

# Star Trek: Sutherland Cold Comfort

By David Falkayn

As she entered the Captain's Table, Liz Shelby breezed by the table where the 24<sup>th</sup> century captains liked to congregate, laughing as she heard Captains Glover and Sandhurst engaged in yet another of their interminable arguments as Sabrina Diaz and Liana Ramirez looked on with amused grins. Seeing Captain Hobson seated next to Captain Owens, Liz waved to her former first officer, receiving in return a friendly nod of the head from the Iceman as she heard Captain Astar call out to her.

"Liz! Over here! Aurelia and I were just about to order another pitcher!"

"We're taking bets on who's going to throw the first punch—Glover or Sandy." A laughing Aurelia chimed in.

"Sorry, I can't!" Shelby answered back in a friendly voice as she jerked her head towards the 23<sup>rd</sup> century table, "I'm seeing someone else tonight." Her lips turning up into a mischievous smirk, she added as she walked away, "But put me down for fifty credits on Terrence—Sandy knows how to push his buttons better than anyone else I know!"

"Well, maybe next time!" Aurelia shouted out as Liz made her way over to her destination.

"Hey, Cilla! Hikaru!" Liz waved to a willowy blonde speaking to Captain Sulu, wearing the maroon jacket and black pants of the later 23<sup>rd</sup> century both of whom waved back to her, as Shelby walked on until she reached her destination. "Poppy!" She squealed, laughing in delight as she recognized the roughhewn features of her grandfather, Commodore Robert Wesley amongst his fellow starship captains.

Turning rapidly at the sound of her voice, the gray haired former boxing champion flashed a broad toothy grin, "Hey Spitfire! What are you doing over here with us dinosaurs? I'd think you'd want to spend some time with your pals over there." He remarked as he waved his hand in the direction of the 24<sup>th</sup> century table where Glover and Sandhurst's argument was growing even

more heated. "Those two look like they're going to start going at each other soon."

"Don't mind them. They're like that all the time." Liz grinned as she approached Robert, the pair hugging each other tightly for what seemed like several minutes before they reluctantly broke from each other.

His gaze falling on a solitary figure at the bar, a brown-haired human wearing the maroon top and black pants that marked the Starfleet uniform of the later 23<sup>rd</sup> and early 24<sup>th</sup> centuries, Robert asked in a soft voice, "Aren't you going to say hello to him?"

"I've got nothing to say to him." A now stern-faced Liz replied.

"He's your father." Wesley gently reproached.

"I don't care." Shelby grimaced momentarily and then just as quickly plastered on a smile as she quietly made her way to the 23<sup>rd</sup> century captains' table, "I just wanted to spend some time with you guys..." she said, seeking to change the subject as she gave Marietta DeVees a playful wink, receiving an amused chuckle in return from the stunning red-headed captain of the *Scipio*. Deliberately swaying her hips as she passed by Jim Kirk, the impish blonde captain smirked at the frustrated look on the roguish captain's face as she plopped down on the lap of a surprised Captain Dodge. Wiggling her bottom seductively until she got the desired result, Liz spoke in a breathy voice as the captain of the *Hood* blushed a deep crimson, "Hi Frank! Hmmm...I get the feeling I'm not the only one who's happy I'm here. In fact, I know you're happy I'm here."

Envious at his fellow captain's good fortune, Captain Tracy of the *Exeter* asked as he took a deep drink from his beer mug, "So, what are you having?"

"Well...what's a girl gotta do around here for a mimosa?" Liz chuckled as, throwing her arms around the burly shoulders of the captain of the *Hood*, she once again ground her bottom into Dodge's lap.

"Uh...Huh...you know the rules, Spitfire..." Commodore Wesley momentarily grinned, the smile quickly vanishing as his eyes once again drifted to the lonely man sitting at the bar. "You gotta pay for your drink..."

"All right...all right..." Shelby smiled back, "You guys want to hear a story? Ok, I've got one for you." Turning her head to her grandfather, she said, "As you

know, I've always had one ironclad rule I never—ever—break: Don't screw the crew..."

"A good rule...some of us should follow it more often." Captain Grace MacAfee interjected as she gave Captain Kirk an accusatory glance.

"Now...now...boys and girls..." Liz chided, "...it's my story, remember. Well..." she recounted, the smile vanishing from her face to be replaced by a lost...winsome and yet also pensive...and even longing look, "...I've only broken that rule one time. It happened during the Dominion War..."

