Tales of the USS Bluefin
Aftermath
By The Lone Redshirt

Author's Note: the events in this story occur during the Dominion War, immediately following Operation Return – the battle to retake Deep Space Nine. The story includes characters from my other series: The Endurance of Jesse Yeager.

Stardate 51464.9 (10 June 2374)
USS *Bluefin*
Ninth Fleet Rescue & Support Wing – Bajor Sector

Captain Joseph Akinola silently watched the main viewscreen of the USS *Bluefin* as the pivotal battle to retake Deep Space Nine raged in the distance. Light flared and faded as opposing starships unleashed their deadly arsenals at each other.

His dark face registered his frustration and concern. He was frustrated over the support role to which his border cutter and crew were relegated, but his main concern was for the thousands of Starfleet and allied beings now caught in a deadly struggle to retake the strategic space station, Deep Space Nine.

Part of him understood and accepted the reasoning for remaining in a support role. His cutter, though swift and well-armed, was no match for the Cardassian and Jem'Hadar battleships that were fighting elements of the Second, Fifth and Ninth Fleets. But he also knew that the Fleet was outnumbered nearly 2 to 1. It grated on Akinola to sit on the sidelines, to wait for the end and to simply help pick up the pieces. Another part of him – the part that had lost friends and colleagues to the Cardassians and Dominion forces cried out for retribution. Akinola quelled those feelings. For now.

The Captain stood from his chair but refrained from pacing. He turned toward the operations station.

"Lt. T'Ser – any update?"

The Vulcan operations officer turned slightly in her chair. "We've received an update on ship losses sir, but it's far from comprehensive."

Akinola felt his stomach tighten in apprehension. "Let's have it," he said, flatly.

T'Ser hesitated, glancing at the XO, Dale McBride. "Sir . . . it's not good . . ."

The Captain's features softened slightly. "T'Ser – go ahead, give me the update."

She nodded in acquiescence and turned back to her display screens. "67 *Miranda*-class ships damaged or destroyed. 29 *Excelsior*-class ships out of commission, 19 *Galaxy*-class, 15 *Centaurs*, 8 *Nebulas*, 4 *Akiras* and 4 *Defiant*-class ships also gone. There are almost certainly more . . ." Her voice trailed off.

The bridge was momentarily silent following this announcement. Already, 146 of the 627 Starfleet vessels in the battle were out of the fight. How many more ships would they lose? How many more people would die?

And where are the damn Klingons? Akinola fumed silently. He sat back in the command chair, his mood as dark as his complexion. The *Bluefin* held station a good light hour from the battle area, along with 23 other cutters, 4 hospital ships, 10 warp tugs plus 3 elderly *Constellation* – class ships that the Fleet Commander, Captain Sisko, simply couldn't use. All of them watched and waited for the battle to end. At that point, they would move into the battle area to salvage damaged ships, rescue survivors and tend to the dead.

Now I know how a vulture feels, mused Akinola. *Just wait around for the dying to end, then swoop in.* He kept his eyes on the screen, watching the flashes of energy flare and fade – knowing that he was seeing images that occurred an hour earlier.

I'm watching the last gasps of dying ships, he mused, *and there's not a damned thing we can do to help them from here!*

"Sir!" T'Ser spoke up, her voice animated. "Klingon warships have de-cloaked and are engaging the enemy ships!"

Akinola thumped the arm of his chair with his fist. "About time!" he exclaimed. "That should level the playing field!"

For the next two hours, the bridge crew anxiously waited and listened as reports slowly came in. It soon became apparent that the tide of battle had, indeed, turned in their favor.

"I'm receiving another report . . ." announced T'Ser. She frowned in puzzlement, yet it was obviously good news as her face broke into a wide grin. "I'm not sure I understand – something about the Dominion Fleet simply *disappearing*? That can't be right! But our forces have definitely broken through! The remaining enemy forces are in retreat – headed for Cardassia!"

Dale McBride, the XO, let out a whoop of joy and there were high-fives and hugs throughout the bridge. Even Captain Akinola had difficulty suppressing a huge grin.

"Alright, people!" he shouted over the din. "Settle down, settle down! It's our turn, now. Let's get in there and help out our comrades. XO, shields up and weapons hot – we might run into some enemy stragglers. Lt. T'Ser – signal the rescue wing to move into their assigned op-areas. Have the hospital ships hang back with the *Constellations* for escort."

McBride and T'Ser acknowledged and carried out their orders.

"Mr. Fralk, take us in – maximum impulse. T'Ser, prepare to scan for life signs."

