

Tales of the USS Bluefin

This Ain't Hell, But...

By The Lone Redshirt

Author's note: This short story takes place in 2354, during the height of the first Federation-Cardassian War. Joseph Akinola is an enlisted man, serving as Chief of the Boat on the border cutter, USS Bluefin.

Stardate 31782.3 (October 13, 2354)

USS Bluefin

Beloti Sector - en route to Mericor System

Part One

Master Chief Petty Officer Joseph Akinola sat at his office desk in the cutter's armory with a glacial expression on his face. He rhythmically tapped a stylus against a PADD - the sharp *tak . . . tak . . . tak . . .* was the only sound in the room, save for the muffled hum of the environmental system. Across his desk were the objects of his malevolent gaze - two very sorry specimens, in his estimation.

Standing before him, ramrod straight, were two men - both bruised, bloodied and disheveled. One was a stocky Human Petty Officer second class with close cropped hair and a nose that had obviously been broken several times. By its current swollen and bloody state, it was obvious that the nose had been broken again, very recently. His lower lip was puffy and a thin crust of dried blood streaked his chin. Perspiration glistened on his high forehead, despite the relatively cool temperature of the office.

The other was a young, muscular Red Orion Petty Officer third class. His left eye was nearly swollen shut and the left sleeve of his jumpsuit was torn completely off. His glossy black hair was mussed and wet with perspiration. The Orion's left hand was badly swollen with wounds that looked suspiciously like teeth marks forming a crescent between his thumb and forefinger. Like his compatriot, he stood at attention; his gaze focused twenty centimeters over the head of their pissed-off Chief of the Boat.

Master Chief Akinola finally tossed the PADD and stylus on the desk and leaned back in his chair. He steepled his fingers, shifting eye contact from one subject to the other.

“This is the third time in as many months you two have gotten into it,” he said, quietly.

“Actually, it’s the fourth . . .,” began the Human petty officer.

“Shut your face, McManus!” Akinola snapped. “Do not open your mouth unless I tell you to.” The Master Chief stood and placed his hands on his waist, glaring at the two misbegotten non-commissioned officers.

“Who started it?” he asked, once more in a quiet voice.

“I did, Master Chief!” they said in unison.

Akinola restrained from smirking. “I see. Very noble of you both – take the blame, maintain honor, and then get into another fight at the first opportunity.” He walked around his desk and stood very close to both of the men. He moved to McManus first, moving in so close that their noses nearly touched.

“You don’t like Orions, do you Petty Officer McManus?”

The pugnacious Scotsman cut a quick glance at the Red Orion. “Nae, Master Chief, I do not! They’re a thieving, murderin’ lot! It’s daft t’ allow ‘their kind in th’ service!” McManus’ brogue was thicker than usual as he spoke through split, bloody lips.

Akinola nodded, and then stepped in front of the Red Orion. “And you, Petty Officer Brin – you don’t like Humans, do you?”

To his credit, Brin did not flinch. “I like Humans just fine, Master Chief. I just don’t like him!” he said, with a sideways jerk of his head.

Again, the Master Chief nodded. “I see.” He pursed his lips and again shifted his gaze from one man to another. “I suppose you both like Cardassians?”

Both non-coms looked shocked. “Nay! . . .” “Of course not . . .” they began, simultaneously.

“Really? I’m surprised, seeing as how you both are putting more effort into killing each other than you are the snake-heads!”

Akinola suddenly bellowed at point-blank range, *“You two are a waste of rations and atmosphere! We’ll be going up against the Cardies within days and you’ll both probably be taking up space in sickbay while people who are doing their jobs will be getting killed because we’re short handed. You make me sick! I swear, I want to puke, but I won’t give you the satisfaction! Follow me!”*

Akinola suddenly stormed out of his office. McManus and Brin exchanged puzzled looks, and then quickly followed him.

The Master Chief took the ladder up one deck, then headed forward toward the ship’s gym. As he entered, Akinola suddenly turned on the two men.

“Attack me,” he said.

McManus blinked and Brin frowned in puzzlement.

Akinola suddenly lashed out with a back fist that dropped McManus to his knees. He spat out bright red blood and a tooth onto the deck.

The Master Chief stood, hands at his side. “You two will learn to fight *together* against a common foe, or I will personally put you both in sickbay.”

“Uh, Master Chief? Isn’t against regulations? . . .” Brin’s protest was abruptly cut off by a vicious side-kick to his mid-section. He doubled over, gasping for breath.

“Attack me,” Akinola repeated.

This time, McManus launched himself at Akinola with a growl of wounded fury. Unfortunately for McManus, he was a brawler and lacked any sense of subtlety.

Akinola easily side-stepped the charging Scotsman and punched the man in the kidney. McManus tumbled to the deck, writhing in pain.

