

Exeter

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Exeter

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Stardate 53285.81: After the long fight in the Dominion War, Lieutenant Commander Indira Sukihija must take the battered USS Exeter back to port... for decommissioning.

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Notes

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Historian's Note: This story takes place within four months of Star Trek: Deep Space Nine's finale episode, "What You Leave Behind."

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

Star Trek: The Quarterdeck Breed

by Lord McCovey Cove

Part Five: *Exeter*

NCC-26531 (USS *Exeter*)

Federation Sector 013

En route to Starbase 6.

Stardate 53285.81

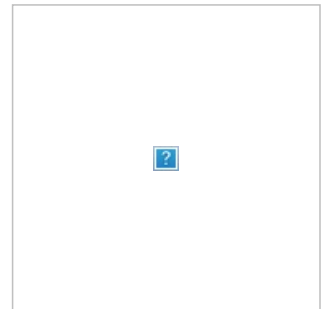
"Good morning," said the soft alto voice of the computer. "The time is oh-five-thirty."

When the computer repeated itself a second time, she swung her legs out to touch her feet against the deck. "Computer, cancel alarm," she called out. After hearing the computer's signature response tone, she pushed herself up from the bed and flexed as she did every morning. The surprise was the fact that she was somehow able to sleep an entire night without being woken by one of her colleagues.

Approaching the replicator, she ordered herself a mug of coffee and then asked the computer for a summary of events during the night shifts. *Exeter* was on course for Starbase 6, as it had been when she retired for the night. Other than a minor course correction suggested by the ship's navigational computer and confirmed by the officer of the deck, nothing unusual had occurred. Nor would it, travelling well within the heart of Federation territory at the restricted speed of warp five.

The ship was one of the first products of the Ambassador-class, constructed over fifty years ago and mothballed ten years ago during the brief peace between the Cardassian and Dominion wars. Starfleet brought the ship back into active service when the constant fighting with the Dominion forced the Federation to leave no stone unturned in the search for resources to maintain the war's high levels of readiness. *Exeter*, along with five of her sister ships, were turned out from the reserve shipyards at Antares and pressed into service in a high priority upgrade queue.

Indira Sukhija was among the officers assigned to the ship when it was brought back to life five years ago. A senior lieutenant at the time, she served under the officer-in-command, Grith. It was quite the occasion as Grith was the highest-ranking Gorn officer in Starfleet. He was a lieutenant commander, leading a crew of eighty-three as the ship was being transferred from Antares to Starbase 375 to report for duty in one



of the tactical fleets being assembled for the push to Deep Space Nine. Since then, she continued to serve in various capacities, including chief of operations and ultimately as the executive officer.

The Dominion war caused a lot of field promotions by admirals in the field. Indira herself was the benefactor of a promotion to lieutenant commander following her first fleet action. By the end of the war, she reached the rank of full commander. Field promotions in wartime were the result of rapid advancement due to a lack of experienced officers serving. Grith and Indira both proved to be capable officers in command positions. Captain Grith eventually rose to his current appointment as commanding officer of the *Exeter*. His promotion to captain was announced as a permanent promotion by Admiral Necheyev on the last day of the war.

Indira was not as lucky; she was reduced in rank to lieutenant commander the same day. Admiral Ross, the sector admiral, assured her that he would look into a promotion within the month, but Indira knew the upper echelons of Starfleet enough to know lip service when she heard it. By the time she was completely prepared for duty, the intercom called her attention away from that thought.

"Sukhija, here," she said, after touching the Starfleet insignia upon her chest.

"Commander," replied hissing voice of her commanding officer, Captain Grith, "report to my quarters."

In spite of having served together for nearly five years, the underlying hissing to the Gorn voice still sent a momentary chill down the back of her spine. Even through the sound of the universal translator, the heavy hiss resounded through the sanctuary of her stateroom. "Aye, sir," she informed him. "I'm on my way."

The small number of crewmembers walking through the ship reflected the early morning hour; before oh-six-hundred on any day without combat saw two-thirds of the crew enjoying their off-duty time by using the ship's recreational facilities or sleeping. The other third manned their stations during the final two hours of their shift. Indira enjoyed the feeling of moving between decks without seeing another person, but that feeling was squashed the moment she reached the turbolift.

She gave her customary warm smile toward the ensign standing within the turbolift car, and worked her memory to recall his name. With a crew compliment of just over eight hundred people, her ability to recall everyone's first name at the drop of a hat reached its limit quite often. She knew he was a member of the ship's security forces, but his first and last name eluded her.

