

# Star Trek: Sutherland Absent Friends

By David Falkayn

## *USS Sutherland: Stardate 56982.2*

Watching silently as the last, but one, of her senior officers filed out of the banquet room, the very youthful—thanks to a strange incident that took place three years ago involving time travel, the Bajoran Prophets and their orbs, other universes and dimensions, and an ancient family curse—Captain Elizabeth Shelby, looking alluring in a pastel green formal evening gown, turned to her executive officer, Commander Sam Lavelle, also looking dashing in his formal dress uniform.

“Well, Sammy...” she remarked in a pensive, reflective tone, her familiar form of address indicating to her first officer that this was to be a private and personal discussion, “...another year...another remembrance dinner...”

“Yeah, but this one’s special, Betts.” The dark-haired Lavelle noted as he filled both of their champagne flutes with the genuine Cristal champagne that Liz had brought out for the occasion. “This is the last one we’re going to have on the old girl.”

“I know.” Liz sighed mournfully, “When she goes into the yards in a few weeks, we move over to the *Horizon*.”

“I guess a *Sovvy’s* a move up— isn’t it?” Sam asked, half jesting. “Too bad they won’t let us rename her like they let Sintina rename her ship the *Indy*.”

“It’d be nice...” Liz remarked, “But, since they’re only refitting and not decommissioning the *Sutherland*...”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” The roguishly handsome Canadian agreed as he sipped the bubbly wine, and then quipped in a teasing voice, “That’s what you get for keeping your ship in one piece instead of trashing it like Kirk, Picard, Sisko, and Aurelia did theirs...”

Chuckling, Liz riposted, "Better not let Sintina hear you mention her and Picard in the same sentence. I think she's still pissed off at him over that command codes incident a few years ago. Still..." she reminisced as, standing up, she patted the table, "...we made some memories here...both good and bad."

"That we did." Lavelle agreed in a somber voice, "I only wish..."

"I know..." Liz replied, nodding her head, "Caernarvon IV still hurts...even after all these years."

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### ***USS Sutherland: Stardate 50982.2***

Her lips a thin straight line, Captain Shelby listened intently, along with the rest of her bridge crew, to the words being spoken by the stone-faced visage of Admiral William Ross on her main viewscreen.

"Captain Shelby...Liz...I don't have to tell you that things have been going poorly for us the past few weeks—you've seen enough of it yourself.

"Aye, Sir." Liz reluctantly agreed, tacitly acknowledging that even the morale on her ship had dropped significantly as a result of the continual retreats in the face of the Dominion-Cardassian onslaught. "So...when are we going to strike back?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid." Admiral Ross answered back in a grave voice, "That's where you come in."

Leaning forward in her seat, Shelby impatiently, yet politely, prompted, "Go on, Sir. You've got my attention."

"I thought I would." Ross briefly chuckled, "The Cardassians and Jem'Hadar are threatening to overrun one of our outpost colonies—Caernarvon IV. If they succeed in overrunning that outpost before we firm up our defense lines..." shaking his head, the admiral noted morosely, "...well...let's just say that we might as well go on ahead and unconditionally surrender right now."

"It's that strategically important?" Shelby inquired her adrenaline beginning to pump.

“Yes, it is.” Admiral Ross definitively replied. “Added to that, there are civilians on that planet. If at all possible, we need to evacuate as many of them as possible before the Cardassians and Jem’Hadar get their hands on them.”

“So...” Liz conjectured, “I assume that the *Sutherland* will be part of the fleet tasked to hold on to the system?”

“Not exactly.” Ross answered back, shaking his head. “You’ll be in command of an ad hoc task force consisting of yourself, the *Renown*, the *Bozeman*, the *Scamp*, and the *Belize*.”

“Sir?” An incredulous Liz questioned, “You’re sending me in command of a task force consisting of an *Excelsior*, two outdated border cutters, and one armed transport. If the Cardassians and Jem’Hadar send any sort of significant force...”