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"Thanks for the lift back, Sam. Remind me to never set foot on Station K-43 again. That station smelled like the inside of a Klingon bathroom." A withdrawn Captain Elizabeth Shelby, still dealing with the aftermath of the Battle of Caernarvon IV said from the co-pilot's seat of the shuttle *Ptolemy*.

"Anytime, Sir." The Canadian helmsman replied. "Ummm...thanks, Captain." He said as his eyes fell momentarily to that third dark pip on his collar. "And also for..." He trailed.

"You earned that Medal of Valor, Lieutenant Commander." Liz smiled. "Of course, you know that means you're Second Officer now—better get used to working more with Commander Hobson..."

"And there's the downside..." Sam joked.

"Look at it this way..." Liz bantered back, her spirits momentarily lifted by her newly appointed second officer's wit, "Now you've got something to throw at Riker if we meet up with the *Enterprise* again."

Chuckling, Sam quipped, "You know...I never thought of that...I'd give almost anything to see the look on his face when the promotion records come out." and then inquired, "So...how did the staff meeting go, if I might ask?"

Sighing, Liz shook her head. "The usual bull. I laid out my scheme for launching cavalry raids behind Cardassian lines. Admiral Ross is all for it and so are the Klingons, but..."

"Admiral Shanthi's being a horse's rear." Sam finished, his lips turned up in a sardonic grin.

“Right.” Liz affirmed and then wryly noted, “She thinks it’s too risky, but...Sam....” Shelby gritted her teeth, “The only way we’re going to survive this war...much less win...is by taking chances. We just can’t afford to grind it out against the Dominion—especially not with the Romulans sitting on the fence.”

“Yeah...the idiots don’t realize they’re next.” Sam grumbled.

“Oh...they’re just being their usual backstabbing selves.” Liz shook her head. “They’re holding back, hoping that we’ll all bloody ourselves so that they can just swoop in and pick on the leftovers. That bird of prey of theirs should be a damned vulture!” She cursed, barely restraining herself from throwing a padd against one of the bulkheads.

“Remind me not to get you pissed at me, Sir.” Sam jibed in an effort to ease tensions, “You’re almost as bad as Maria when you’re mad.”

Laughing, Liz quipped back, “Maybe we should sic Maria them—that’ll show ‘em.” Her laughter subsiding, the captain gently inquired, “How’s she doing?”

“Better.” Sam managed a wan smile. “She’s up and about now. By the way...thanks for putting her in for a Silver Palm and promotion.”

“She’s earned both.” Liz replied. “If it weren’t for her quick thinking, Atris, Jaxa, and a whole lot of other good people would have been dead.”

“We’re going to get better, Captain.” Sam said in a soft voice. “You know that, don’t you?”

“I know, Sam.” Liz sighed, “But sometimes...sometimes...I wish I did decide to make that left turn at the Academy and quit and dance professionally like Renee wanted me to.”

His lips turning up in a smile Sam remarked, “I saw a vid of that program you did with Sandy...it was beautiful...and yeah, Captain, you’d have been a helluva a dancer and I think you’d have even been happy doing it, but I have a feeling there would have been a hole inside you—that, no matter how happy you were, I don’t think you would have been fulfilled.”

"I don't feel very fulfilled right now, Sam." Liz groaned. "Three hundred dead on the *Suthy* alone. Nearly half the crew. And then there were the other ships and crews...and Nyota and her people..."

"Anyone else in command." Sam declared, "...and everyone would have died. You pulled off a miracle, Boss."

Before Shelby could respond, the tiny shuttlecraft was buffeted by a great force, knocking both captain and helmsman to the deck. "What the hell!" Sam cursed as he slowly regained his feet, only to see that his captain was unconscious and that the *Ptolemy* was plunging towards the planet on the viewscreen. "Damn. Must have been a frinxing gravitic eddy!" Lavelle cursed as he fought the controls to regain mastery over the shuttle before it either burned in the atmosphere or crashed. Finally regaining control, the skilled pilot managed to bring the vessel down—hard—on the ground. The *Ptolemy*, skidding to a stop, crashed on to a plateau strewn with outcroppings and boulders. Just managing to stay conscious, Sam dived down, barely avoiding having his head severed along with the shuttle roof by an outcropping.

"Well..." Sam uttered to himself as he struggled to his feet, "Any landing you can walk away from..." He took stock of his surroundings and of the fact that he was beginning to shiver from cold and that the shuttle had no power. "Oh Hell!"

