

Tales of the USS Bluefin

The Blood Pit

By The Lone Redshirt

Author's Note: This story takes place during the first Cardassian War, when Joseph Akinola was a Master Chief Petty Officer on the USS Bluefin under the command of Captain Darby Reninger.

Stardate 31674.7 (4 September 2354)
Planet Tykura II
Firebase Hades (aka "The Blood Pit")

Master Chief Petty Officer Joseph Akinola squatted on his haunches and peered out into the fog. The sun was making an anemic attempt at introducing daylight, but the constant rains and oppressive humidity of the Tykuran jungle absorbed the light much as it absorbed most everything else. His keen eyes scanned the jungle canopy for any sign of movement. The Cardassians were out there somewhere – probably as cold, wet and miserable as he. The thought gave him scant comfort.

For over six weeks, Akinola and a half-dozen Border Dogs had shared this gods-forsaken hill with twenty raggedy-assed Federation Marines. The Marines had been here longer and were in worse shape – physically and mentally. Starfleet Command, in its infinite wisdom, had decided that Tykura II was a “strategic asset” to be “defended at all costs” against the Cardassians. The Nigerian NCO could not fathom why either side would want this nasty, disease-ridden ball of dirt. Trace minerals and the constant moisture wreaked havoc on their equipment. Scanners were all but useless and communications were sketchy at best. Transporters did not work and energy weapons degraded quickly. Worse still was the stuff you couldn't see that got under your skin, causing painful rashes and boils. Not to mention the stuff that got into your digestive tract.

He stood up carefully and more than a little painfully, satisfied that for the moment, a Cardie attack was not imminent. He would send Solly and a couple of jar-heads out to check the perimeter and trip wires later.

The irony of the situation struck Akinola once more as he carefully slogged his way through the sticky, ankle-deep mud back to the command post. Six and half weeks ago, the cutter *Bluefin* had been tasked with sending in food, medical supplies and fresh gear to the Marine detachment on Tykura II. Captain Reninger had dispatched two Star Stallions on the mission as the cutter was still needed for convoy escort duty. It had seemed like a straight-forward mission: come in under the protection of Marine drone-ships, drop off supplies, and evacuate the wounded. If all had gone according to plan, the entire mission would have taken less than a week.

But in war, things seldom go according to plan. No one at Fleet Command knew that the Marines' drone-ships were grounded with corrupted guidance systems. And no one had bothered to tell the Marines that the Border Service was inbound.

Thus, when the two Stallions hit the atmosphere of Tykura II, they were met not with Marine drone-ship escorts, but with Cardassian anti-starcraft missiles. Stallion Oh-One had taken a direct hit, exploding in a massive fireball and killing seven Border Dogs. Stallion Oh-Two had escaped instant destruction by the skillful flying of Lt. Helena Ortiz, but the crippled smallcraft had been forced into what could charitably be called a controlled crash. The Stallion's inertial restraints had spared their lives but most of the supplies were ruined and Petty Office Cho had suffered severe burns to his hands and face when a control panel overloaded and exploded.

The comedy of errors had nearly become fatal for the survivors as they stumbled across a group of Marines in the dark. Fortunately, no one was hit in the brief fire-fight.

Now, the surviving Border Dogs were joined up with the remnant of Baker Company, 3rd Platoon, 1st Federation Marine Expeditionary Forces. Their Company Commander, 2nd Lt. Klessaan, was dead, leaving Gunnery Sergeant Grigory Stephanz in charge of the Marines.

And, in Akinola's opinion, Gunny Stephanz was as big a problem as the jungle or the Cardies.

The Nigerian NCO absently flicked a bloodwasp from his arm as he maneuvered amongst splintered wood, sawgrass and carnivorous vines until he came to the entrance of the make-shift command post. The shelter was comprised of empty storage containers, sheets of tritanium salvaged from the Star Stallion, and held together with lengths of the tough, native vines. A berm

of dirt and logs surrounded the CP, providing marginal protection from the wind. No one was under the illusion that they were protected from a Cardassian assault. The one bright spot was that the Cardies' equipment was about as frakked up as their own.

He pushed aside the plastic sheets that served as a door and stepped down into the CP. It was considerably warmer in the enclosure but also considerably darker. The air was stale with sweat, decaying rations and the pungent odor of infection. A single emergency lamp glowed anemically, revealing a hodge-podge of communications equipment, weapons, and rations boxes. The last were dwindling quickly.