“I know, Liz.” The admiral nodded his head, “But we don’t have a choice. What we have left are either already tasked to other operations, are in repairs, or are otherwise unavailable. I’m giving you the best I can give you at this time, Captain. You **have** to hold Caernarvon IV until you are either relieved or instructed to withdraw. Regardless of the cost.” Fixing Shelby in his gaze, Ross asked in an emphatic tone, “Do you understand, Captain?”

“Aye, Sir.” Liz replied in a soft voice, realizing that her, her ship and those other ships under her command had probably been all given death sentences, “I understand. Don’t worry, Sir. We’ll get the job done.”

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As the four ship captains and their first officers and tactical chiefs took their seats around the conference table, Captain Shelby and Commander Hobson, accompanied by Manuele Atoa, the *Sutherland’s* tactical chief and his assistant, Lieutenant Nyota Dryer, entered, the two security officers each bearing a stack of padds in their hands. After distributing the padds to each of the officers present, Manuele and Nyota took their seats as Hobson and Shelby made their way to the head of the table.

“Gentlemen...” Liz began, addressing the gathered beings seated before her, “We’ll reach Caernarvon IV within twenty-four hours and I wanted to go over our plans one last time. If any of you have any ideas or alternatives—now’s the time to put them out.”

"I think we've pretty much hashed out all the possible...and impossible...options, Captain Shelby..." Captain Morgan Bateson of the *Bozeman* declared with his trademark avuncular grin, "But it probably wouldn't hurt for us to review the plan once again. Just to be sure we're all on the same page."

"That would be prudent." Captain T'Mas of the *Renown* concurred, her Vulcan features betraying not a whit of emotion.

"All right." Shelby responded, "The way I see it, we're going to have to fight this as a series of delaying actions, taking advantage of the unique terrain within the system to try to channel the enemy advance while we attempt to take them out in detail. There's no way we can hold on to everything..." she asserted, "So we're going to have to prioritize as situations develop. However, as you can see on your padds, I have designed a few gadget plays that will hopefully at least temporarily confuse the opposition."

As he read the information on his padd, a sly grin appeared on Captain Rodenko's face. "While I like the idea of hiding photon and quantum torpedoes along with Mk 23's within the planet's ring system and using them as mobile mines, you are aware, of course, that the Mk. 23's will probably have no effect on the Dominion and Cardassian warships—they're too heavily shielded."

"I'm aware." Liz nodded her head, "What I'm hoping the Mk. 23's will do is take out or at least temporarily incapacitate their smaller assault transports and shuttles and possibly any other small scout craft. Which will allow you and Captain Bateson to carry out parts two and three of the plan."

"The one thing I don't like about this, Captain Shelby..." Morgan interrupted, "Is the fact that if this goes off the way you're planning, you're putting yourself and the *Renown* through a meatgrinder. You're setting yourselves up as the anvil here..."

"I know." Liz sighed, "But we don't really have a choice. Because we're the largest ships, we're the natural targets. But..." she said, smiling a sad smile, "...the good news is that if all goes well, while they're tying themselves up with us, you'll have a much freer hand to do what you have to do to hold on to the planet." Turning her attention towards Lieutenant Dryer, the blonde captain asked in a grave voice, "You understand what you have to do, Nyota?"

"Yes, Sir." The ebony skinned security officer promptly replied, "Our people, along with security teams from the other ships, are to cover the civilians' withdrawal and hold on as long as possible." Pausing for a moment as the full implications of her statement sunk in, Lieutenant Dryer added in a confident tone, "Don't worry, Sir. We won't let you down."

"I know." Liz responded in an equally confident voice before once again addressing the assembled officers, "Well...if there are no further questions, I'll let you get back to your ships now." Pausing for a moment as the officers stood up, Liz turned to the time displaced captain seated on her left, "Morgan...if you could stay for a moment? Chris, Manuele, Nyota...I'll see you later."

"Sure, Liz." Bateson immediately replied, resuming his seat as the others, taking the hint, silently filed out. Waiting until the last of the group had departed, Morgan turned to his old friend, "What is it, Liz?"

