

Life is Choices

A Star Trek: Gibraltar Short Story

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Starbase 71

As waiting rooms went, it was spacious, quiet, and modestly decorated, essentially what one would expect of a flag officer's temporary offices on a starbase where nearly everyone aboard was in transit to someplace else.

Commander Donald Sandhurst craned his neck tiredly and tugged at the gold collar that was beginning to chafe his neck after sixteen hours on duty. Two weeks earlier he had been temporarily reassigned from the executive officer's position aboard the starship *Venture* to oversee the drydock facilities here at Starbase 71. *Venture* herself was undergoing eight weeks of repairs and upgrades following damage sustained in the final battle to free Cardassia Prime from the clutches of the Dominion some seven weeks previous.

Starfleet had lost nearly half its available ships in the Dominion War, and most of those that remained had been left to languish with non-critical battle damage that had been hastily patched over in order to return the vessels to the front lines quickly. Now that cumulative damage would have to be completely repaired, and every shipyard in the Federation was buried under a backlog of work orders that would take over a year for them to dig out from under.

Construction of new ships to replace all that they had lost was also underway, drawing upon the design and construction skills of the Starfleet Corps of Engineers and countless civilian subcontractors.

Though Sandhurst had enjoyed serving as first officer to the legendarily mercurial Captain Ebnal, he was excited at the prospect of returning to his engineering roots. A plethora of new positions had opened up at the Utopia Planitia Yards on Mars, and Sandhurst felt that

he would be an ideal choice for yardmaster at any one of the facility's dozens of orbital construction rigs.

So, when the unexpected message from Rear-Admiral Monica Covey had arrived on his terminal, Sandhurst strongly suspected that his mentor and former commanding officer had added her weight to his application for transfer to Utopia. He was not typically given to bouts of self-satisfaction, but he would be lying if he didn't admit to having a warm glow of pleasure at the potential of a planet-side assignment.

If I play my cards right, he reflected giddily, I could ride this job all the way into retirement. The brand new Earth–Mars Transport Relay System would be online within the month, allowing for near-instantaneous beaming of people and cargo between the two most populated planets of the Sol system. He'd had his eye on an apartment in central Brussels, less than a five-minute walk from the public transporter complex. *A five-minute commute to Mars and back... now that is my idea of an idyllic shore assignment.*

His reverie was interrupted by a male voice which announced, "Commander, the admiral will see you now."

Sandhurst stood, nodded distractedly at the desk-bound yeoman, and proceeded through the door.

Monica Covey was standing at the office's replicator station as Sandhurst entered the room. Though she'd aged some since he had last seen her, Covey still retained the same sense of vibrancy in her willowy frame. Her hair, now colored auburn, was shoulder-length and allowed to flow freely. Sandhurst experienced a moment of self-conscious guilt over his expanding waistline, a byproduct of his surrendering his engine room and kilometers of Jefferies tubes for a chair on the bridge.

He extended a hand to her, but rather than shaking his appendage she placed a steaming cup of Rigellian spice coffee into it. "Welcome, Mister Sandhurst," she said with a vaguely curious smile.

Sandhurst smiled broadly in response as he accepted the mug. "You remembered, sir. I'm flattered."

Covey took an experimental sip of her own beverage as she motioned towards a sitting area opposite her desk. "You're the only person I've ever served with who could stomach the stuff." She descended into a soft chair as Sandhurst sat in its opposing number a moment later, cradling his mug.

"Back in gold, I see," she remarked, a hint of amusement in her voice.

He smirked. "I hung onto the red for a few days, but nobody would take me seriously as an engineer in that color." He took a drink of his agreeably pungent coffee and sighed contentedly. "It's terrific to see you again, Admiral."

"You too, Donald. What's it been, three years?"

"Yes," he answered. Then, as her mouth began to open with the question they both knew was coming, he added preemptively, "And no, I haven't spoken to Ojana recently."

She smiled wanly at his correctly having deduced the unasked query. "Fair enough." Covey reached out to toggle the LCARS interface set into the coffee table separating the two officers. "You're no doubt wondering why I've called you here," she said as the wall mounted viewer that had been disguised as a print of Matisse's *Blue Nude* came to life.

Sandhurst inclined his head. "I am indeed, sir."