Luckily, it never came up. They rode in the turbolift together wordlessly, until the car came to the sixth deck of *Exeter's* saucer section. She left the ensign behind and moved amongst the VIP staterooms located on the deck. The captain, in his wisdom, occupied one of the VIP staterooms as his own. He opted not to reside amongst the other senior officers on deck eight. Although his reasoning had been to choose a location closest to the bridge, he did not allow any of the other senior officers to follow suit. Indira knew, only due to her research, that it was the Gorn practice to separate a commander from his subordinates.

Immediately after she touched the door chime, the captain called out to the computer to allow her entry. She braced herself against the environmental change from the ship's normal operating condition, to the personal settings of Grith. His homeworld's idea of a beautiful morning felt like a brick wall of humidity against her skin, and she felt the effects of her morning shower melt away as a sheen of sweat and mist formed on the exposed areas of her skin.

"Computer," said Captain Grith, "return environment to Terran normal."

Indira raised her hand and said, "Sir, you don't have to do that."

The captain's left eye moved toward her, and his tongue began to move. "It is no annoyance. Do you wish to repeat your morning water ritual?" A croaking sound began to emit from his mouth; it sounded as though an animal was being skinned alive.

She recognized the captain's laughter and gave him a warm smile. In spite of his quirky sense of humor, filtered through the algorithms of the ship's universal translator, it was unusual that he would accommodate her like that. "What's the special occasion?" she asked as she moved toward his desk.

"In honor of the last meeting."

"Sir?" Though the universal translator tried its level best to reform the Gorn tongue into Standard, it tended to follow the succinct pattern of his speech. Gorn spoke in short, commanding phrases. Sometimes, it made normal conversation hard to follow.

"We will arrive at the starbase in two hours. I will be removed."

Of course, she knew, he did not mean that as others might have heard it. Indira understood his intent. "You mean you will be relieved of command, sir?"

"Correct."

"I'm very sorry to hear that. I hope you this means they will appoint you in command of another ship."

His large head moved up and down in a nodding motion. She always thought it looked more like he was trying to cough up something, but without the appropriate sound. "New ship. New crew. I am sorry."

Looking down at her feet briefly, she understood his words. He will be moving on, but she will not be following him to his new command. "I understand, sir. There's no need to apologize to me. I go where Starfleet points." A wave of betrayal washed over her, even as she spoke.

"I am sorry," the captain insisted. His tone began to rumble, as he attempted to approximate the Standard method of speaking softly. It never had that effect, but their working relationship overrode the immediate impact of his words. "I will speak with the admiralty. For you."

"With all due respect, sir," Indira said, not quite believing the words she spoke, "please don't."

He rumbled once more. "I *will* speak with the admiralty." Grith placed a padd upon his desk. "Orders for the new captain."

She picked up the padd and scanned it with her eyes. When he said "new captain," she assumed he meant his appointment orders from Starfleet for his new ship. It was not out of the ordinary for Grith to share his orders with her, especially during combat when it was likely that she might have to assume command if he fell in battle. However, the orders were not addressing his new command, but his old one.

"Upon arrival at Starbase 6, you are ordered to relinquish command of USS *Exeter* to Lieutenant Commander Indira Sukhija, and arrange high priority transportation to Antares Ship Yards." Indira looked up at her captain, wearing a look of disbelief. "They're placing me in command?"

"Correct."

That was a highly unusual move for Starfleet. Ambassador-class ships required a ranked captain in command. As a lieutenant commander, she could receive an appointment to command a much smaller class of ship, such as an Oberth or Defiant-class vessel. During wartime, appointing an officer of lower rank to command a large ship would not have been out of the ordinary, given the lack of available command officers in Starfleet. Now that the war was over, Starfleet's practices returned to peacetime procedure.

It meant there was only one reason why she would be placed in command. "They're retiring the ship, aren't they?"

"Correct."

"How many of the crew will be rotating off?"

"Seven hundred."

She felt her stomach knot up, but she did not understand why. "That leaves me with one hundred and eleven in crew. A skeleton crew to bring her home before they put her out to pasture?"

Baring his teeth in his own version of a smile, Grith told her, "We return to the beginning."

Indira opened her mouth to say something true to her emotions, but decided against it. Instead, she offered her soon-to-be former captain a small smile and agreed. "Indeed, we do, sir."

The mass exodus of crew to Starbase 6 brought a sense of eerie finality to the last voyage of the starship *Exeter*. Following a change-of-command ceremony performed by Captain Grith, the remaining crew of the ship enjoyed a brief reception held in the ship's lounge. Indira did not enjoy it at all, knowing full well that her tenure as captain would be very brief. After leaving dock, the fact that the ceremony was even held seemed to mock her status as captain.

Reduced to just over one hundred people, the amount of open space on the ship increased five times. The journey from the starbase to their final destination of Earth would take a mere day at warp eight. The increase in speed beyond the Federation restriction communicated the desire for the ship to be returned quickly.