"I have a feeling this is going to be a rough one, Morgan..." Shelby began haltingly only to be stopped by the older man's gentle voice.

"I know what you're about to say, Liz and don't." He gently admonished, "You can't blame yourself for anything that might happen or not happen tomorrow. You've got a good plan and good people to carry it out with. You can't worry yourself about that now. Just do the best you can, we'll do the best we can, and if all goes well, we'll give the Cardies and the Jemmies a day to remember."

"Thanks, Morgan." Liz beamed as, standing up, she wrapped her arms around the older man's shoulders, hugging him close. "You're a good friend." A sad smile crossing her lips, the petite captain advised, "You might want to see Denise before you beam back to your ship. I'm sure she'd like to see you."

"Yeah..." Bateson replied, his lips also turning up into a sad grin as he stood up, "I think that would be a good idea." Giving the younger woman a chaste kiss on her cheek, he smiled once again, "I'll see you later, Liz."

Watching as the time displaced starship captain left the room; Shelby sat down in her chair. Picking up her padd, the newly appointed task force commander once again analyzed her battle plan, trying for the last time to tease out any possible weaknesses or holes that she didn't account for earlier. After what seemed like hours, Shelby heard the door slide open, looking up, she saw her first officer at the threshold bearing two cups of coffee. "I

thought you could use this.” Commander Hobson said as he offered one of the cups to his commanding officer.

“Thanks, Chris.” Liz replied gratefully as she sipped the warm brew. “You’re right, I did need this. So...what are you doing here?”

“I just wanted to report that everything is in readiness for tomorrow.” Hobson replied in his normal patrician voice. “Systems are at optimal and the crew is ready—and resting.” Pausing for a moment, the first officer added in an admonishing tone, “As should the captain be.”

“Reprimand duly noted.” Liz chuckled as she stood up. “I’m going to take a bath and turn in for a few hours.” Her smile vanishing, she added ominously, “Tomorrow is going to be a big day.”

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“All right everyone...” Liz announced, speaking from the center chair of her starship, “Sound out...”

Speaking from his concealed position in the outer asteroid belt along with the runabouts *Loire* and *Rhone*, Captain Rodenko declared in a deeply Russian accented voice, “*Chase One* in position.”

From a point near the north magnetic pole of Caernarvon IV, Captain Bateson called out, “*Bozeman* ready.”

“*Renown* is in position.” T’Mas’s emotionless voice declared from the speaker.

“*Belize* is beginning transport of evacuees.” Captain Leland Richards announced.

“Good.” Liz responded, “Remember, Captain. Once the Dominion attack transports draw within transporter range, we’re going to have to activate the transporter buffers on the surface. You’ll have to conduct the evacuation from then on by shuttlecraft.”

“Aye, Captain.” The white bearded former merchant captain replied, “I understand. We’ll get as many off as we can.”

Nodding her head at Richards’ response, Liz once again activated her comm, “You ready, Nyota?”

"Aye, Sir." The lovely security chief responded, "We're in position. Don't worry, Sir...we'll give 'em hell when they come."

Before Liz could respond, Ensign Django called out in a voice that barely concealed her excitement, "They're here. At least four *Galors*...several frigates...assault transports...and some Bugs.

"All right, everyone." Liz announced, "It's showtime!"

"You heard the lady!" Boris Rodenko declared to his crew from the center seat of the *Scamp*. "Now, let's show these Regular Fleeters that we Border Dogs can rumble with the best of them!"

A somber Morgan Bateson let out a deep breath as he turned to his executive officer, speaking in a quiet voice, he simply requested, "Take us to Red Alert, Gabe. Looks like we've got some shooting to do."

"Here they come!" Maria cried out as the first elements of the Dominion assault force pierced the Oort Cloud.

"Wait for it..." Shelby uttered in a flat, low voice as the enemy armada drew nearer, "Wait until the transports get in." Seeing that the main enemy fleet had passed, leaving the more vulnerable transports alone in the cloud, Liz dropped her right arm in a slashing motion, "Now!"