"Joe," greeted Lt. Helena Ortiz. The Latina Border Service officer looked weak and haggard. The sclera of her eyes were tinged with yellow and running sores covered her face and arms. Like all of them, her uniform was in shambles – the durable fabric no match for the toxic jungle environment. She sat cross-legged on a sleeping mat, scant protection from the pervasive mud, but better than nothing, and turned her attention back to a recalcitrant component of the Marine company's subspace transceiver.

"Morning, Lieutenant. Beautiful day, isn't it?" Akinola took a tin cup and drew a few swallows of water from their still. Thankfully, they still had a source of fresh water, thanks to the ingenuity of Lance Corporal Richley and Corpsman Kurtz. The modified moisture traps provided filtered drinking water for the twenty-odd Marines and Border Dogs – at least enough for survival if not hygienic purposes.

Ortiz grunted. Normally good humored, the Lieutenant had become spare of words lately. Understandable considering her weakened state, but her physical decline worried Akinola.

Still, Ortiz was in better shape than Petty Officer Randy Cho who lay quietly on another sleep pad under a makeshift table. Cho's arms were bandaged as were his eyes. Unfortunately for Cho, medical supplies and equipment were virtually nonexistent. Corpsman Kurtz had salvaged his medical tricorder and his personal med-kit from the debris of the Stallion but the bulk of the supplies were destroyed. The Asian Petty Officer remained stoic for the most part, though he sometimes moaned in his sleep.

"Any luck with the transceiver?" asked Akinola.

Ortiz sighed. "Maybe. I just can't tell. The power cell is pushing out a viable subspace pulse but I'm not receiving jack-crap. If anyone can hear us, we may not know until they show up."

Akinola knew that "they" could be a Starfleet rescue party or a Cardassian patrol. It was a risk they had to take.

The flap to the CP opened again and Gunnery Sergeant Grigory Stephanz entered. His face was ruddy, though remarkably clean. Akinola knew he shaved with his razor-sharp K-bar knife, sans water. Whether he did this to maintain esprit 'd corps or to prove he was a bad-ass, Akinola did not know or care. Personally, Akinola found that a beard provided at least a modicum of protection from the horde of insects that plagued the jungle.

Stephanz removed his helmet and nodded at Lt. Ortiz. Following long-held naval tradition, he did not salute indoors. He turned his attention to Akinola, fixing him with pale, gray eyes.

"Master Chief." His voice was flat and cold. Whatever warmth of personality he may have once had was long-gone, swallowed by the damned jungle and the constant company of fear, hunger and isolation.

The flaps opened again, allowing Petty Officer Solly Brin and Lance Corporal Anna Richley to enter.

Instantly, Stephanz' eyes narrowed at the sight of the Red Orion. His lips pressed together in a tight line and Akinola noticed his hand moving absently to the K-bar knife strapped to his thigh.

And here was the other problem – more pressing at the moment than the Cardies, jungle rot, or even their need to find more food. Stephanz had an ingrained hatred toward Orions – red, green, male, female, slave or free. It didn't matter to the Gunny. When it came to Orions, he was an equal-opportunity bigot.

Akinola wondered how the man had passed through all the psych-screenings to become a Marine, much less a gunnery sergeant. Not that it mattered now.

For his part, Solly Brin chose to ignore Stephanz' hostile demeanor, though Akinola could tell that his friend was alert and ready to defend himself. The Orion caught Akinola's look and gave a minute shrug as if to say, "What's a guy to do?"

Ortiz coughed and spat out a wad of phlegm into the mud. Beads of sweat stood out on her brow. She looked feverish. Akinola made a mental note to have Kurtz check on her.

“Sit-rep,” she said, hoarsely, asking for the morning’s situation report.

“Perimeter is manned and secure,” replied Gunny Stephanz, keeping his cold gaze on Brin. “We’re down to fourteen working phaser carbines and three ARCs. Photon mortar batteries are in place but I can’t guarantee how many rounds are good. I’ve got some men working on Punji stakes – that would slow down any Spoonhead assault.”

Ortiz frowned, unfamiliar with the term. She was, after all, a pilot and helmsman, not a line officer. “Punji stakes?”

“Sticks sharpened and smeared with excrement,” explained Akinola. “Hidden under a layer of foliage. Nasty but effective.”