Her eyes fluttering to wakefulness, Liz tried to sit up only to be gently held back. Looking up, she saw her second officer kneeling beside her covering her up again with a thick thermal blanket. "Easy, Captain." Sam said in a low voice. "You took a nasty blow to your head and was unconscious for a while. Here..." He said as he gently helped her up to a sitting position and then pressed a warm cup of tea in her hands. "I've got good news and bad news. What do you want to hear first?"

"Good news." Liz said with a wan smile as she sipped her tea.

"Well...I managed to scrounge enough stuff to make a fire." He explained, gesturing at the fire close to them. "We crash landed and lost all power." He explained, "At least we'll have some light and warmth."

"And the bad news..." Liz trailed.

"The bad news is that this planet has a six-month rotation and we're going into darkness. And if you think it's cold now...when it gets fully dark—it's

going to get very cold. I set up the automated distress beacon.” He offered as a ray of hope, “Hopefully one of our ships will respond before the bad guys do or we die of hypothermia.”

“Sam...if the Cardassians or Jem’Hadar beat our people...”

Pulling out two hypos, Lavelle replied in a grim voice, “We’ve both got prices on our heads. Nogatch hemlock.” He explained, “Instantaneous and painless. I’m not going to let them take us alive. Me...they’d just kill. You...they hate.”

“Tell them they can stand in line behind my father, Shanthi, Paris, Owens, and Akinola...” Liz growled.

“Well...” Sam cracked a grin, “Let’s hope none of them show up. I’d rather face the Cardies or Jemmies than any of them.”

Laughing with her second officer, Liz’s mirth soon turned into a scowl as she did nothing to hide her loathing, “Almost anything’s better than to have to deal with Shanthi’s sanctimonious prattling, Owen’s holier than thou attitude, Paris and Akinola’s puritanism, and...” Her eyes reflected an almost lost, detached look, “...the less said about my father—the better.”

“Yeah...” Sam glumly nodded his head, “I’m on the outs with my mother again.” Taking a deep breath, the young Canadian decided to take the woman next to him in his confidence, “A little after Caernarvon IV, after we limped back to Starbase 375, she contacted me by subspace. After she heard about the battle, she wanted me to transfer back to the *Enterprise*—said that I’d be less likely to see fighting on it.” Shaking his head, he handed Shelby a ration bar and took a bite of one himself before continuing, “I told her no—I’m happy where I’m at and have no intention of leaving. She got mad...called you a few names I won’t repeat...” Both chuckled a little until Sam spoke again shaking his head, “I know she’s worried about me...but...Captain...”

“Liz...” The blonde woman interrupted, “We’ve known each other long enough so that we can be on a first name basis in situations like this or when we’re off duty and it’s just the two of us or with good friends.”

“Ok...Liz.” Sam smiled, “Like I said, I know she’s just worried about me and being a mother, and I love her and love her for it—but...this is where I need to be.”

"I'm sorry, Sam..." Liz apologized and, seeing the man next to her shivering, beckoned him to come join her under the blanket. "It's cold, Sam and it's only going to get colder and that fire's not hot enough. At least we can keep each other warm."

"Ok." Sam said as he slipped under the blanket, the couple huddling together to share their warmth.

"You weren't kidding about it getting cold, Sam." Liz muttered as she held her companion closer.

"So..." Sam asked, "You hear from Jason and Sandy?"

"Yeah." Shelby's lips turned up in a warm smile, "They're doing fine." A winsome expression crossed her face as she spoke, "They and Raul and Heather heard about Caernarvon IV and were worried. They want me to come and see them when I get enough time."

"You should." Sam urged. "It'll do you good to be with them—and how long has it been since you've seen Raul and Heather."

Sighing, Liz replied, "Too long. Since before the war."

"Well..." Sam quipped in an effort to lighten the mood, "Maybe they'll do a morale tour. A lot of artists and musicians and all are doing them now."

"That'd be nice." The blonde woman's lips turned up in a sweet smile.

"You miss dancing, don't you?" Sam asked.

"Yeah." The former jazz dancer nodded her head. "There's something about performing before an audience...it's intoxicating in a way I can't really explain. But..." She smiled, "I've got no regrets. This is the life I wanted, and I wouldn't trade it for anything..."

"Freezing huddled under a blanket with nothing but water and cold food rations." Sam teased.