Rather than sit on the bridge as a useless stand-in, Indira was given to touring the ship. A nostalgic feeling settled over her as she meandered from deck to deck. As she approached the second junction on deck eighteen, she recalled the first time she set foot aboard the ship, and the state it was in...

Stripped of any sense of luxury, the corridor of the Exeter looked like it had seen better days. Lieutenant Indra Sukhija moved out of the main corridor and into a service crawlway. She looked for a way around an emergency bulkhead blocking her path to the engineering compartment, using the layout she downloaded to a padd. Crawling down two decks from the shuttlebay, she finally reached a point where she could use the corridors again.

They had come aboard with a crew of eighty people, mostly engineering crewmen and women. They were tasked with bringing the ship out of mothballs and into a serviceable state for the Antares Ship Yards to equip her with tactical systems and supervise upgrades to put her into the fight against the Dominion. No vessel in the reserve fleet was being overlooked in this endeavor to keep the war from dwindling their capacity to fight it.

Lieutenant Michael Hawking, the resident engineering officer, met her at the corridor junction. He appeared to be approaching from the opposite direction. "Hey," he said.

"Where the hell did you come from?" she asked with wide eyes.

"Well, I, uh..." he started, looking around at the location. He ran a hand through his dirty blonde hair and gave her a sheepish look. "I got lost," he admitted with a shrug. "It was dumb luck that you got here when I did. I think I've been circling this junction for the past five minutes."

Indira could not contain her amusement. She shot him a wry grin. "You didn't think a map would help?"

"I did, but then that would force me to admit that I didn't know where I was going."

"You didn't."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I have to say I don't know."

"No, of course not," she said sarcastically.

"So where are we?"

She took a look around, but rather than admit her own loss of orientation, Indira consulted the padd containing the ship's organization. "Junction One-Eight-Two. We need to head aft a section and then down four more decks to reach engineering."

Hawking nodded as they began to walk in that direction. "Have you seen Grith around?"

"Not since we split up, no. I assume he's making his way up to the bridge."

"Good."

She fixed him with a glare. "'Good'?"

With a feigned shiver, he told her, "He gives me the creeps."

"What do you mean?"

"I know he's the first Gorn in Starfleet and all, but the hissing noise he makes when he talks..."

Indira chuckled. "I know. It takes some getting used to, doesn't it?"

Before he could respond, the voice of Lieutenant Commander Grith spoke over his communicator. "Grith to Hawking."

Hawking made it visibly clear that the Gorn's voice irritated him by shivering slightly as he touched his badge. "Hawking, here. Go ahead, sir."

"Where are you?"

Indira quickly shower her padd to give him his bearings. "I'm aft of junction two on deck eighteen."

"Go to engineering."

"We're on our way, sir."

"Who is with you?"

"Lieutenant Sukhija."

"Good. Out."

"Not much for words, is he?" asked Hawking, once Grith closed the channel.

"It's how they communicate," she told him. "Gorn leaders do not believe in mincing words or worrying about their command image."

He rolled his eyes as they entered the service hatch and climbed down the ladder to the deck below. "He's not going to get far with an attitude like that."

"I'm pretty sure that's the last thing on his mind right now," she said as she jumped down from the ladder and hit the deck with a resounding thud. "Ow."

Hawking stared down at her, wearing a wry grin. "That was pretty stupid."

She shot him an annoyed glare. "Shut up. Help me up, would you?"

He offered her his hand, and she used it, pulling herself up off the deck while rubbing at her backside.

Mike Hawking died during their first fleet action, Operation: Return, to take back Deep Space Nine when the ship took a direct hit to the engineering hull. Reports from the survivors of that conflict state that he died as he was assisting an injured crewman evacuate the compartment once the bulkheads began to activate. Unable to move himself out of the way of the emergency bulkhead, he was severed at the shoulders. The crewman survived as he was pushed out of the way at the last moment.

Then-Commander Grith recommended him for the Starfleet Cross, the second-highest honor one can earn in wartime. His recommendation was reduced to the Silver Star, along with a promotion to lieutenant commander, posthumously. She recalled how well Grith spoke of Hawking's career during the memorial service they held aboard the ship after *Defiant* drove the Dominion away from Deep Space Nine. That action had been her first taste of fleet combat during the war. It had also served as the first time she lost someone close to her in the line of duty.

To her, Hawking was more than just a friend; he had served with her on two previous starships prior to the start of the war with the Dominion. They were promoted together to junior grade lieutenant, and then again to full lieutenant aboard the Galaxy-class starship USS *Venture*. Serving under Captain Hastur, they cut their teeth on the border, defending civilian traffic from pirates and the wayward Ferengi ship, looking to salvage a ship before they qualified available for such an activity. When war broke out, Starfleet made a general appeal for officers to volunteer for combat duty. They mutually agreed to do so, hoping to net the same assignment.