The cutters sped toward the scene of the battle as the hospital ships followed behind.

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The ebullient mood on the bridge quickly faded as the rescue ships moved into the battle zone. Hundreds of ships drifted, trailing plasma and frozen atmosphere. Debris tumbled and collided through the carnage.

"Sweet Lord!" muttered McBride from the tactical station. His face reflected the shock and grief of all on the bridge.

"Focus on the task at hand, people," said Akinola, quietly but firmly. "Let's find the survivors and take care of them first. T'Ser – signal the *Scamp* and *Snubfin* to handle combat patrol while the rest of us begin SAR-Ops."

"Aye, sir." Her hands moved quickly over the com panel as she opened channels to the *Bluefin's* two sister ships.

The cutters spread out into their designated search areas. The *Bluefin* banked slightly to starboard, weaving slowly through derelict spacecraft as debris impacted their shields in blue, staccato flashes. Most of the debris was comprised of shredded metal and alloys. Some was organic.

"Look at that!" whispered Fralk as they passed the dead hulk of a *Miranda* – class ship. The scorched and battered hull had a massive hole punched clean through.

"T'Ser?" queried Akinola.

"It's the *Majestic,* sir." She paused, "No life signs."

The Captain merely nodded. "Continue scanning, Lieutenant, and watch for life pods. Steady as she goes, Mr. Fralk."

They soon came upon the wreckage of two Cardassian *Galor*-class cruisers. One was broken in two, still streaming glowing plasma. The other was fragmented, only the total mass and make-up of the debris revealed its former identity. Akinola took cold comfort in the destruction of these enemy ships. There were far more allied ships destroyed. He still wondered how they had managed to win the battle.

"No life signs on that *Galor*, Captain," T'Ser announced. "No energy readings either."

At this, McBride relaxed fractionally. He had two torpedoes ready for launch and he moved his hand fractionally from the firing control.

Moving past the tumbling Cardassian ship, they spotted the mangled remains of an *Excelsior* – class starship. Both nacelles were gone and the primary hull had numerous breaches with entire sections missing and exposed to the vacuum of space. The engineering hull was likewise damaged, though not as extensively. Barely visible through the scorch marks and gaps in the plating was her name – USS *Axanar.* Akinola noted that the escape pods were still in place. Apparently they had gone down fighting the *Galors* – to the last man.

"Scanning for life-signs," announced T'Ser. She frowned. "There's a lot of background radiation – probably from the sheer amount of ordinance

expended. Attempting to filter . . ." She jerked up, surprised. "I'm reading several life-signs, sir, but they're weak!"

Akinola responded instantly and tapped the intra-ship com button on his chair. "All transporter rooms - prepare to beam over survivors!"

"Most of the survivors are located in the secondary hull, near sickbay," continued T'Ser. "Two are still in the primary hull - one on the bridge, one on deck four." She paused, and then quickly added, "The one on the bridge looks to be in bad shape – life signs are fading."

The Captain tapped his combadge. "Akinola to Chief Deryx.

"Deryx here, go ahead, Captain."

"Chief – beam whoever's on the bridge directly to sickbay."

"Aye, sir – I'm on it. I've got a lock and initiating transport now."

"Thanks, Chief. Akinola, out." He turned to McBride. "Dale, head on down and see to the survivors. We'll need temporary quarters for the un-injured. Make sure anyone with injuries gets to sickbay."

McBride unfolded his tall frame from the tactical station and moved to the lift while Senior Chief Brin moved to replace him.

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Dr. Calvin Baxter, CMO of the *Bluefin*, watched as a human form materialized on one of the bio-beds. It coalesced into a tall, male human who was unconscious and badly injured. Baxter noted that the man's left leg was gone just below the knee. Additionally, his skin was pale and sallow, though much of this was concealed by soot and dried blood from a scalp wound. There were severe burns on his hands and the sleeves of his uniform were scorched. Baxter quickly glanced at the bio-sensor readouts above the bed and frowned. The pulse was thready, blood pressure dangerously low, and respiration was fast and shallow.

"Sandy, let's get his vitals stabilized, then check him over for injuries," said Baxter to Corpsman 1st Class Sanders.

Sanders frowned at the man's leg, or lack thereof. "No bleeding?" he asked, puzzled.

"The stump's been cauterized – probably with a phaser. *Focus*, Sandy!" said Baxter, impatiently, as he administered a hypo-spray with an anti-shock compound.

Sanders forced his gaze from the ravaged limb and quickly placed an oxygen canula under the man's nose. He noted the four pips on the man's collar.

