THE PENALTIES OF SUCCESS

A Star Trek: Gibraltar Short Story
By Samuel Redfeather 2023©

The Dominion War - May 2374
USS *Venture,* Retreating from the Hakamis System

"I thought I was going to die, but later I was afraid I might not," he admitted too freely, still riding the wave of ebbing adrenaline and the painkillers they'd administered to him.

"I don't doubt it," Doctor Keralta replied quietly, choosing to ignore the lieutenant commander's medicated confession. "It sounds like all of you stumbled into a meat-grinder down there."

Keralta was finishing her exam of the bruised, bloodied, but otherwise intact engineer when the captain entered Sickbay.

Captain Lucian Ebnal stood off to the side, arms folded across his chest, appearing uncharacteristically quiet given the circumstances.

Keralta finally replaced the sensor wand into the medical tricorder, snapped the device closed, and turned to make her report. "He'll be fine, sir. He's roughed up a bit and has some mild gamma radiation exposure from the mines, but I'm clearing him to return to duty in twenty-four hours."

Ebnal nodded curtly but said nothing, and Keralta took the opportunity to retreat to her office after shooing a nurse out of the compartment.

The spider-web of cuts etched across Donald Sandhurst's features had almost faded completely thanks to the dermal regenerator treatment. He lay there, silent, watching Ebnal and awaiting the mercurial captain's verdict.

"What the hell went wrong down there?" were the first words out of Ebnal's mouth.

"I'm not entirely sure, sir. The colony was empty, and Commander Aiken ordered my team to download the colony's logs from the central ops building. When I deactivated the distress beacon in the operations center to restore power to the computer system, I think it triggered the mines."

Ebnal seemed to glower even more intensely, if that were possible, as his unyielding gaze drilled into the prostrate engineer. "And then?"

"And then all hell broke loose, sir." Sandhurst closed his eyes briefly, momentarily overwhelmed by an onslaught of images from the frenzied moments that followed. "There was a series of explosions from outside… the mines, I'd guess, followed by phaser fire. I think Aiken and the Marine lieutenant were killed in the initial series of blasts, and the rest of the away team was calling for help. I had my engineers set up a defensive perimeter around the ops center, and then I headed out to try and disable the mines."

"Where'd the mines come from in the first place?" Ebnal demanded, the accusatory tone in his voice only too obvious.

"My best guess is they were there the whole time," Sandhurst admitted. "Probably passively shielded with undetectable subspace proximity fuses. Pretty damn ingenious."

"I ordered the away team to run a full multi-spectrum scan of the vicinity before entering the colony site," Ebnal growled.

Sandhurst blanched. "Yes, sir. I reminded Commander Aiken of that, but he apparently felt time was of the essence if the colonists were in distress."

Ebnal waved away Sandhurst's explanation with an impatient gesture. "The mines… what happened then?"

"I gathered together as many tricorders as I could get my hands on and linked them to create an inversion field that tripped the mines' internal diagnostic programming and caused them to shut down momentarily and recalibrate. Then I overrode the Cardassian's command signal and piggybacked my own targeting protocols that spoofed the mines into thinking the Cardassian platoon advancing on our position were priority targets."

His expression otherwise inscrutable, Ebnal quirked an eyebrow. "You blew the Cardies up with their own mines?"

"Most of them, sir… there were a few pockets of survivors." Sandhurst was suddenly exhausted, the reality of how close he'd come to dying sinking in as he recounted the events. "Once we'd blunted their attack with the mines, I had what was left of the away team gather up our survivors and tag our KIA's for recovery transport before falling back to the beam-in site and returning to the ship."

Ebnal was silent for an achingly long moment before announcing, "That was some damn fine work, Mister Sandhurst." He shook his head slightly and sighed. "I knew it was too soon to promote Aiken. He was too young, too headstrong for his own good, and it got a lot of good people killed and wounded today."

"Captain, I think that's a little harsh—" Sandhurst tried to defend the memory of the deceased XO, despite secretly agreeing with Ebnal's assessment.

"No, goddamn it, it's *not* too harsh!" Ebnal barked. "We're at war, and I need capable people I can depend on, not young hotshots out to try and make a name for themselves."

Sandhurst simply nodded mutely.

"Tell Lieutenant Osterburke that she's acting chief of engineering now, Sandy," Ebnal ordered as he turned his back on Sandhurst.

The engineer blinked in evident shock, "I'm being relieved, sir?"

Ebnal spun back around, his face creased by a smile as grim as it was unexpected.

"For a bright guy you can be pretty dense sometimes. As of this moment you're promoted to XO."

"Sir?" Sandhurst protested. "With respect, I think there are better candidates—"

The captain shook his head with mock disbelief. "Oh, poor Sandy, you must have mistaken that for a request, didn't you?" His tone hardened. "It wasn't. I want you in division red and on the bridge at oh-seven-hundred hours tomorrow, ready to step into Aiken's smoldering boots. And while you're recuperating from your little scuffle with the Cardies, I want you to reflect on how this isn't even remotely about you,

your comfort level, or whatever the hell it is you think you want. This is about the best interests of this ship and crew. You'd best make yourself comfortable with that."

Ebnal thundered out of Sickbay, trailing a litany of curses that would have made a Marine drill-sergeant blush.

The doctor poked her head out from her office. "He gone?"

"Yeah," Sandhurst sighed. "Now you know why I was afraid I wouldn't die…"