"And you to keep me warm." Liz teased back as, shivering, she huddled even closer to Sam's warmth. "Sam?" Liz ventured, unsure as to whether to continue, "Is there anything you regret?"

"Yeah." Lavelle whispered back. "I regret not going in Jaxa's place. If it had been me they caught...they'd have either killed me or sent me off to a slave labor camp. Either would have been better than what Jaxa went through."

"Sam." Liz consoled in a soft voice as her embrace became more of a comforting hug, "You were there when she needed you most and you're there when she still needs you." A wan smile crossed her lips, "They look up to you, you know. The junior officers. They see in you what they can be. That's why I'm making you my second officer and not Jadon or Varok—they're both good officers, but...they don't want the responsibilities that come with command and you do—even if you try to hide it and won't admit it to yourself sometimes."

Chuckling softly, Sam demurred, "I'm nothing special. I remember the first time I came on to the *Sutherland*—just before you took command. When the old-timers found out I was on the *Enterprise*, I got some of the dirtiest looks you'd ever see from some of them and I never understood why until Manny and Smitty set me straight. And then there was Maria..." He sighed with a note of longing in his voice.

"You're in love with her, aren't you?" Regretting her words almost as soon as she said them, Liz quickly apologized, "I'm sorry...I had no business asking..."

"That's all right, Liz." Sam smiled as he held the blonde woman in his arms closer, to keep both of them warm he told himself. "Yeah...I am in love with her." He groaned, "Sometimes I think she feels the same way about me...and other times..."

"Maybe she's scared." Liz suggested, "I get the impression she's a lot like me...she doesn't make friends easily...and is real careful about who she does let get close to her."

"Yeah." Sam nodded his head gently, "I know. She puts up this sassy and bitchy front...but beneath it...there's a warm and caring person. But...she can also be incredibly hurtful sometimes." Sam confessed. "When she really loses her temper, her words can sting and sometimes, they can be very painful and hard to forget. That's when I have to get away from her for a while—otherwise, I don't think I could take it. Liz..." Sam cooed softly as he brushed away his blonde companion's tears, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but...was there someone..."

"I was in love with?" Liz finished, her lips turning up in a sad smile as she sighed, "I guess Jason and Sandy come closest now. Our relationship...well...it's...complicated. None of us are the forever and ever sort. I guess the closest I came to really being in love was when I was with Erika—Erika Benteen. And I threw it all away because I let my ambition get in the way of my heart and conscience and ended up losing not only Erika, but also a piece of my soul." Tears now flowing freely, she sobbed, "The kicker was...I found out later when Pava took a risk on me and put me on his tactical team on the *Shran* that I had the promotion anyway—all that backstabbing and hurting for nothing. The first officer was leaning towards Erika, but the captain liked me." Crying on her companion's chest Liz confessed, "Sandy once warned me about letting my ambition getting the best of me—remember what happened to Macbeth, she said. I should have listened."

"Hey, Liz..." Sam comforted, "That ambition got you the *Reed* and then the *Sutherland*. And it's not as if I wasn't ready to sell my soul for that exact same post on the *Enterprise*. I made a fool out of myself in front of Riker—he thought I was trying to suck up to him—and I guess maybe I was. After Jaxa was killed, I felt guilty—like I said earlier, I felt like it should have been me on that mission and not her and that held me back for awhile until...we all got her back. Then...I guess I changed." His lips turned up in a smile as he wiped the tears of the woman he was holding away, "Maybe you changed when you got the *Reed*."

"More like when I got the *Sutherland*." Liz admitted. "A few years ago, Nerys asked me if my goal was to make admiral. I told her that if she had asked me that question a few years earlier, it would have been yes, but then I told her that I wasn't so certain. Now...Sammy...I am certain. I don't care if I don't make admiral, but it's not because I've gotten fat and lazy like Riker...it's because...well...Sandy once called me a free spirit, and yeah...I guess I am, and I'd be miserable tied behind a desk in a some starbase or planetbound. Give me the freedom of a starship any day."

"Yeah..." Sam agreed, "I guess I feel the same way. Doesn't give much room for friends outside the Fleet though does it?"

"No." Liz affirmed, "It doesn't. But then..." Her lips turned up in a wry grin, "I don't have that many friends to begin with. There's Jadzia, of course, and then there's Jason, Sandy, Heather, and Raul—but I don't see that much of them and they're kind of in their own category, and Morgan, Terrence, and Boris..."

"And me...I hope..." Sam said in a soft tone.