"It's their captain!" pointed out Sanders.

Baxter administered a second hypo-spray containing Cordrazine and Tri-Ox. "Not for much longer unless we get him stable. Get the thoracic arch ready – I'm not liking his heart rhythm. And push a unit of normal saline – we've got to get him re-hydrated."

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Commander McBride was stunned when he entered transporter room one. Several crewmembers from the *Axanar* were there, but they looked terrible. Their faces reflected shock and grief, mixed with a tinge of anger. Most were covered with soot and blood.

Corpsman Rice knelt over an Asian man wearing commander's pips. After running a medical tri-corder over him, she turned to Chief Deryx.

"Chief – he's got a severe concussion and a broken arm. Beam us directly to sickbay."

The Denobulan CPO nodded and quickly complied. Rice and the injured man disappeared in the shimmer of transporter effect.

A male Trill approached McBride and stopped before him. Like the others, he was covered in grimy black soot. There were scorch marks on his tunic. McBride observed that the man tried not to limp as he walked.

The Trill straightened. "Lt. Commander Grelden Pralax, sir. I'm Chief of Security on the *Axanar.*"

McBride was puzzled by the crisp British accent coming from the Trill but he did not comment. Instead, he held out his hand in greeting. "Dale McBride -

XO of the cutter *Bluefin.* We're goin' to see to your people, Commander – *anything* you need, just ask."

Pralax looked dumbly at the proffered hand before finally taking it.

Poor bastard's in shock, thought McBride. "If any of your people need medical treatment, let's go ahead and get 'em to sickbay."

The Trill blinked, and seemed to return to the present. "Thank you, sir. We're quite alright, though I'm sure we could all do with a shower and clean uniforms." Pralax paused. "What of the rest of the crew – have you already beamed them off?"

McBride hesitated and glanced at Chief Deryx, who shook his head fractionally. The XO placed a steadying hand on the Trill's shoulder.

"Mr. Pralax . . . I'm sorry as hell to tell you this, but . . . your group here, plus one we beamed to sickbay from your bridge, well . . ." McBride's voice trailed off, but his eyes conveyed the rest. Out of the starship *Axanar's* complement of 755, only 21 had survived.

"Oh . . . I see," said Pralax. The vacant look had returned to his eyes. "Right! Well then, I best get back to my people." He began to drift toward the other survivors, hesitated, and turned back to McBride. "Commander McBride, would you happen to know who you beamed off the bridge?" His voice was still dull and listless, yet there was an underlying plea to the question which the XO did not miss.

McBride shook his head apologetically. "No, but I'll sure find out for you."

Pralax forced a smile. "Most kind. I, um, I . . ." his voice caught and he paused, clearing his throat. "Sorry," he said tightly.

The XO nodded in sympathy. He turned to Chief Deryx and spoke softly. "Chief, please escort these folks to the wardroom and have Cookie get them somethin' to eat while quarters are prepared. I'm goin' to sickbay to check on the other survivor."

"Aye, aye," replied Deryx, somberly.

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As he regained consciousness, Commander Osamu Tamura was disoriented. He knew he was in a sickbay, but it wasn't the *Axanar's*. It was much too small.

Nor did he recognize the petite corpsman that was looking down at him. She offered a reassuring smile.

"Just relax, Commander. You've got a nasty bump on your head and a fractured ulna. Doc is going to get you fixed up good as new, though."

He tried to speak, but all that came out was a strangled croak. He coughed hard, bringing up black phlegm, which the corpsman dutifully wiped away. She offered him a straw and he swallowed some wonderfully cold and delicious water.

This time, he was able to speak. "Where am I?"

"You're on the cutter, *Bluefin,* in our sickbay. I'm Corpsman 2nd Class Rice and I'm taking care of you."

He coughed again and cleared his throat. His head hurt and his thinking was muzzy, but he began to recall recent events – the battle, the fire-fight with the Cardassian ships, trying to make his way to the bridge after the turbo-lifts failed . . .

Tamura struggled to sit upright, but a wave of vertigo washed over him and he collapsed back onto the bed.

"Whoa! You're not ready to get up Commander! You've got a concussion, so no heroics!"

He closed his eyes until the room stopped moving. "What about my shipmates?" he rasped.

Corpsman Rice's smile did not falter, but Tamura saw something in her eyes that gave him a chill. "We're taking good care of the other survivors. Now, I'm going to give you something for the pain and to help you relax, then Doc will get that arm fixed."