The Mk. 23's set out in the Oort Cloud, activated by the subspace signal sent to them by the *Sutherland*, homing in on the assault transports and shuttlecraft of the Cardassian fleet, exploded in unison, their proximity fuses triggered by the nearness of the intruding vessels. Smiling in satisfaction as several of the enemy transports and shuttles drifted powerless in the cloud, Shelby activated her comm, "Now, Boris...eat 'em up."

"Da." The *Scamp's* skipper acknowledged as he signaled his squadron, "*Chase One*...attack!" Springing out of the concealment of the far asteroid belt, the antique *Albacore*-class border cutter, flanked by the runabouts *Loire* and *Rhone*, slashed through the disabled transports. "Fire all weapons!" Rodenko bellowed, the adrenaline flowing through his body as red beams lanced from her weapons turrets and photon torpedoes crashed into the still forms of the enemy assault ships.

His ship shuddering under the impact of weapons fire, the Russian captain heard his tactical officer report, "A squadron of frigates is closing on our position."

The border cutter shuddering once again as lights flickered, Rodenko ordered, "Time for phase two—hard evasive—**NOW!**" Watching somberly as the *Rhone* exploded, Boris rushed to the helm as the console lit up in a shower of sparks, causing both officers manning the station to fall screaming to the deck. Sparing just a moment to look on sadly at their mangled corpses, the Russian border skipper took the pilot's position at the helm. "Divert power to impulse engines and shields! I'll shake this pack of *sobla-ebla*! Now move!"

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Watching as the *Galors* grew larger in her viewscreen, Liz once again touched her comm, "Captain T'Mas? Are you ready?"

"We are ready." The Vulcan responded laconically.

"Let's do this then." Liz grimly announced as she addressed her helmsman, "Mr. Lavelle. Take us into action. Tactical, fire on my orders." As the two capital ships moved closer to their Cardassian counterparts, Captain Shelby gritted her teeth. "Now!" As both ships unleashed hell in the form of phased and quantum energy at the lead *Galor*, Liz watched in grim satisfaction as the Cardassian ship, her shields collapsing under the onslaught, twisted under the continued weapons impact until, its hull unable to take anymore, it died in a slow motion explosion.

"For what we are about to receive..." Lieutenant Lavelle remarked as he saw two of the remaining *Galors*, along with a pair of *Keldons*, turn their attention towards the *Sutherland*. Moments later, the *Nebula*-class cruiser shook under the violent impact of the enemy ships' bombardment, knocking Lieutenant Rysyl off her seat. Wiping the blood off her brow, the Deltan operations officer reported, "Shields at seventy percent. Weapons and engines still operational.

"Return fire." Liz ordered as the *Sutherland* once again unleashed death, this time at a frigate. Gritting her teeth as the Cardassian ship drifted aimlessly in space, Liz, seeing a second wave of attack transports pierce through the defenses, addressed her tactical officer, "Manny... tell Nyota to get ready, 'cause they're coming."



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"All right, you heard the Boss!" Nyota Dryer called out from her position at the first defense line. They'll be landing soon." Addressing the medtechs and others helping with the civilian evacuations, she yelled, "Get a move on! We've got to get those shuttles spaceborne ASAP!"

"Shuttles are filled!" Dr. Murakawa called back as she helped the last of the first wave of evacuees on to the tiny craft.

"All right, get 'em up!" Nyota replied, saying a silent prayer as the shuttles took off.

"That's it, Gabe." Captain Bateson said quietly as his scanners picked up the shuttlecraft climbing out of the atmosphere. "We've got to make sure those shuttles get to where they're supposed to."