"And you. And now..." She said in a soft voice, "I need to get some sleep."

"Yeah...I do too." Sam whispered as both fell asleep in each other's arms.

Waking up first, Liz instinctively huddled closer to the warm body lying next to her and then, looking into his eyes, she saw the kind and gentle face of her new second officer sleeping soundly. Not wanting to wake him up, she slipped quietly out of the blanket, shivering at the growing cold. After adding more of their dwindling fuel to the fire, she took the frozen rations and water and warmed them by the fire until the water was warm enough for her to add some tea leaves from the emergency rations and the rations were thawed out enough to eat. Taking the tea and warmed up rations, she walked back to Sam and, without even thinking about it, kissed him on the forehead. As he stirred to wakefulness, Liz grinned, "Here...I figure it was my turn to cook."

"Thanks, Liz." Sam smiled as he took a sip of the tea and munched on the warm ration bar.

"Wasn't sure if those things could be warmed." Liz chuckled, "But I didn't fancy either of us breaking our teeth on one frozen."

"I don't think either one of us needed that." Sam laughed as he opened the blanket, "Come here." He gestured, "I can see you're freezing."

"Yeah." Liz responded as she readily joined him under the blanket. "You're right...it is getting colder. She sighed as she huddled in his arms. "I remember when I was little, my father used to hold me whenever he was home. He'd tell me stories about the planets he'd been to and all the aliens he'd seen." Her lips turned up in a sad smile, "He was gone a lot when I was little...but..." Breathing deeply and exhaling, she confessed, "...I guess it really wasn't his fault. Now that I'm sitting in the center seat, I can understand him a little better."

Staying silent, Sam allowed the blonde woman huddled next to him to unburden herself. Sobbing, she looked up at him with doe-like eyes and asked, "But why did he say those horrible things to me when he found out about my relationship with Jason and Sandy and Raul and Heather when I went home for leave after my plebe year? I mean...I know people like Shanthi, Akinola, Paris and the others call me whore and slut and bitch and a few other words I won't mention, and it really doesn't bother me. As far as I'm concerned, they can all frinx themselves up their warp core. I'm going to

live my life the way I want to live it and that's all there is to it." She sobbed as Sam held her closer, "But when your own father calls you those names! It hurt me, Sam!"

"It's ok, Liz..." Sam cooed as he gently stroked the back of the blonde captain's hair, "No one's judging you here. For what it's worth..." Sam consoled, "I think you're the best and, if you weren't my commanding officer and if I weren't involved with Maria, I'd be doing the best I could to get you to notice me."

"Thanks, Sam." Liz smiled, "And you're not so bad looking yourself, you know."

As he looked down at the blonde woman in his arms, he didn't see his captain, rather, he saw a lonely woman who wanted and craved love and tenderness. As their lips drew closer, he tenderly kissed her. As their lips touched, all the pain and heartache and loss the two had suffered and shared over the past few years came rushing forth as their kisses became more fiery and passionate, lost in each other and in the swirl of emotions and feelings brought about by that kiss, their hands fumbled clumsily to remove clothing under the blanket while both tried to stay as close as possible to each other sharing in their warmth and heat as they lost themselves in a passionate frenzy of lovemaking that left both of them spent.

Awakening simultaneously, Sam blushed a deep crimson as he apologized, "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have..."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Liz smiled as she kissed the handsome Canadian on his lips, the fire dying down, its fuel expended. If we're going to die on this rock, then I want my last memories to be happy ones and I can't think of anyone else I'd rather make them with than you right now."

"And I with you, Liz..."

"Betts..." Liz corrected with a smile, "Only you and a few other people get to call me that."

"Ok, Betts..."

As she caressed his face, Liz said, "Sammy, I can't give you anything permanent...or really anything beyond being a friend...a close friend who once shared something very special with you...but a friend just the same, should we get rescued." Her lips turning up in a sad smile, she recalled, "I

remember something Sandy once told me the first time after we made love. She said that I should never promise anyone anything I wasn't prepared to give them. Sammy..." Liz kissed her lover tenderly on his lips, "All I can promise you is now. And all I can tell you is...that this is not just a romp for me or casual sex. What we have here now is real as far as I'm concerned and if we die here, then I can't think of a better way to die than in your arms."

He tenderly kissed her once again and they made love for the last time. After they had finished, they slipped into unconsciousness in each other's arms, the cold finally taking them. They couldn't hear or see the transporter effect in their little shelter as two figures materialized next to them.