He tried to protest as he heard the hiss of the hypo-spray, but his body relaxed as he was restrained by the arms of Morpheus.

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The wardroom was crowded with the remnant from the *Axanar* as Captain Akinola entered. Those seated began to stand as he entered, but he waved them back down.

"Please, everyone, just relax. We're not going to stand on ceremony here. You're our guests – at least until we rendezvous with the hospital ship, *DeBakey.*"

Pralax approached Akinola. "Grelden Pralax, Captain. I suppose I'm senior officer for the moment, since Captain Yeager and Commander Tamura are indisposed."

Akinola smiled at the Trill's accent. "Joseph Akinola, Mr. Pralax. I believe we have quarters ready for you and your crew. We plan on transferring your captain and first officer to the *DeBakey*, then we'll take the rest of you on to Starbase 317."

Pralax expression fell slightly. "And our ship, sir? What of the *Axanar?*"

Akinola shook his head slightly. "I'm afraid she's a total loss, Commander. Right now there are ships there that are taking care of your . . . casualties."

Pralax's expression was tight, but he nodded. "I see. May I see our Captain and Commander Tamura?"

Akinola glanced around the crowded wardroom, then said softly, "Walk with me, Commander." Pralax, reluctantly but dutifully followed the Captain into the corridor. They walked a few meters from the wardroom, where Akinola stopped and turned to Pralax. He gazed at the Trill and sighed.

"Our CMO, Dr. Baxter, informs me that Captain Yeager is in *very* serious condition. He's placed him in an induced coma for now, pending transfer to the hospital ship."

"May I ask the extent of his injuries, Captain?" asked Pralax, wariness in his voice.

Akinola nodded. "I'll tell you what I know. Captain Yeager is in shock from his injuries – he lost his left leg below the knee. He's got severe burns on both hands and lower arms, plus a hairline fracture to the skull. His lungs are

scarred from super-heated air and smoke. The *good* news is that Doc has him stabilized for now. It was touch and go for a while."

Pralax nodded, though his complexion was rather pale. "Thank you for your candor, Captain. And what of Osamu? How is he faring?"

Akinola did not comment on Pralax's use of the first officer's first name. It was a breach of protocol, but it indicated that the two were friends. "Your first officer is doing well. He suffered a concussion and a broken bone in his right arm, but Dr. Baxter has already repaired the arm. Commander Tamura is still sleeping but I'll get word to you when he wakes up so you can visit him."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate that – and, for all that you're doing for us. You pulled our arses from the flames, quite literally!"

Akinola nodded. "It's our job, Commander, but you're very welcome! I only wish there had been more to save."

"As do I." Pralax suddenly sagged against the corridor wall, his face crumpled with emotion. "All those lives lost – for nothing!"

Akinola grabbed the Trill's arm, steadying him. "For nothing? . . . Commander, didn't you know?"

Pralax looked confused. "Know? Know what?"

The Captain grinned. "You won the battle, son. We've re-taken Deep Space Nine and the Cardies and Dominion forces have fled to Cardassia with their tails between their legs!"

Pralax simply stared at Akinola, dumbfounded.

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"How's he doing, Doc?"

Dr. Baxter turned from Yeager's bed to see Captain Akinola standing by with a concerned look on his face.

"Oh, hello Joseph!" Baxter turned back toward his patient and regarded the sleeping man. "I think he's out of the woods, at least for now. The induced

coma will give his body time to recover from shock. As to his wounds, well . . ." The CMO shrugged, "Time and technology can do wonders."

Akinola looked down at the still form of Yeager. He had never met the man before, but based on the reaction of his surviving crew, he was well-liked and respected.

"With a war on, I imagine they'll slap on an artificial leg on him and send him out on another ship," observed Akinola.

"Hmmm. Not likely for him, I think. Losing a limb affects one's psyche as much as it does one's body. Remember, too – he lost most of his crew in the battle."

Akinola winced and nodded. "Yeah – that part will be a lot harder than losing the leg."

Baxter glanced side-long at Akinola, but didn't comment. He knew that Akinola still grieved the loss of his nephew who died while serving under his command. And there had been other losses too. To lose hundreds? Baxter couldn't imagine.

"So what happens to him now?" continued the Captain.

Baxter shoved his hands into the pockets of his lab coat and raised his eyebrows. "Well, he'll undergo regenerative treatment for his burns as soon as he gets on the *DeBakey.* From there, he'll go to Starfleet Medical Center on Earth to continue his recovery. In time, I imagine he'll be fitted with a bio-synthetic leg and go through extensive therapy to learn how to walk again. In a year, he'll probably be as good as new – physically."