The cross-section of a *Constitution*-class starship floated onscreen, slowly rotating to reveal various angles of the craft. Sandhurst admired the lines of the old ship for a moment as he absorbed the data stream scrolling up beside the image. "Good Lord, I didn't realize we had any Connies left in service."

"She's the *Gibraltar*," Covey provided. "They pulled her from the Dalashni V anchorage eight months ago and started a Priority-Three refit cycle to bring her up to modern specs."

He stood to move closer to the viewer, continuing to read the accompanying text display. "It says she just finished that refit at Starbase 234." He glanced at Covey, but the admiral's expression was inscrutable.

“Let me guess,” Sandhurst continued. “They botched the upgrades and you need me to fix it quickly and quietly?” He frowned, shaking his head. “Hard to believe, though. Cora Charbonneau’s the yardmaster at 234, and she’s always done quality work.”

“No,” Covey said softly, “the refit went perfectly.” She set down her coffee cup, stood, and walked over to stand alongside the viewer. “I don’t need someone to fix *Gibraltar*, Donald. I need someone to command her.”

He blinked, speechless. Then, still at a loss for words, he blinked again. “You’re... kidding, right?”

“Not in the least,” she replied, suppressing the urge to laugh at his obvious astonishment.

Sandhurst shook his head as if to clear it, then looked down into his coffee mug for a long moment. Finally, he met Covey’s eyes. “Are things really *that* bad?”

Her expression was one of disbelief. “You fought in the war. Hell, now you’re helping to patch together all the ships that we kept throwing into the Dominion’s jaws time and again. It takes a lot longer to train a competent officer or enlisted person than it does to fix or even build a ship, Commander.” Her face hardened as she let her emotional control slip a notch, just enough to let the pain of the past two years’ losses seep into her voice. “Yes, we have too few ships now, but it’s the loss of so many good people that’s hurting us the most. The war cost us an entire generation of future command officers. The most experienced captains we have, those we can spare, are being promoted up into the admiralty to fill the gaps the Breen left when they leveled Starfleet Headquarters.”

The engineer appeared unmoved. “Still, I have to believe there must be other, better candidates.”

“You’re smart, Donald, and intuitive, and compassionate, and yet you can still make the tough calls when needs be,” Covey said with conviction. “Lucian Ebnal himself said that you’d make a fine captain.”

Sandhurst actually snorted at that. "Okay, sir, now I think you're overselling it a bit."

"He did!" she exclaimed. "Everyone thinks you'd be perfect for the captain's chair but you."

He gesticulated towards the mass of scarred and battered ships orbiting the starbase. "What about the Fleet?" he blurted, rising from his chair. "Someone has to put it back together. I'm a damned fine engineer, and you'd be wasting me in the center seat!"

"I don't think so," was her heated retort. "You're squandering your potential by remaining in the engine room."

"I never wanted command," he rejoined. "Ebnal forced it on me out of necessity!"

"Ebnal never does anything without thinking, you of all people know that," Covey said with audible exasperation. "He picked you because you were the right person for the job, Donald."

He held up his hands. "Fine, good. Even if I concede that, it doesn't change the fact that I don't *want* command of a starship."

She stepped closer to him, radiating a fierce conviction that he could not help but find intimidating. "This isn't about what you want, Commander. This is about what's best for Starfleet and the Federation. It is your duty to serve to the best of your ability, and I judge that your abilities dictate that you assume command of *Gibraltar*."

"My duty?" he echoed incredulously.

"One that you're honor-bound to accept," she replied without a hint of hyperbole. "The Federation is teetering on the edge of a precipice, Mister Sandhurst. Are you going to just watch from the sidelines, or are you going to get into the game?" She extended a hand to him. "We need you... I need you, on the bridge of that ship."

"This is insane, you know that, right?" he murmured, still dumbfounded at this unlikely turn of events.

She made no reply, but simply stood with her hand outstretched.

Sandhurst watched himself with an odd sense of detachment as he reached out and took her hand in his own. “When you put it like that, Admiral, how can I refuse?”

Covey chuckled as she maneuvered him towards the door. “Come on, Captain. Let’s go make this official.”

Numb with the awesome responsibility he had just inexplicably accepted, Donald Sandhurst fell into step behind the admiral, retracing his previously confident steps through the outer office.

It appeared that Brussels and Utopia Planitia would have to wait a while longer.

“Oh, and wait until you meet your XO,” Covey chirped happily. “You two will get on famously!”