"Hypothermia." The auburn-haired woman wearing winter clothing diagnosed as she tapped her comm pin and as the Asian woman next to her immediately injected the pair with a hypo. "We've got two patients to beam up to sickbay, stat."

"Aye, Dr. Crusher."

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"Hey, Sam...Captain Shelby."

Awakening to a familiar voice, Sam looked up to see Nurse Alyssa Ogawa looking down on him. "Alyssa?"

"We picked up your distress beacon." The Japanese nurse explained, "...and beamed down." She further clarified. "You were suffering from severe hypothermia. We had to rewarm both your blood and airways. If we were just a little later..."

"Thanks, Alyssa." Sam smiled.

"Yes, thank you, Lieutenant." Liz also smiled at the *Enterprise* head nurse.

Coughing gently, Alyssa lowered her voice so that only her two patients could hear, "Dr. Crusher and I left out of our logs the condition we found you in. We figure it's no one's business but yours."

"Thanks, Alyssa." Both Sam and Liz replied in unison.

"So..." Liz asked, "When can we be discharged."

"In just a few more hours, Captain...Lieutenant Commander. Oh...I nearly forgot..." Alyssa's grin grew wider, "Congratulations on your promotion, Sir."

"Thanks, Alyssa." Sam grinned. Turning to his commanding officer, Sam's grin grew wider, "I guess I'm going to have to get used people calling me that, aren't I, Sir."

"I think you'll get the hang of it, Lieutenant Commander." Liz grinned back.

Dr. Crusher, entering the room, smiled warmly as she greeted her patients, "Captain...Lieutenant Commander...your vitals are much stronger now. I just want you to get a little more rest and then Captain Picard asks if you would see him in his ready room at your convenience."

"Of course." Liz acknowledged.

"Well...we'll leave you alone to rest up." Beverly said as Alyssa, taking her unspoken hint, quietly vacated the room with a smile and nod of her head towards her patients. "Alyssa will be back in a couple of hours to give you a last check up and then we'll turn you loose."

"Captain..." Sam began, more than a little nervous, once he was sure that the pair were fully alone, "I just want you to know that I'm not going to tell anyone about us and...I remember what you said...about us not being more than just friends..."

"Friends who shared something very special." Liz said warmly. "What we had down there was our time...and it belongs just to us. It was special, and I'll always cherish it. It wasn't just a fling for me, Sammy. And yeah..." She admitted with a sigh, "A part of me wishes it didn't have to end...but...I don't think it's fair to you to lead you on thinking that there could be more when there can't. Like I said down there, I'm just not the forever and ever sort and you deserve better—a lot better. You pulled me out of a very dark place and I'll always love you for it. But you have someone important waiting for you back on the *Sutherland*. You should be with her. She needs you even if she's too scared to admit it."

Taking a deep breath, Sam exhaled, "I understand, Captain..."

"It's still Betts when we're alone like this, Sammy." Liz interjected with a smile. And then closing her eyes for a moment, she opened them, the pit of

her stomach tightening, “And if you don’t feel comfortable being on the *Sutherland* after this, I’ll understand. I can get you a second officer’s post on another *Nebbie* or *Galaxy* or a first officer’s slot on a smaller ship and I can probably swing it where Maria can go with you, if you want—a few captains owe me favors...”

“Do you want me to request reassignment?” Sam asked, his heart tightening, afraid of her answer.

“No...” Liz shook her head. “I just don’t want you to be hurt, Sammy—and I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not going to hurt me, Betts.” Sam said reassuringly, “Yeah...” He chuckled, admitting, “It’ll probably be a little clumsy for me for a little bit...”

“Yeah...for me too.” Liz giggled. “I’m pretty sure we’re going to get some sideways glances from Chris and maybe a wink from Jadon.” Her laughter died down, “We’re not going to be able to fool Anara...she’ll sense it right away.”

Sam nodded his head, “Yeah...her empathy will pick up on us immediately. But I think she’ll keep what we had secret, don’t you?”

Liz nodded her head as Sam continued, “The person I’m worried about is...”

“Maria.”

“Yeah.” Sam affirmed and sighed, “If she asks me flat out...”

“Then tell her what you need to, Sammy. I’ll understand.” Liz interjected, granting her consent. “Do what you think is best. I don’t want to be a wedge between the two of you. That’s one of the reasons why I asked if you wanted to be reassigned.”