As the old *Soyuz*-class ship slipped out of its hiding place, the alert skipper spotted a pair of the smaller Jem'Hadar pursuit craft zeroing in on the shuttles. "Catch those bugs." Bateson ordered tersely as the *Bozeman* lurched into warp. Accelerating quickly, the border cutter caught the Jem'Hadar just as they were drawing within range of the evacuees. "Fire!" Phasers and photon torpedoes lanced from the obsolete warship, impacting the bug to the left. The gunner's aim true, the purple and white craft exploded in a brilliant fireball as its partner veered away, turning towards its pursuer.

Watching dispassionately as the much more advanced bug launched its weapons at the *Bozeman*, Morgan turned to his first officer, "Gabe. If I don't get the chance—it's been nice knowing you. Now...all power to shields and brace yourselves for impact!"

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"Oh hell..." Sam uttered in a hushed, agonized tone as the *Renown* exploded under the concentrated fire of a severely damaged *Galor* cruiser and four *Keldons*. No one had time to mourn though, much less offer a prayer for the dead as the bridge of the *Sutherland* shook under the impact of fire from the other two *Galors*.

"Our shields are down to twenty percent." Lieutenant Atoa reported, and we've lost phasers three and four."

“Concentrate fire on that limping *Galor*.” Liz ordered as she saw the ship that had destroyed the *Renown* turn away from the battle. “If nothing else, we can avenge T’Mas and the rest of her people.”

“Firing.” Atoa grimly replied, nodding his head in silent satisfaction as the *Galor* exploded. The ship shaking under yet another barrage, Manuele announced in a grave tone, “Shields down.”

“Right.” Liz acknowledged, “Find me another *Galor*, Manuele. If this is it—then we’re going to go down fighting.”

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“They’re landing.” Nyota announced to her troops. Tapping her comm badge, she inquired of the chief medical officer, “Doctor? How many more left?”

“We’re loading up the last of ‘em now.” Denise answered back as she helped a family of four into a waiting shuttle. “Can you buy us the time?”

“I’m going to have to.” Nyota grimly replied as Cardassian soldiers and Jem’Hadar warriors approached. Addressing her men, Lieutenant Dryer cautioned, “Wait until they get into the minefield.” Waiting until as many enemy troops as possible had entered the kill zone, the ebony skinned security officer flashed a toothy grin as she pressed the red button on the small device she held in her hand. “Now!”

Phaser fire erupted simultaneously with the explosions of photonic mines as Cardassians screamed while Jem’Hadar quietly died. The explosions dying down, Nyota gritted her teeth as fresh waves of troops replaced their fallen compatriots, their deliberate walk now turning into a pell-mell charge. “One more burst and then fall back to line two!” Nyota ordered as the skull of the Andorian next to her exploded, spattering the New Kenyan’s face with his blue blood.

Barely maintaining her cool, Nyota waved her arm, ordering, “Fall back,” as Jem’Hadar scaled the makeshift wall, jabbing their blades into the flesh of the retreating Starfleeters.

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The bridge a smoking ruin, Liz helped an injured Varok up, his green blood staining her uniform jacket. “Auxiliary control room...” the captain ordered,

“Now!” Picking Maria up in his arms, Sam carried the groggy ensign, who had just pushed Atris and Jaxa away from a ruptured conduit, and then saved two other crewmen’s lives from a fire caused by the burning circuitry, towards the turbolift as Hobson assisted Anara. Watching as the last of the survivors withdrew; Liz barely maintained her footing as the ship shook once again under the impact of the sole surviving *Galor* and its accompanying frigates. “Come on, Varok...” Liz urged as she helped the elderly Vulcan into the Jeffries tube. “We’ve still got some fight left in us.”

“C’mon Treasure...give me a hand!” Jadon called out to his buxom assistant, her face now cut and smudged from blood and smoke. “I’m going to set the matter-anti-matter containment to overload if the self-destruct sequence doesn’t work.” He then looked deep into the young engineer’s eyes “If Captain Shelby or Commander Hobson are gone and it’s looking like the Cardies are going to take this ship, then it’s up to the two of us. Promise me, Treasure, that if I’m not able...that’ll you do what has to be done.”