Although she knew he had no regrets in saving that life, Indira regretted their decision to transfer to the same ship. For months following his

death, she lingered on their impudent assumption that they would be fine no matter what. Faced with the grim prospect of mortality, she withdrew her friendships in the hope of sparing herself the pain of losing another close friend. Starfleet's mandate to protect the Federation from military threats meant that they all risked their lives for their citizens. Intellectually, she knew what that meant, but the lesson learned impacted the emotional side of her.

She felt the sting of the memory play at her heart as she entered the mess hall, noting strangely that it was devoid of any crew. Even with the lights dimmed, the royal blue flag of the United Federation of Planets installed above entrance and exit to the main corridor on that deck. The memory of how it got there struck her, as she stared at its lines...

The war with the Dominion forced the Federation and its allies to retreat. They gave up far more territory than they gained, and the overall morale of the crew began to wane with every report from the front. Exeter neared the completion of her necessary upgrades and they had planned to install the remaining systems en route to link up with the fleet gathering at Starbase 375. Grith received a battlefield promotion to captain and appointed in command of the ship when the starship carrying their intended commanding officer was destroyed in battle on their way back from the front. He was ordered to make haste with the upgrades and proceed with all due speed.

Indira was appointed as the new executive officer after they got underway, seeing as she was the next most senior officer aboard ship. So, ranked merely as a full lieutenant, she approached her new duty as best she could. The lingering thought she had was to improve their morale, first. Otherwise, they would face their first battle with the possibility they would have an unfocused crew or worse... one that might defeat themselves before the first shot was fired.

When she addressed her concerns with Captain Grith, he took the information in stride and told her in his own way, that he would address it shortly. By the time the ship departed from the shipyards, he ordered her to assemble the crew in the mess hall for a brief announcement.

She arrived last, making certain that everyone heard her order and corralled them into the mess hall. Grith stood near the replicators and galley access, with a piece of royal blue cloth draped from his right arm. It shimmered as it moved with him, as the cloth caught the light within the mess hall.

"I came to the Federation long ago," he said. "My ship dealt with Orions but my crew died. I alone survived." He reached to the cloth and pulled it with his claw across the length of his uniformed arm.

"Starfleet ship Victory rescued me, but my ship was lost. I joined Starfleet to repay a great debt of thanks. My people reject myself and my decision. It is hard to think that I cannot go back home." He stared out at his crew, those huge eyes seemingly focused on each of them as they could see their reflection within the mirrors that scattered across them. "This is my home. You are my family.

"Our family is under threat of destruction by a powerful enemy. An enemy that travelled a great distance to seek our end. But we are too strong to be taken so easily because of how we work. Our family frightens them. We do not bend to the will of those who would scare us. Our family is strong."

He unraveled the flag of the United Federation of Planets and held it out within both of his claws. "This is the symbol of our family. Everyone who lives under it, shall have Starfleet's protection. We do not seek violence, but we will use it if there is no other way. We fight!"

Indira could feel the spirits of the crew lifting, as they all had looks of determination on their faces. It was working, and she had to admit, it was working for her, as well.

"We fight for them, and I fight for you," he said. "Lieutenant, some assistance, please."

She approached her captain and helped him place the flag above the entrance and everyone in the mess watched as they did so. Once they were done, they both stepped down from the stepladder and turned to face them.

Grith spoke once more. "This will be here to remind us. Remind us to remember why we are here. And why we cannot fail! We fight for them, and I fight for you!"

"We fight for them," repeated the crew, "and I fight for you."

Indira joined in, but raised her voice louder. It incited a response in kind from them, and soon they repeated the phrase over and over again until the voices could reach no higher without losing their composure. It soon dissolved into a rowdy applause.

As they were dismissed from the meeting, they all wore smiles and patted each other on the back. Indira looked at Grith and acknowledged his efforts with a smile of her own. "Well done, sir."

He said nothing. Grith turned and left the mess hall as he arrived, but he reached up and grazed the bottom of the cloth with his hand as he did so.

So did she.

And so did everyone else who left. Now, and throughout the rest of the war.

The flag hung there, though it looked a little less luminescent than it had been when it was first placed. A year and a half of people reaching up and touching it ritually might have drained some of its lustrous quality, although she mused that it might have something to do with the fact that the room's illumination was at quarter-standard.

As she departed the mess hall, she reached up out of habit. She made a mental note to preserve it for sentiment before they decommissioned the ship. After all, once the ship is removed from the active list, it can no longer legally fly the flag of the Federation.

She approached the junction toward main engineering. With a as warm as smile as she could muster, she waved away the junior grade lieutenant acting as the temporary chief engineer for their short voyage. A mere six people worked at the stations within the compartment. On any given shift during the war, engineering would have no less than fifty-four people working there. There was a time, during the war, when the number of people dropped dramatically...