"And, emotionally?" asked Akinola, maintaining his gaze on his injured colleague.

Baxter sighed. "That, my dear Captain, I don't know. Starfleet will see that he gets help in that regard too. Captain Yeager will get to know quite a few counselors." He turned toward Akinola. "By the way, when will we rendezvous with the *DeBakey?*"

"As soon as we finish sweeping our area of operation – probably two hours."

"Have you found more survivors from any ships?"

Akinola's expression darkened. "Not yet."

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"Osamu? Can you hear me? It's Pralax."

Commander Tamura yawned expansively and forced his eyes open. He was still groggy, but at least his head wasn't pounding any more. He glanced down toward his arm and frowned. It was encased in some sort of cylinder which was humming softly.

"S' what the hell's that?" he slurred.

"That would be an osteo-regenerator," replied Pralax with a relieved grin. "It's knitting the bone that you so carelessly broke."

"Frak you, Pralax." He tried blinking his eyes to clear them. They felt sticky and everything still looked fuzzy. His tongue felt like it was covered with hair.

"What happened to that corpsman?" Tamura asked, trying to look around. "She was kinda cute."

"Ah, so you *are* better, then. If you're feeling so randy, you might as well stop slacking off and get out of bed."

"The last time I tried that, I almost threw up."

"In that case, wait until I leave."

Tamura smiled weakly. "So, how are we doing?"

Pralax knew that by "we" Tamura referred to the crew. He forced a smile in return.

"Bloody marvelous," he said with feigned good humor.

Tamura's smile faded, sensing something was wrong. "Give it to me straight, Pralax. I know it's bad – I saw enough bodies on the *Axanar* when I was trying to work my way to the bridge."

Pralax bowed his head and let out a long breath. "Yeah, it is bad." He looked up. "There are only 21 of us that got off *Axanar* alive."

The Asian first officer held his gaze for several seconds, then closed his eyes. A tear slid down the side of his face.

Neither man said anything for several minutes. Finally, Tamura spoke.

"So . . . what's happening now."

"We're about to rendezvous with the hospital ship, *DeBakey*, as I understand. You and the Captain will be transferred aboard, while the rest of us will head on to Starbase 317. After that . . ." Pralax shrugged and smiled weakly. "Who knows?"

Tamura merely nodded. He felt tired and the residual effects of the drugs were pulling him back towards sleep.

Pralax brightened slightly. "Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you the *good* news. We won the battle! The sodding Dominion forces ran off. Deep Space Nine is back in Starfleet hands."

"Hooray for us . . ." murmured Tamura, as he drifted back to sleep.

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Thirty six hours later, the *Bluefin* arrived at Starbase 317. They had found no other survivors in their search efforts. Of all the ships involved in the search and rescue operations, only two others located survivors. The USS *Growler* found several life pods from the USS *Napoli* and rescued 45 personnel. The cutter USS *Avondale* found 7 Cardassians alive but badly injured in the remains of a ship. They were rescued, given medical treatment, and placed under heavy guard. The USS *Bozeman* discovered one life pod from the USS *Sitak.* Only one survivor was on board.

No other survivors were discovered in the battle area of Operation Return.

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"Captain, thank you again for all you and your crew have done for us! I wish I could say it's been a pleasure meeting you, but other the circumstances . . ."

Akinola nodded in understanding. "I know what you mean, Mr. Pralax. Good luck to all of you!"

The Trill nodded and stepped on the transporter dais. Akinola turned to Chief Deryx.

"Energize."

Pralax and the last six other members of the *Axanar* disappeared. The Captain allowed his gaze to linger on the empty transporter chamber for a moment, then he turned and exited the transporter room. He tapped his combadge.

"Akinola to bridge."

"Bridge – McBride here."

Dale, take us out. Make our heading toward DS9. We've been tasked to help with the salvage operation."

"Understood."

"I'll be in my quarters if you need me. Akinola, out."

The Captain took the lift up one level, then walked to his quarters. Inside, he sat at the small desk, his gaze unfocused, then he picked up a holocube off a shelf.

The image of his sister's son, his nephew, Lennox Okonedo smiled back at him. He was wearing a Starfleet uniform – the single pip of an ensign worn proudly on his collar.

Akinola smiled wanly at his dead nephew's image, then he replaced the holocube back on the shelf. Abruptly, he stood. He changed into his karate *ghi* and left his quarters for the gym and a vigorous workout.

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