“I will, Boss.” Treasure said in a soft, determined voice. “Those bastards aren’t getting this ship.”

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“We’re loading up the last of ‘em now!” Dr. Murakawa called out as Lieutenant Dryer and her surviving troopers prepared for a fresh onslaught from the Jem’Hadar and their Cardassian allies. “Get back here!”

“Not enough time.” Nyota grimly replied, “If we withdraw, they’ll be on us before we could load up and dust off. You and your people get out—we’ll cover for you.”

“Lieutenant...” Denise began only to be cut off by Nyota’s fierce retort.

“Doctor! I’m in charge planetside and I’m ordering you to get the hell off this rock—NOW!”

With a mournful sigh, Dr. Murakawa quietly replied, “Order reluctantly acknowledged. God bless you, Nyota...” the faithful Catholic finished, crossing herself as she said a silent prayer for her friend.

Looking first to the right and then to the left, Nyota Dryer looked on grimly at the advancing Cardassian and Jem’Hadar soldiers. “All right, people...” She said in a quiet, level tone, “Let’s make this a fight they’ll remember for a long

time.” With that, she pressed another button, this one causing music to come out of a set of speakers to the rear of the Starfleeters. As the enemy soldiers closed in, Nyota and her remaining compatriots sang along at first softly and tentatively and then in a loud resounding voice an old song with the closing verse, “...we will be invincible...”

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“The last of the shuttles have landed.”

Nodding his head at his first officer’s report, Captain Richards addressed his helm, “All right, get us out of here...maximum warp.”

“Aye, Sir.” The helmsman acknowledged as the *Belize* warped out of orbit, disappearing from the carnage in a flash of light.

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“*Belize* has successfully warped out of orbit, Sir.” Commander Hobson, his arm in a sling, reported as he handed his commanding officer an extra phaser. “We’ve lost communications with Captain Rodenko and Captain Bateson and Lieutenant Dryer...”

“I know, Chris...” Liz replied in a soft voice. “They’ll be coming for us soon.” She grimly declared as she shoved the spare phaser in her belt. “I want all hands ready to repel boarders. I won’t let this ship fall into their hands. If need be...”

“Understood, Sir. They won’t take the *Sutherland*.”

“Captain!” Lieutenant Rysyl, her head hastily bandaged, called out in an excited tone, “The enemy...they’re falling back...”

“Allied ships entering system.” Mr. Varok declared, “Klingons. Captain K’Temoc from the T’Ong is hailing us.”

“Put him on.” Liz replied as she faced the small viewscreen, “It’s time for us to count our dead.”

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***Starbase 375: A Week Later***

As Captain Shelby walked into his office, Admiral Ross took in her appearance. Her usual impish grin was gone, replaced by thin pursed lips. Her pale face and red eyes revealed both a lack of sleep and the shedding of a great deal of tears. Watching as she approached his desk, the admiral stood up. "Sit down, Captain." He gently urged as he took two glasses and a decanter out of a bottom desk drawer. Filling the glasses with an amber fluid, Ross pushed one of them towards Shelby. "Saurian brandy." William smiled, "Drink—admiral's orders."

"Thank you, Sir." Liz answered politely as she took a sip of the warm liquid, allowing its heat to sooth her throat as it went down.

"You and your people did a good job out there, Liz." The admiral declared. "I wasn't at liberty to tell you earlier, but many of those people you evacuated were scientists engaged in several projects of potential interest to the Federation. By getting them out of harm's way, you ensured that they—and their work—wouldn't fall into the Dominion's hands. Plus, you held the line long enough for us to strengthen our defenses. That window the Cardassians had to flank us is now safely shut."

"We paid a high enough price for it." Shelby remarked in a soft yet biting voice as she took another drink.

"We're going to pay an even higher price before this is all over." Ross dourly replied. "Some of us might even have to sell our souls before it's done." Seeing the quizzical expression given to him by the blonde captain seated before him, Ross chuckled grimly, "Forget I said that. I'm just tired." Glancing down at his padd, the admiral remarked, "Medal of Honor?"