The wail of the battlestations klaxon gave way to the alarm that informed the ship's crew that intruders had arrived. Exeter and the Excelsior-class Repulse were caught in a supply transfer of weapons near the Cardassian border when a fleet of Jem'Hadar vessels reached out across the line and attacked. Heavily damaged, Repulse had no choice but to leave them behind and move out of range of the subspace jamming to send for help. Grith antagonized the Dominion forces to keep their interest on Exeter.

Eventually, the ship's defense systems were compromised by energy weapons and torpedo fire. This allowed the shock troops entry aboard the Starfleet ship. Though the initial forces numbered five, the combined firepower of Exeter and Repulse reduced the odds significantly. The remaining two enemy ships centered their attack upon the engineering section enough to take the warp drive offline, crippling the ship's ability to defend itself.

The next logical step would be a boarding party. Hand weapons were distributed to those that did not already have them, and the security forces were distributed to the sensitive sections of the ship. Indira joined the crew defending engineering, as the ship's executive officer. Captain Grith remained behind to defend the bridge. The problem with defending against the Jem'Hadar was the simple fact that their stealth technology allowed them to appear from anywhere. There was no way to set up a defense, if the direction of the attack was uncertain.

As promised, the first sign of an attack turned out to be a scream from one of the security officers. Even though his weapon was drawn and ready for use, they managed to kill him with a quick slash across his neck. Phaser fire followed soon after, but Indira could not see clearly enough to know if she hit them or not. The environment within engineering heated up quickly as the air was exposed to more and more energy weapons. She felt the burn of a phaser beam hit the bulkhead near her arm, and she moved to her right to avoid being hit.

The wildness of the phaser fire from the collected group increased the danger tenfold, she realized. Just before she could order them to move against the bulkhead to fire in at the enemy, she felt the grasp of a Jem'Hadar soldier hard against her shoulder. Grimacing through the pain, Indira tried to leap to the right, but the vice-like grip he had her in prevented movement. She brought her phaser to bear on him, but he knocked it away with his free hand and then smiled as he took her wrist in his hand and squeezed hard enough to crack the bones there.

Feeling the fear course through her, she brought her knee up to the junction of his legs, hoping to injure him enough to free her from his painful ministrations. Impacting against his crotch, the force was enough to push him back and away from her, but he did not seem to be injured. A quick glance around at the melee within the compartment confirmed her suspicion; half of the team assembled there were already dead or mortally wounded. A phaser was within her reach.

She dove for it, falling down on her bruised shoulder hard. Screaming out in pain, she made contact with the weapon and without checking its settings, brought it around to point it in the direction of her assailant. She fired without aiming, trying her best to keep her eyes open and focused in spite of the stinging tears forming at the corners. The beam lanced out and touched the soldier's forehead, shooting clean through as it exploded under the power of the phaser.

Dispatching her attacker, she remained in the prone position, as more fire lanced out over her. Indira began to crawl toward the exit, hoping to contain the attacking party within and protect the rest of the ship. If need be, she could vent the atmosphere and stop the onslaught before other sections would be in danger. That was assuming they were not already, of course.

A pair of hands laid upon her back. She screamed in surprise and stopped when she turned over to fire her weapon at whoever it was. She breathed a sigh of relief when it was one of the security petty officers. The petty officer helped her to her feet, but kept her low as they both fired at the Jem'Hadar soldiers.

They survived the day, and she won herself the first of two Purple Heart medals. The firefight in engineering marked the first time she took a life in defense of her ship. At least, the first time in hand-to-hand combat. She remembered how long it took to come down off of her adrenaline rush and the moment she did, she collapsed under the care of the ship's medical officers. Indira folded her arms as she leaned against the bulkhead that took fire; the evidence residing there as they never managed to replace the panel.

The entire ship carried its battle scars from within and without. Starfleet lacked the resources to put a true spit-and-polish on the old girl. Sections of the external hull simply had hull patches replacing damaged ones. When she saw the ship from the view of the dockyard at Starbase 375, she remarked that it looked like they put half the ship in bandages. What she did not say was how much the ship looked like the crew felt... barely held together. It was not until they made the decision to make that final push to Cardassia that they decided to reinforce the armor plating.

Her hand ran against the side of the bulkhead where the Jem'Hadar weapon scored it. A small smirk played over her lips, but disappeared when the dark scar gave way to a faint red streak. She left out a shaky sigh as she pulled her hand back quickly.

Sukhija moved away from the engineering compartment, her hands clasped behind her.

The junior grade lieutenant seated in the center seat stood up as soon as he saw Sukhija step onto the bridge. "Captain on the bridge," he announced clearly.

"As you were," said Sukhija, immediately. "There's certainly no need for that." She looked around at the bridge. All the stations were empty. "Especially since there's no one here."

