?"

He dropped his gaze; chased a bread-crumble across the table. "She says I know all I need a'ready."

There was no need to ask who 'she' was.

"But there's so much more, isn't there?" The expression on Brian's face was full of his eager hope. Scott remembered himself at that age; felt for a moment he was outside time again, looking at his own face in a mirror.

"Aye, tha' there is."

"Wha's it like, out there?"

The words would not come. It was what it was, and there was no way to wrap it up in fine phrases and drop it into another's awareness like a Christmas gift dropped into a waiting lap.

"Ah, lad, I canna tell ye. It's ... livin' every moment wi' the power of a hundred hundred generations behind ye, pushin' ye out so ye'll be part of the hundred generations ahead. It's makin' planetfall on a land where nae man has e'er walked -- or mayhap he has, but he's gone, an' yer heart breaks because ye'll ne'er meet him, ne'er know wha' became of him or if ye could ha' learned anything from him if ye'd just been a century or a hundred centuries earlier. It's--"

His eyes fell on the bundle, still unopened on the table, that held the legacy of a starman, and he wished he'd bitten off his tongue before he'd fed dream-stuff to a boy who'd never make the dream reality.

"It's doing your job," he finished lamely. "An' sometimes it's dyin' for someone else's error, an' there's nae glory in it, lad."

The boy's chapped and rawboned hand reached out to touch the parcel's wrapping, reverently, and Scott knew his last words hadn't penetrated the shield around the fine fantasy.

"I ne'er knew him, no' really. I was nae older than Jordy

when he went away. An' when he'd come home ... it seemed like he was two men -- one wantin' to stay, an' one wantin' to be gone again. Sometimes I'd snatch his uniform shirt before Ma got to it, an' I'd keep it under my pillow at night ... it seemed like I could smell the stars on it. I think he knew wha' I was doin', but he'd ne'er answer my questions." He stopped, colored at the revelation made to a stranger, but his hunger was stronger than his embarrassment. "Ye knew him, Mr. Scott. Wha' was he like? Wha' kind of man was he?"

"He was a fool."

Scott turned in the chair to an empty steam kettle in one hand. see Meghan standing in the doorway, holding an empty steam kettle in one hand.

"He was a fool an' a dreamer, Brian, an' he's dead of reachin' for sommat he could ne'er have." She crossed the room with angry strides and yanked the cover from the echoingly empty water barrel. "An' ye've dithered away the mornin' playing wi' your broken toy, an' yer chores gone beggin'. Get on wi' ye, now, an' do wha' needs be done. Ye'll have to spend the night on the road as it is, to get Mr. Scott to his precious shuttle on time. Go on!"

Brian stood up, defiance on his face.

*I've meddled enough*, Scott thought, but the words came anyway.

"Do as your mother says, lad."

The door slammed behind him and the echo of it still hung in the air when her words began.

"You! You're behind this wi' your fine talk an' fillin' his head wi' dreams. I'll nae have more of yer meddlin', Mr. Scott, They're my bairns--"

"Nay, Mrs. McKenzie. No' entirely yours."

"You--" she began, but he cut her off.

"Hush, now, an' listen to me. They're your bairns, aye, but they're blood an' bone of McKenzie's, too. An' because of tha', mayhap, or just because of the way of the world, ye canna keep them here always. Yon lad has a hunger, woman, an' he'll feed it, or he'll starve while ye watch him.

He'll slip away from ye, just as the wee one's slippin' away now."

There was fear in her eyes, smashed flat by denial.  
"Jordy--"

"Jordy has pneumonia, I'd wager, from the water in his lungs. An' ye'll lose him, unless Brian helps me put tha' radio back together."

Something in the woman seemed to crumble, as if he'd stripped her naked before jeering eyes. Scott moved to touch her, to clothe her in dignity again with the movement of his hand.

"This life ye've chosen ... I canna say it's wrong, No' for ye. But there'll come a time when the young ones ha' to make their own choices. Ye canna undiscover fire for them, nor would ye want to. This is nae different."

Tears hung in her dark lashes, tears she hadn't shed for the man who ceased to exist somewhere between worlds.

"I wanted more for them," she said. "More than just a

starsong, callin' them away."

"Aye. An' they'll have it, if ye let them choose freely. There's home songs, too, Meghan, an' music in these lands tha' can reach out an' grab a man when he's a galaxy away. McKenzie heard them, an' he talked of comin' back to a place like this when his tour was o'er. I hear them too, sometimes, but there's naught waitin' for me to come back to."

"By your own choice."

"Aye. Tha' doesna' make it less lonely though, when the starsongs are no' enough."

The silence between them was rich as a new plaid, colors and shadings and patterns that could go where ever the weaver directed them -- to order or chaos, to beauty or ugliness. But the time was wrong for them, and they both knew it. The loom had been strung for a different pattern, and it had to be finished and the shuttles cleared before another weaving began.

She turned away from him and wiped at her eyes.

"I'll call Brian," she said.

\* \* \*

The crackle of an amplified voice spat like summer heat lightning in the room, and Scott spared a moment to grin congratulations at the boy beside him before he made his reply.

He sketched the situation for ears that waited half a continent away and gave the coordinates that would bring aid within the hour. The sign-off was as comforting to him as the sweet hum of a warp engine ... or the sigh of embers in an open fire.

"Well none, lad. I couldna' ha' done it alone."

He looked beyond the beaming youngster as a whisper of sound spoke of another presence in the room. Meghan stood in the doorway to the kitchen, her hands cradling the burden that had brought him here an eternity ago.

"Brian " she said, "I've have some things here tha' your father wanted ye to have."

She laid the package on the table and drew back the covering as she would from a sleeping babe. "He sent sommat for each of us, but these ... these are for ye to choose."

The boy moved carefully to the table, as if the air around him might shatter if he ran. Scott followed him with equal care, until he could see the objects, too.

There was a Starfleet patch, proud golden ellipse with the chained lightning in its center, gleaming at them in the soft afternoon light. And something else; a small packet with the birdflight lettering of the language of Rigel, and a drawing of a vine that never flowered on this world. Not until now.

The boy's work-roughened hand moved out, hung over the seed packet for an instant, before one long finger reached out to stroke the shining cloth instead. He did not pick the emblem up, but his aching was palpable in the air. He looked at his mother, then back at the bundle, and his hand drew away, hovering, undecided.

"D'ye mean..." his voice was hushed, laced with starsong and homesong in carefully balanced harmony. "...d'ye think I could ha' them both?"

The woman's gaze lifted from the tabletop and its heather hue brushed Scott's face before it came to rest on her child.

"Aye, son," she said. "I think ye can."

THE END