"Lieutenant Dryer earned it, Sir." Liz answered back in a firm voice. "She gave her life—along with the rest of her command—to make sure that the shuttles could take off safely. Without her sacrifice, many of those civilians would have been lost. I'd say that definitely qualifies as action above and beyond the call of duty."

"All right...I'll go ahead and forward the request. The Federation needs heroes now. Speaking of which..." Admiral Ross grinned, "I've put you and Captains Bateson and Rodenko in for the Starfleet Medal of Valor and I've put Captain Richards in for the Silver Palm. You've also been nominated for the Karagite Order of Heroism." His smile vanishing, the admiral added, "I've also put Captain T'Mas in for a Medal of Valor

“Sir...while I’ll agree that Captains Bateson, Rodenko, and Richards deserve their awards...I don’t think I do. I just led them into a meatgrinder.”

“I disagree, Captain.” Ross retorted, “Your battleplan was solid—better than what I would have come up with. If anything...” he noted sadly, “...I’m sorry I put you out there with what little you had. I wish I could have given you more...” he apologized, confessing, “...sometimes I wonder what Command is thinking. We’ve got the *Enterprise*, a *Sovereign*-class warship, doing good will tours. We have other—valuable—ships and their captains still engaged in exploration! It’s as if Command either doesn’t—or can’t understand the seriousness of the situation!” Shaking his head, Ross again apologized, “I’m sorry, Liz. I’m just venting. Getting back to what we were talking about. You earned those awards, Liz. If nothing else, think of them as being not so much validations of yourself, but rather as memorials of the courage and strength of all those who fought with you that day.” Flashing a last, wan smile, the admiral stood up and extended his hand. “Now, if you’ll forgive me, Captain. I have to get back to work. Take care of yourself and your people out there, Liz.”

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### ***USS Sutherland: Stardate 56982.2***

“That was a bad day.” Sam reminisced, “We lost over three hundred souls—including Nyota—in that battle.”

“And Morgan lost a quarter of his crew and Boris half of his.” Liz replied in an equally grim tone.

“But we held the line.” Sam pointed out. “And eventually we won the war.”

“Yeah...but we paid a price—and we’re still paying a high price.” Liz noted. “You and I, Sam...” she smiled as she refilled both their glasses, “We’re from a very special generation. You see, we’re not like Picard, Owens, and the other ‘Old School’ captains and admirals. They had the luxury of being explorers first and foremost and only secondarily—and grudgingly—soldiers. They couldn’t—and still can’t really—adapt to how things have changed. They want it to go back to the old days, where they could just go out and explore, but that’s impossible.” She noted ruefully, “Too much has happened...too much blood spilled for us to ever forget that we are soldiers.” Taking a moment to catch her breath, Liz sipped her champagne and then continued,

“The younger captains like Aurelia who came out during and immediately after the war—they’re soldiers first and foremost. They were rushed through the Academy and haven’t had the advantage of the courses that emphasized the exploration mission of Starfleet. They’re quick on the trigger...sometimes...too quick.”

“So...” Sam asked, “...where does that leave us?”

“We’re the bridge between old and new.” Liz replied. “We’re the ones who have to remind the ‘Old Guard’ that we’re living in a different galaxy now and that our days of complacent naiveté are gone forever, while at the same time shepherding the new generation—showing them that there’s so much more to what Starfleet does than maintain the peace—that there’s a galaxy out there just waiting to reveal itself to us. We have to give back to those officers and captains something of that sense of wonder that they haven’t really had the chance to experience yet.”

“Sounds like we’ve got quite a job ahead of us then, Betts.” Sam joked as he sipped his drink.

“Yeah...” Liz laughed, “But, I think we’re up to it, Sammy.” Her laughter disappearing as she gazed down at the half empty glass in her hand, Liz raised her champagne flute, “To absent friends.”

“To absent friends.” Sam replied as the glasses gently clinked together. “They’ll always remain in our memories.”