“I don’t want reassignment, Betts.” Sam declared, “I’m happy on the *Sutherland*. We’ll make this work. I have faith in what we built together on that rock. It wasn’t just the heat of the moment. I’d like to think we built something deeper...a friendship.”

Getting off her bed, she walked carefully to the man sitting up on the bed next to hers. Placing a gentle kiss on his lips, she smiled a sad, almost longing, smile, “Thank you.”

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The meeting with Picard went well as the pair recounted their experiences, editing where appropriate, and the *Enterprise* captain updated them on recent events. Smiling, he told Captain Shelby, "Apparently whatever you said at that meeting hit home as they've okayed your plan. Good hunting, Captain and..." His lips turned up in a paternal grin as he addressed Sam, "If I might offer congratulations to you, Lieutenant Commander...the promotion orders just came in...and also, please accept my felicitations on your winning the Medal of Valor and on Captain Shelby naming you her second officer." Shaking his head, the distinguished captain remarked with no small measure of pride, "And to think, just a few years ago you were an ensign on this very ship."

His eyes falling first on Captain Shelby and then on Picard, Sam responded in a voice that was a mixture of both pride and humility, "Thank you, Sir. I learned from the very best."

"Well..." Captain Picard said, indicating that the meeting was over, "We should be at Starbase 375 in a couple of days, so I invite you both to enjoy our hospitality. I've assigned quarters for you both and I'm sure we'll see more of each other soon."

As the pair left the captain's ready room, they nodded at Commander Riker, sitting in the center chair and also at Lieutenant Commander Data sitting next to him on the chair to his left. "Mr. Lavelle seems to have done very well for himself, Sir." The android noted, "I read where he's now a Lieutenant Commander and Captain Shelby's second officer."

"Yeah..." Commander Riker responded in a low voice as his eyes fell to the three pips on his own collar, "He has." Captain Picard's voice then came through the comm, "Number One...I'd like to see you in my office, please."

"Aye, Captain." Riker responded, gritting his teeth, already anticipating the topic of their conversation.

"Why don't you go on to Ten-Forward after you get situated and changed, Sammy..." Liz whispered as the pair walked down the corridor. "I'll meet you there...I want to change out of this uniform and into something more—or less..." She said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, "...depending on point of view—appropriate."

“Ok, Betts.” Sam whispered back, his lips turning up in a warm and yet also wicked grin as he understood the import of his captain’s words. “I’ll meet you there.”

Entering Ten-Forward, Sam, now wearing civilian pants and a shirt, smiled as he immediately spotted Guinan behind the bar wearing her usual long flowing dress and high hat—this time in purple. Geordi LaForge and Data, already at the bar, waved for him to join them. “Sam!”

“Hey...Mr. LaForge...Mr. Data...” Sam greeted as he joined his fellow officers at the bar.

“It’s Geordi now...Lieutenant Commander.” The *Enterprise* engineer jovially corrected, “Congratulations.”

“And you can call me Data.” The android added, “And may I also tender my congratulations.”

“Where’s Captain Shelby?” Geordi asked as Commander Riker joined the little group at the bar.

“Mr. Lavelle...” Riker greeted, plastering on a grin, “Congratulations on your promotion and decoration.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Sam grinned, smirking inwardly at the *Enterprise* First Officer’s attempts to hide his discomfiture at the man who had just a few years ago been an ensign and was now nearly his equal in rank. Then turning to Geordi, he answered, “Captain Shelby should be here soon.” His lips turned up in a sly grin, “She likes to make an entrance.”

Moments later, Liz walked into the lounge and very quickly became the focus of attention. Wearing a royal blue, trimmed with silver, single piece low cut outfit revealing the tops of her breasts, with the midsection, front and back, cut out in the form of a diamond, the upper tip of the diamond beginning just below the breasts, then flaring out to the sides and then down to just below her waist. The outfit also exposed the flesh on her side, leaving a tantalizing glimpse of her breasts. To complete the ensemble, she wore a pair of dark blue with silver trim pumps, diamond earrings, and her navel ring of diamonds and silver filigrees.

"Damn." Geordi gasped, "She never looked like this the first time she was here."

"Guess all the stories about her are true." Riker grumbled

"Why is this any different from the way she dressed at the party held after we came back from rescuing Lieutenant Sito?" Data asked, clearly confused. "As I recall, what she wore then was even more revealing."

"It was." Sam agreed as Liz approached the little gathering, "But now, she's making a statement."