Lieutenant (jg) Hansen, the ship's next senior officer, grinned. "Sorry, sir. I hope you'll forgive my indulgence."

"I suppose I'll overlook it, this time." She broke into a smile and asked for a report.

"The shipboard automation program is operating within cruise mode parameters," replied the ship's computer, before Hansen could speak. The computer continued with a full report of their course, speed, and sensor contacts.

Hansen shrugged with his hands outstretched.

"So what have you been doing while the computer's doing all the heavy lifting?" she asked him as she wandered over toward the helm.

"I have been efficiently applying heat to accelerate this surface, here," he patted the seat, "to a more comfortable temperature."

She shook with silent laughter. She liked Ulysses "Uli" Hansen, ever since he stepped aboard as an ensign less than a year ago. "Well done, Lieutenant."

"Will you be taking the bridge, sir?"

Sukhija looked around once more, taking it all in. "It's hard to believe that by this time next week, it'll be back to the way it was when we found her."

"Sir?"

"We rescued her from the Antares mothball fleet. Brought her back to life and put her into the fight."

Hansen shook his head. "You never told me that."

"Well, you were just a newly-commissioned ensign. I think you were more wide-eyed about the fact that you had to report to a Gorn captain than anything else. Not much time spent getting to know people while we took fire from the Dominion."

"I suppose you're right," he said. He stepped down, taking a seat at the helm station next to her. He did not touch any of the controls, instead swiveling the seat around to face her. "Do you know what you're going to do when we get home?"

She thought about it, looking away from him and at the deck. Finally, she admitted, "I don't know." She returned her gaze to Hansen. "Do you?"

He folded his arms. "The Bureau of Personnel transmitted a fleetwide bulletin that anyone seeking retirement or transfer to the reserves could do so within the next ninety days," he replied. "I've been thinking about whether or not I want to stay."

Hansen wasn't a regular. He was a reserve officer, pressed into service by the needs of the Federation. He didn't even graduate from Starfleet Academy, like she did. He was a product of the Reserve Officer Training Command, set up by Starfleet to recruit and train baccalaureates to be officers during the war. Demand was so high for skilled people, sometimes they would even forgo the college diploma. "Have you thought about transferring into the regular fleet?"

"I have. I mean, when I first got here, I wondered what the hell I was thinking..."

She grinned.

"Starfleet wasn't really my first choice. But, you know, with the war on and the patriotic call to duty... it was hard not to make a good case for joining and fighting for what I believe in."

She tilted her head to one side. "Starfleet isn't all about fighting, though. It's just one of our functions."

"I know."

Looking away from him again, she placed a hand on her chest. "I certainly didn't join to fight. I joined to explore."

"Really?"

"Absolutely," she said with a succinct nod. "But, when you're an explorer, you've got be ready to defend yourself and your ship against anything that might want to bring harm. The unknown isn't all Betazoids and Deltans. The unknown has Romulans, Breen..."

"The Dominion," he added.

"Right."

Hansen appeared to consider her words. "Do you think I'd do well on an explorer?"

Sukhija smiled and placed a hand on his shoulder. He came aboard with a degree in astronavigation, hoping to land himself a job on a commercial vessel as a pilot. In their time serving together, he learned combat flight so quickly that his talents became indispensable aboard *Exeter*. "Let's just say that if I ever command a ship, you'd be one of the first people I'd want as my crew."

"Thanks, sir," Hansen said with a large smile. With an extended index finger, he said, "I'm going to hold you to that."

"Attention to orders," announced Sukhija. The skeleton crew assembled in the ship's large mess hall. With the tables cleared away and stored, there was enough room for four times that many people, but group of one hundred remained behind to decommission their home.

The dockyard lieutenant stood next to her as the ceremony dictated. She carried the orders from Starfleet's Bureau of Ships to Sukhija, and presented them upon her arrival.

"By the order of Starfleet Command, Naval Construction Contract Two Six Five Three One is stricken from the active list and decommissioned, effective this stardate," she read the order aloud to the crew. "The ex-*Exeter* is to be transferred to the McKinley orbital facility for dismantling and recycling." Her throat threatened to close up as she read the new name of the ship. She would no longer fly the flag of the Federation on her decks. "Signed, Rear Admiral Grant Edward Markham, Starfleet Bureau of Ships."

The lieutenant turned toward her and nodded. "I relieve you, sir."

She turned to face the young woman. "I stand relieved." The ceremony completed, the crew began to break up. She called out, "Before you all go..."

They turned their heads to look at her. Some of them with a question in their eyes. This was not a part of the usual procedure.