The Lieutenant frowned but did not protest. Six months in the blood pit had stripped away much of the civil veneer from warfare.

“Okay,” she said. “Master Chief, what about patrols?”

“We’re down to fifteen combat-ready personnel from the Marines and our bunch. The rest are physically unable. I want to change up the patrols – put Richley in charge of one squad and Brin in charge of . . .”

“Hell, no,” growled the Gunny.

Akinola eyed him coldly. “I wasn’t through talking, Gunnery Sergeant,” adding emphasis to the difference in their rank.

“You can talk all you want, Master Chief. But it will be a cold day in hell when I send my Marines out with any yellow-eyed, murdering Orion devil.”

Ortiz was off the sleep pad and in the Gunny’s face. “You’re out of line, Gunny! You don’t have the luxury of indulging your bigotry. I don’t give a damn about your screwed-up view of the universe, our asses are surrounded by Cardies that want to kill us and creatures that want to eat us. You will follow orders or I’ll have you brought up on charges!”

Stephanz did not flinch. A rictus grin formed, stretching the tight skin of his face into a death's head.

"Aye, aye Mr. Ortiz. Like you said, there are all kinds of bad things out in the blood pit. Anything can happen, right *slis'pul*?"

The last, he addressed to Solly. Brin bristled at the vulgar, Orion insult. "Yeah, that's right you ignorant *vuut*. Anything can happen." His hand slid to the handle of the Andorian blade sheathed on his side.

"Enough," growled Akinola. "Both of you, stand dow . . ."

Before he could complete his sentence, two things happened. The subspace transceiver, silent for so many weeks, suddenly came to life. At almost the same moment, they heard a distant, muffled "krumph" as an anti-personnel mine detonated.

"The trip wires!" exclaimed Stephanz. He grabbed his ARC and helmet and was out of the CP with Brin, Lance Corporal Richey and Akinola right behind.

Rain was now falling in heavy sheets, making visibility difficult. Akinola slipped and fell, sliding downhill and flailing around for a handhold. He grabbed an exposed root, just as a photon mortar round detonated few dozen meters away. The heat washed over him, momentarily drying the moisture from his exposed skin. Instinctively, he turned his face away from the dazzling light just as the shock wave hit, sending him up in the air before landing awkwardly in a puddle of stagnant, green water. His head struck a splintered tree stump and his vision exploded with stars as a purplish black haze threatened to steal his consciousness.

Stunned and disoriented, Master Chief Akinola attempted to regain his equilibrium when all hell broke loose.

Fifty meters ahead and downhill, Gunny Stephanz dropped into one of the hand-dug trenches that encircled the firebase. Bursts of concentrated energy erupted from the dense jungle foliage, shredding vegetation and splintering trees. Brin dove in behind him, rising quickly to fire off several bursts from his phaser carbine. The stench of ozone, filthy water and rotting vegetation filled his nostrils.

Stephanz glanced at the Orion. "Where's Corporal Richey?"

Brin glanced behind him. The young Marine had been right behind him a second ago. For that matter, so had Master Chief Akinola. He popped his head over the edge of the trench, only to be rewarded by a fusillade of heavy phaser fire. Steam rose from the impact points in the mud, as geysers of scorched red dirt and gravel showered back on him. A rain-soaked form lay half-buried in the mud a short distance away. Lance Corporal Richey lifted a shaky hand upward briefly, then went still. There was no sign of Akinola.

"I see Richey," Brin gasped, "she's down – about fifteen meters at four 'o clock. Cover me – I'll get her."

As he began to climb from the trench, Gunny Stephanz grabbed Brin's web gear harness and pulled him savagely down into the fetid muck.

"You stay away from her, Orion. If you lay a hand on her, I'll gut you!"

The battle fever that Solly had managed to control suddenly erupted. He had no desire to shove the genie back in the bottle.

He sprang to his feet with preternatural agility, his blade in hand. Yellow eyes blazed beneath his furrowed brow. Rivulets of water streamed from his dark red skin as his nostrils flared and the steam of his exhaled breath flowed forth in a deep, steady rhythm.

Solly Brin tuned out nearly everything as he focused on his target. Stephanz held his own K-bar, twirling the end in a small, figure eight pattern. A smile played on the Human's lips.

A weak, groan of pain wafted over the wind and screech of energy weapons. Uphill, a cluster of Marines were returning fire – lethal bolts of red energy flew by less than a meter overhead.