Solly Brin took advantage of McManus’ attack and attempted to tackle the Master Chief around his middle. A knee strike to his nose dissuaded him of

that strategy. Solly staggered, trying to remain conscious as his vision darkened at the periphery. He felt a tap on his shoulder.

Expecting a fist to his face, Solly brought up a forearm to block a punch. Akinola, however, merely swept the Orion's legs out from under him. The Orion's head bounced off the unpadded deck, and the last vestiges of awareness left him.

Having learned from his previous attack, McManus stealthily approached Akinola from behind as the Senior Chief dispatched the Orion. He brought his fist back to punch Akinola from behind.

The Master Chief executed a text-book back kick, striking the Scotsman squarely in the crotch with the heel of his boot.

With a high-pitched keening, McManus thrust his hands between his legs, and dropped again to the deck, curling into the fetal position.

Akinola surveyed his handiwork, shaking his head in disgust. "Pathetic!" he growled.

"Master Chief, may I inquire as to what you are doing?" came a calm voice from the gym entrance.

Akinola brushed at his jumpsuit sleeve and turned to see the ship's XO, Commander Stanek. An eyebrow was raised prominently on the Vulcan's forehead.

"It's a training exercise, sir," replied Akinola. "I was demonstrating how to defend against multiple attackers."

Stanek nodded his head slowly. Akinola thought he detected a slight glimmer of amusement in the XO's eyes. "I see. It would appear that your 'students' still have much to learn. Carry on, then." Quietly, the Vulcan withdrew.

After the XO departed, Akinola walked over to the bulkhead and punched the comm. button.

"Akinola to sickbay."

"Sickbay, Dr. Peterson here. What's up, Master Chief?"

“Doc, could you send a corpsman to the gym? I’ve got two men with minor injuries.”

A chuckle came over the open channel. *“I bet they’re not so minor to your victims. I’ll have Korlut head down there. Peterson, out.”*

Stardate 31784.4 (15 October 2354)

USS *Bluefin*

Beloti Sector – Mericor System

Part Two

Two days later, Akinola was seated at the tactical station on the *Bluefin's* bridge as they entered the Mericor system. Their cutter was part of a small cutter group assigned to clear out gravitic mines and investigate reports of a Cardassian garrison on Mericor IV.

Captain Darby Reninger, a stocky human from Centauri IV, absently pulled at the collar of his burgundy tunic. Reninger looked more like someone's portly grandfather than a cutter skipper. His wavy white hair and cherubic face gave him a genteel appearance. In fact, Reninger was very personable and well-liked by his crew. But to underestimate the Captain based on his non-assuming presence would be a mistake. He was a veteran cutter commander and a fierce warrior when the situation required it.

"Mr. Galt, calibrate tractor beams for 'repel' and set focus for maximum range. Those mines will go off at the slightest pressure, so we want plenty of distance between us and them, eh?"

Lt. (j.g.) Galt, the newly assigned assistant engineering officer muttered something under his breath as he made the adjustments at the engineering station. Akinola smiled to himself. Galt was a typical Tellarite - given any opportunity to argue, insult or complain, he would take it with relish.

"Shields at maximum, Boats," said Reninger to Akinola. The Nigerian MCPO turned his attention to the tactical controls, making sure that maximum power was available to all shield emitters. He adjusted the coverage to provide overlapping fields of protection. A gravitic mine could easily shred their cutter if it detonated too close.

"Shields at 100% and steady, sir," responded Akinola.

The portly Captain nodded, a pleased look on his face. "Very good. Lt. Slintass, please signal the *Albacore* and the *White Sands* to begin sweeping in their designated patterns. Then, initiate long-range scans of the fourth planet. Let's see if Fleet Intel got one right for a change."

As the Andorian Operations Officer complied, there was muted laughter around the bridge. Unfortunately, it was a response to Reninger's barely veiled sarcasm. Fleet Intelligence had become notorious for inaccurate analysis, resulting in both wasted effort and the occasional nasty surprise. Most everyone knew at least one person who had died as a result of faulty intelligence reports.

Over the next few hours, the three Border Service cutters systematically reduced the number of mines in the system. Yet, for all their efforts, it was a mere drop in the bucket. Both Starfleet and the Cardassians had seeded many of the border systems with gravitic mines for more than a decade. It was estimated that there were at least a quarter million mines scattered among two dozen systems, but no one knew for sure.

For years, many vessels had been destroyed by the mines. Finally, a bright young engineer figured that tractor beams could be effectively employed to dampen the explosions when destroying the mines - something that phasers and torpedoes could not do. Thus, border cutters and warp tugs with their powerful tractor beams were pressed into service as mine sweepers. Unfortunately, there were still losses to the mines. Their sister ship, the cutter USS *Dolphin* had been destroyed conducting a mine sweeping mission just two months earlier.