"Before you all go... I just wanted to say..." she started, feeling the back of head get tight along with her throat. "I just wanted to say that these past two years, serving with all of you..." She wrung her hands out, not sure of what to say next. She wanted to tell them that she didn't want the family to break up like this. She didn't want to put *Exeter* out to pasture. She enjoyed their time together, but how could one enjoy being at war? Would that sound too callous, in spite of her sentiment? "It has been a privilege to serve with every one of you. I'm glad... that I got a chance to be here. That we were here to see the old girl home for the last time."

Sad smiles broke out across the crowd. A few shook each others' hands, some hugged. Hansen stepped forward from within them and reached out with his hand to her.

She gripped it firmly.

"Good luck to you, sir." He said, pulling her into the crowd.

Everyone began to pat her back or shake her hand. Words of good luck and good bye were uttered as they all seemed to coalesce in camaraderie. Eventually, they all began to leave, in pairs and groups, until Sukhija and Hansen remained behind.

He shook her hand again and reminded her of her promise.

"I won't forget, Lieutenant," she told him.

And then she was alone on the deck.

The flag of the Federation had been taken down, but the spot where it sat remained. It was Captain Grith's idea to hang it there to remind all of them what they stood for, and why they fought to protect it. Every morning before her scheduled shift, she would enter the mess hall, look up at that flag, and remember how Mike Hawking would reach up and touch it on his way out of the door.

When the ship was removed from active service, the act of taking down the flag was called, "striking the colors." It was folded ceremoniously, and then offered to the commanding officer of the ship being decommissioned. It was supposed to be an honor granted to the final captain.

Now it was gone, forever.

She damned herself for not speaking up. Instead, she realized that she said what she needed to say. With a final glance around, she left the mess hall and made her way down to the airlock.

All of the ship's lights were reduced to allow just enough light to navigate the corridors. The turbolift sighed as it reached her deck, and she ran her hand along the side of it until it reached the control panel. She entered in her destination, not trusting her voice to speak at all.

The doors parted again, to allow her to step off. The deck containing the airlock did not have carpet on it; instead, her heels clicked loudly against the metal deck. They echoed down the corridors in every direction. The sound reminded her that she would be the last of the crew to depart the ship.

However, Lieutenant Hansen stood just inside the airlock, waiting for her. He had something in his hands behind him, but she could not see it.

"What are you still doing here?" she asked.

"I was waiting around for you."

"Why?"

He pulled around a triangle-shaped object in front of him and presented it to her. "I hope you don't mind. I had a couple of the crewmen take it down before the dockyard people got to it."

"I don't understand."

He gestured with it, for her to take it. "I believe, sir, that as the last captain of the *Exeter*, the honor goes to you."

She looked down at it, and when she saw the gold letters spelling out the United Federation of Planets, she grinned. "Thank you, Lieutenant." Sukhija accepted the flag with both hands, and then placed her right hand on top of it... feeling the thick fabric move under her fingers. "Thank you."

"No, sir," he said with a slow shake of his head. "Thank you."

"Good morning, Commander," said Rear Admiral Jana Fleming as she rose from behind her desk. Her office on the executive floor of

Starfleet Headquarters overlooked a stunning view of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, facing toward the bay from the old grounds of the American military base formerly known as "The Presidio." She wore dual gold pips inside what was known as the "flag box," denoting her rank as a rear admiral (upper half).

Indira accepted the offered hand of the admiral and shook it gently before releasing it. "Good morning, Admiral," she replied in kind. "How may I be of service to you, sir?"

Wrinkles around the green eyes of the rear admiral formed as she smiled. "I understand from the Bureau of Personnel that you turned down their retirement offer." Fleming reseated herself behind the desk and gestured for Indira to take a seat herself.

Irritation bubbled up inside her. "Yes, sir," said Indira, trying her best to keep an indignant tone out of her voice as she spoke. "And with all due respect, sir, I can spare both of us a lot of time by reiterating my commitment to serving."

"Please don't misunderstand, Commander," said the admiral with a raised hand. "This meeting is not about convincing you to stand down. It's to ask you to step up."

"I'm all ears, sir."

"We would like you to consider an assignment to a deep space exploration mission into the Beta Quadrant." Admiral Fleming keyed in a few commands into her desktop terminal to call up a mission profile on the large viewscreen in her office. "An extended multi-ship mission carried out by a number of ships, varying in size from Galaxy-class to Intrepid-class."

Her eyes looking over the mission specifics, she saw that it would be twenty ships sent into the unexplored territory. "This mission profile reminds me of the old five-year missions in the twenty-third century."

"The profile drew a lot of inspiration from those old missions; especially with the level of effectiveness it had on Federation resources in the years following the end of that program."

If the admiral wanted her to make some sort of contribution, the mission profile certainly did not illustrate that. "I see, sir. If I may be so bold, how would I fit into those plans?"

Fleming grinned. "They told me you were the kind of woman to get to the bottom line."

"They,' sir?"