Lance Corporal Richey groaned again. Solly's training and experience finally over-rode the lust for blood that sang in his ears. Gritting his teeth, he spoke.

"I'm going to get Lance Corporal Richey. If you want to do the death dance, save it for later – otherwise, she's going to die."

Brin saw a flicker of doubt in the Gunny's eyes. Quelling his hatred for Orions, he savagely sheathed his knife. He picked up a phaser rifle and tossed it to Solly.

"She's my Marine. Lay down cover fire while I get her."

Solly did not argue. He set the phaser for wide-dispersal and aimed into the jungle canopy, squeezing off round after round. Stephanz pulled himself over the lip of the trench and crawled toward the wounded Corporal. Checking for a pulse, the Gunny was relieved to find Richey still alive, though badly hurt. Her armored vest was a smoldering ruin and her neck was scorched, but she was more or less intact.

He tried grabbing the webbing of her vest, but the charred mess fell apart when he tugged on it. He managed to work his hands through the mud and under her arms, ignoring the sting of the rancid muck on the oozing sores on his hands.

With a somewhat firm purchase, he began to scoot backward toward the trench.

Akinola found his phaser pistol half-buried in the mud. Checking it, he found it was still working, though the charge level was dangerously low. There were probably no more than ten or twelve shots left, not that a hand-held phaser offered much firepower against Cardassian armor at a range over ten meters. Still, it beat throwing rocks.

He staggered down the hillside in the direction of the battle, blood streaming from the gash on his forehead.

Solly stole a glance in the direction of Gunny Stephanz as the Marine NCO slowly dragged his wounded comrade to the trench. Finally, with a grunt of pain and effort, Stephanz pulled Richey down into the trench. The two Marines landed with an awkward splash.

"How is she?" Brin shouted over the din of phaser fire.

"Alive – barely," replied Stephanz. He checked the Corporal over for other wounds as best he could, then stripped off his own vest and used it as a makeshift pillow for the wounded woman.

Suddenly a bright flash of brilliant red light lit up the sky, followed by a horrendous peal of thunder. The ground shook violently and a massive fireball rose from the jungle. A rush of wind peppered Brin's face with mud and twigs and a large shadow rushed over them, followed by a familiar thrumming noise.

A Border Service Star Stallion banked sharply, unleashing a hellish volley of phaser fire and micro-torpedoes into the jungle. A second Stallion followed behind, strafing the perimeter of the jungle with phaser fire. Brin could hear screams and secondary explosions as the focused firepower of the Stallion hit a Cardassian weapons cache.

Solly grinned in exultation. "About frakkin' time the cavalry showed up," he murmured. He turned to face Stephanz and his grin vanished.

Gunnery Sergeant Stephanz cradled an ARC in his arms. The primer diode glowed a vivid red and the emitter was pointed at Solly. A cold smile played on the Croatian's face.

"Like I said, bad things happen in the blood pit." Stephanz raised the weapon.

A red bolt enveloped the Marine NCO. His back arched in a spasm of pain as the ARC fell into the mud with a muffled splash. Stephanz fell backwards into the mud with a lingering moan as consciousness fled.

Master Chief Akinola knelt at the edge of the trench, his phaser still trained on Stephanz. He turned to face Solly, his face ashen and gray.

"You okay, Petty Officer Brin?"

The battle fever and adrenaline rush had faded. Solly felt drained. He glanced down at the still form of Grigory Stephanz. He found he felt neither hatred nor pity for the man. For now, he only felt empty. He forced himself to speak.

"Yeah, Master Chief, I'm fine. Richley is hurt badly, though."

A second tempest blew debris and smoke their way, forcing them to turn their heads as a Star Stallion settled into a clear area with a shriek of thrusters. The ramp lowered before the engines dropped to idle and Commander Stanek, the *Bluefin's* Executive Officer, ran toward them, accompanied by two corpsman. They all wore full combat armor and the XO carried a heavy phaser rifle. He

stopped by Akinola as the corpsmen dropped into the trench to tend to Stephanz and Lance Corporal Richley.

Akinola stood to greet Commander Stanek, but sagged to his knees as fatigue and pain overwhelmed him. The Vulcan grabbed the Nigerian before he could fall, then effortlessly picked him up and carried him toward the Star Stallion.