"And what sort of statement is that, Mr. Lavelle?" Riker inquired, arching an eyebrow.

Holding his head higher and with a pleased smile on his lips, when Sam answered the *Enterprise* first officer's question, it was with pride, "She's saying that she's taken off that burial shroud she and all the rest of us on the *Sutherland* have been wearing since Caernarvon IV. She's telling you, the rest of Starfleet, and especially the Cardassians and the Dominion, that she is back and so is the *Sutherland*. The rowdiest captain and the rowdiest ship in the Fleet are back. And God have mercy on anyone who stands in our way."

"Gentlemen." Liz smiled as she approached the bar. "Hello, Guinan...it's been a while." She grinned as the El Aurian bartender handed her a champagne in a long flute. "Mmmm..." The blonde captain purred, "Just as I remembered."

"I believe Cristal is your champagne of choice." Guinan smiled back as Liz finished her drink while engaging in a few polite words with Commander Riker and more pleasant conversation with Sam, Geordi, and Alyssa who had joined them after Data had left to assume bridge watch. Then, finally finishing her drink, Liz whispered to Sam in a voice low enough so that the others couldn't hear them, "Let's show them how we do it on the *Sutherland*, Sammy." She suggested as she gestured with her champagne glass at the vacant small dance floor.

"Sounds good to me, Betts..." Sam whispered back in an equally low voice as Liz got Guinan's attention.

"Could you play something we could dance to?" Liz asked with a mischievous grin, "Something from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century maybe?"

“Sure thing Captain...” Guinan grinned as music played.

“C’mon Sam....” Liz smiled as he grabbed her second officer by the hand, “Let’s show ‘em how it’s done.” And with that the pair got up on the dance floor as Liz, feeling the music and rhythm taking her as memories of her time spent with the man dancing with her on that frozen globe resurfaced, felt something she had not felt in a long time—alive.

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Silence reigned at the 23<sup>rd</sup> century table as she finished her story. “And after all these years, that still remains mine and Sam’s special time. No one else knows about it and no one else ever will.”

“Helluva a story, Spitfire.” Robert said in a kindly voice. “I guess you’ve earned this.” He said as he handed his granddaughter a mimosa. He then gestured towards an out of the way corner of the bar, “I get the impression you want to talk to me”

“Thanks, Poppy.” Liz grinned as she gave her grandfather a kiss on the cheek. “And yeah...I do...” She said as she led him to the corner.

“You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?” Wesley asked, his lips turned up in a warm smile.

“I don’t think ‘in love’ is the right phrase.” Liz demurred, “But I do love him. And he still is a special friend of mine—and I don’t have a lot of those.” Shrugging her shoulders, she declared, “Lovers come and go...but friends...for me...they’re rare and I love them all.”

“And your father?” Robert asked, his rugged face etched with concern for his grandchild.

“I’ll go talk to him here—Poppy.” Liz reluctantly conceded, “But...right now...in my real world...no...I’m not ready and I don’t think he is either.”

“Fair enough.” Robert accepted as he guided Liz back to the table where Cilla had joined them while the story was being told.

“So, where’s Sam now?” Cilla Oudekirk asked as her former commanding officer and the woman who inspired her to reach for the captain’s chair came back from their talk.

“He’s still my first officer...” Liz replied, “But not much longer. He’s getting his fourth pip shortly and command of the *Victory*. I suspect you all will be seeing him here soon. She then flashed a sly grin at Robert, Jim Kirk, Cilla, and Marietta—some of you have already seen him.” Then, seeing the lonely captain still at the bar, Liz sighed, “Excuse me, I’ll be back, but there’s something I have to do.”

Encouraged by Wesley’s gentle nod of the head and approving smile, Liz approached the man and spoke, “This doesn’t change anything between us. When we leave those doors...” She said, pointing to the large doors that separated this plane from the others, “We’ll forget all about this, but for now...for this moment...can we be father and daughter again?”

“I’d like that.” Philip Shelby replied with a wan smile as he took his daughter’s hand in his and let her lead him to the table with the other captains.

Resuming her place on Frank Dodge’s lap, Liz introduced, “You all know my father...Philip Shelby.”

“So...” Philip inquired, “What’s everyone having...”

“Uh Huh, Dad.” Liz smirked, “You know the rules...you gotta tell a story first.

“All right, Liz.” Philip smiled, “It happened while I was skipper of the *Roosevelt*—around about the time of your fifth birthday. We were patrolling the Neutral Zone and then we ran into...”