"Admiral Ross and Captain Grith. Both of them contacted my office this week, asking me to consider you for placement within the new program."

Indira fought the blush as much as possible, but lost the battle. "I asked them not to go through any trouble on my behalf, sir."

"Nonsense," Fleming said immediately. "They communicated to me that they felt you had been overlooked. I've read your service record. It's very rare to have an officer with your level of combat experience survive the war for as long as you did. Captain Grith spoke very highly of you and your ability to adapt to every situation the Dominion threw at you."

"I must remember to thank them for their kindness."

"Come now, Commander. No false modesty."

Feeling her blush deepen, Indira kept herself from sinking into the chair as the admiral maintained her stare. "It's not false, sir. I did what was required of me."

"Well, be that as it may, I believe we have need of an officer like yourself for this program."

"Yes, sir."

Admiral Fleming looked down at her terminal. "I would like you to find transportation to Utopia Planetia after taking some administrative leave of one week to enjoy some downtime," she ordered. "I understand that you have not had an opportunity to indulge in recreation since the end of the war?"

"Actually, sir, I think the last time I had leave was before the war started."

"Then this will be your big chance, Commander."

"Aye, sir. To what ship will I be reporting once my leave is over?"

"New construction," replied the admiral. "Intrepid-class light cruiser."

As she was a lieutenant commander, Indira sighed. She would serve as an executive officer once more. Light cruisers required no less than a full commander in permanent command. "Has the captain been selected, yet, sir?"

"In fact, she has. However, she has not yet been informed of her appointment."

Indira gave the admiral a nod. "Understood, sir."

Fleming reached for a padd and handed it to Indira. "For you, Commander."

"Thank you, sir." Indira read the screen casually, not really letting the words sink in. She assumed it was simply her duty orders for transfer

following leave. "Will there be anything else, Admiral?"

The admiral cocked her head. "Did you not read it?"

Embarrassed that she had not, Indira quickly gave the padd her undivided attention. When she finished reading, she snapped her head up to fix the admiral with a wide smile. "Thank you, sir!"

Admiral Fleming offered her hand and said, "Congratulations, *Captain Sukhija*."

TO: LCDR I. Sukhija
FR: VADM J. Fleming
RE: PCU *Exeter*

Lieutenant Commander:

- 1. You are hereby selected for promotion to the rank of Commander.**
- 2. You are requested and required to assume command of NCC-78770 (PCU *Exeter*), presently located at Construction Yard Gamma, Utopia Planetia Ship Yards, Mars.**

Signed,

Jana I. Fleming,
Rear Admiral (upper half),
Starfleet Command

End Notes

And now, a word from the author:

Post-Dominion War stories are all the rage, these days, aren't they? Anyway, *Exeter* is actually the seventh incarnation of the E-ship I wrote. I went through other stories, including *Eagle*, *Endeavour*, *Excalibur*, and *Excelsior*. And because I like to tease you, here were some of the premises:

- *Eagle* #1, a Constitution-class refit starship tending to a medical emergency on the planet Betazed before they were members of the Federation. Ultimately ditched when I wrote myself into a corner regarding the telepathic child they rescued.

- *Eagle* #2, a Constitution-class refit starship being brought out of mothballs and put into the fight for the Cardassian War. Ultimately ditched when I got two thousand words in and I had no more story to go on.

- *Eagle* #3, a Constitution-class refit starship whose captain was about to be put out to pasture by Starfleet. I got two scenes in and dumped it because I felt this was way too close to a previous entry, *Constitution*.

- *Endeavour*, an Ambassador-class starship fighting in the Cardassian War. Ditched after I realized I was rewriting *Dallas*. Oh, well.

- *Excalibur*, an Ambassador-class starship patrolling the border. Ditched when someone pointed out that Peter David had laid serious claim to the starship I was using. But, there was something about the Gorn science officer I wrote that I liked, so I kept him for later.

- *Excelsior*, an Excelsior-class starship on deep patrol. Intended as a sequel to *Agamemnon* and *Bellerophon*, featuring a future Captain James and Lieutenant Commanders Duke and Leone. The premise was that the ship was being called for help by a space station thought long gone (Deep Space Station K-12). Ditched when I realized that I didn't want to do sequels within the scope of the anthology. Maybe I'll rewrite it as a full-fledged novella someday.

Which led us to *Exeter*. I wanted to showcase another woman in command, especially after spending so much time aboard such a ship and keeping her together long enough to keep her in the fight. Indira was so endearing that I contemplated a full series about her and the new *Exeter*. Maybe I'll write that after I'm done with *Full Speed Ahead*.

Indira's name is Indian, and it means, "Bestower of Wealth." Grith will return in another story, someday, because I like Gorn characters a lot.

Thanks for reading! Stay tuned for the final installment, *Farragut*.

-- McCC

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!