EPILOGUE

Cleared by the medical staff and released from sickbay, Akinola made his way down to Deck 7 and the armory. He nodded at the other non-coms but did not stop to make small-talk. For their part, they wisely left Akinola alone.

Alone in his office, he leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh. His uniform hung loosely from his frame – a result of losing 25 pounds while on Tykura II. The CMO had assured him he would regain his normal weight and strength in short order.

He savored the familiar sounds and sensations of his small office. No mud, no rain, no bugs, no jungle rot. Firebase Hades, the blood pit, seemed like a distant bad dream now. Though the war continued, for the moment, Akinola felt at peace.

A shadow loomed in the doorway and a familiar figure appeared. “Master Chief – you got a minute?”

Akinola smiled. “Sure, Brin. Come in.”

The burly Red Orion appeared physically fit and generally unfazed by their seven week ordeal. He had not been afflicted by jungle rot or dysentery like the Human and Centaurans. Akinola doubted he’d lost an ounce in weight or one iota of muscle fibre. Chalk one up for Orion genes. Or growing up on a hell-hole like Verex IV.

Brin took one of the two guest chairs and leaned back against the wall. “How’s your head, Joe?”

Akinola touched the newly generated skin on his forehead. It was still tight and itched some, but the nasty gash was completely gone. He couldn’t see a trace in the mirror.

“It will take more than a rotten stump to break my hard head. Now, are you just here to inquire about my health or are you going to cut to the chase?” queried Akinola.

Brin was quiet for a moment. “What’s going to happen to Stephanz?”

Akinola put his feet up on the battered desk and folded his hands across his middle. “He’ll face a general court martial, of course. You, me and Lt. Ortiz will be called on to testify I expect – maybe Corpsman Kurtz and Lance Corporal Richley. If convicted, which I also expect, he’ll most likely spend the next 15 to 25 years raking leaves at the New Zealand Prison Colony as a buck private.”

Solly shook his head. “What a waste.”

Akinola cocked an eyebrow. “You seem awfully sanguine about this, Solly. I figured you’d be happy that this nutjob will be going away.”

“Yeah, well, I did some digging into his past. Talked with Lance Corporal Richey while she was in sickbay.”

“And?”

“Stephanz has been decorated three times for bravery and wounded in action twice. His record as a Marine has been exemplary. Richey said he’s the best leader she’s ever seen.”

“But?”

Solly sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “But, he lost his family to Orion pirates when he was just a kid. He watched as his mother was raped repeatedly and his father’s throat was cut. Stephanz and his sister were to be sold as slaves, but he managed to slip away from his captors and stow away on another ship. His sister wasn’t so lucky.”

Akinola felt a chill hand caress his heart as he thought of his own parents. He swallowed tightly. “That’s no excuse, Solly. That wasn’t your fault.”

Brin fixed Akinola with somber yellow eyes. “Yeah, I get that, Joe. I thought of you, though, when Richley told me about Stephanz’ past. You didn’t like me much either when I was a raw recruit.”

“That’s because you were a smart-ass, Brin, not because you are an Orion.”

Solly chuckled. "Yeah, I know. You busted my balls, but you always treated us fair. Somewhere along the way I guess we got to be friends."

"Look, Solly – there was a time on Earth when people with my shade of skin were treated pretty badly. We got past that, but it took a lot of blood, sweat and tears. But even four hundred years later, you'll still find traces of prejudice among Humans."

"Not just Humans, Joe. I gotta admit, there's a part of me that sees other Orions pretty much like Stephanz does. What does that make me? A self-hater?"

Akinola was quiet a moment. "Your father was killed by the Syndicate, Solly, so I think your distrust is understandable. The difference is you know that not all Orions are bad. Stephanz refuses to make that distinction."

The inter-ship comm system suddenly began to blare. *"All hands to departure stations. Gamma shift supervisors to the bridge. All hands to departure stations. That is all."*

Akinola stood. "That's my cue." He regarded Solly with a look of concern. "You okay, Red?"

"Frakkin-A, Master Chief."

"Good. Quit gold-bricking and shag your ass to your duty station, Petty Officer."

The Red Orion stood, his customary cocky smirk now fixed on his face. "Aye, aye Master Chief." He thrust out his hand. "Thanks, Joe."

Akinola took the Orion's hand and shook it. "Forget it. Now get out of my sight before I put you on report."

Solly turned and trotted off. Master Chief Joseph Akinola shook his head and smiled wanly as he strode out the door.

END