Lt. Slintass looked up from his sensor hood and glanced at the Captain.

"It looks like the spooks got one right, Skipper! I'm picking up an energy signature near the planet's equator, in their temperate zone. I think we've found that Cardie garrison."

Captain Reninger shifted his sizable frame in the command chair. "Understood. Signal the *Albacore* that we're going into orbit around the fourth planet and sending down an assault team. Have them keep a watch for incoming Cardie ships. I don't want to get jumped by a *Gurlen* or one of those new *Galors*!"

Reninger turned his attention to Akinola. "Boats, assemble your assault team and prepare to beam down within thirty minutes."

Akinola was already on his feet and moving toward the lift. "Aye, sir. We'll be ready."

"Joseph . . ."

Akinola paused at the use of his familiar name. "Sir?"

Reninger fixed him with a penetrating stare. "You be careful down there."

The Master Chief responded with a crooked grin. "Always, sir!"

* * *

In transporter room one, Akinola checked the equipment on his Alpha strike team, while Chief Dundelo was performing the same inspection in transporter room two with Gamma team.

He moved quickly but methodically, making sure that armor webbing was tight, weapons were safed, and equipment properly attached and accessible. As he moved, he offered words of encouragement or a quick joke to keep tension down. Finally, he came to Solly Brin - the seventh member of his team. The bruises and swelling from his recent fight were gone, thanks to Dr. Peterson's ministrations. Akinola checked the Orion's phaser rifle, then handed it back. He paused and frowned at an extra piece of weaponry strapped to the Orion's forearm.

"Where did you get the knife, Brin?"

Solly glanced down at the forearm scabbard containing a nasty-looking combat blade. He looked back at Akinola; his gaze was both defiant and imploring.

"It was my step-father's. He carried it when he was a CPO in the Service."

Akinola's eyes locked with the young Petty Officer. Nothing was said, but the Master Chief nodded slightly.

"Alright, everyone on the platform. We beam down in five minutes. When we land, head to the rallying point - it's highlighted on your combat scanners. Stick with your partner. Any questions? Alright - mount up!"

Stardate 31784.5 (15 October 2354)
USS *Bluefin*
Geosynchronous Orbit - Mericor IV

Part Three

"Holding position relative to landing zone," announced Ensign Battaglia from the helm.

"Captain, it won't take long for the Cardassians to notice us," said Lt. Slintass. "I recommend we maintain shields after we beam down the strike teams."

Captain Reninger rubbed his ample chin. "Very well, Mr. Slintass. But if our teams need extraction, be ready to drop shields - is that clear?"

The Andorian nodded. "Yes sir. But you should be aware that I'm picking up some heavy surface to orbit weapons down there. If they light off a missile while our shields are down . . ." The Ops officer did not need to finish his thought.

"The strike teams will neutralize those weapons sites. That's what they're good at," replied the Captain, confidently.

* * *

Strike team Alpha materialized in dense jungle foliage, each member separated by at least 100 meters to prevent the chance of an ambush wiping out the entire landing party.

Sweat instantly popped out on Akinola's forehead as a result of the extreme humidity and the heat. He silently tracked his phaser rifle a full 360 degrees. Satisfied that he was alone for the moment, he began to move stealthily through the thick vegetation toward the rally point.

* * *

Petty Officer Brin found himself stuck in thick greenish yellow mud that came halfway to his knees. He muttered an Orion curse and pulled hard with his right leg. The mud reluctantly released his muddy boot with an audible *shloop*. He slowly moved forward until he reached somewhat firmer terrain, his combat fatigues now covered with sticky mud nearly to his waist.

The combat scanner on his right forearm vibrated silently, indicating an incoming text message. He pulled up the protective cover and saw the simple message from Master Chief Akinola - *"Move your ass!"*

With an exasperated sigh, Brin moved as quickly as he could toward the rally point.

* * *

Akinola was on one knee, talking quietly to the other five members of Alpha team, when Solly lumbered out of the jungle into the small clearing. The Master Chief gave him a withering look.

Brin shrugged and gestured to the mud that covered half his person. "Bad LZ," he said simply.

"Get on over here, Brin. We've got ten more clicks to cover."

Brin stood in the semi circle of Border Dogs that stood before Akinola. The group included Corpsman Korlut, a scaly Rigellian who carried a short ARC (Adjustable Radius Concussion) gun that was favored by corpsmen. Nicknamed the "Hammer," an ARC provided effective coverage up to 180 degrees and up to 50 meters range - an ideal weapon for a medic. The others, Brown, Eriksson, Churnix, and his old nemesis, McManus, all carried Mark 2-G phaser rifles.

Akinola spoke softly and clearly. "Brown - you've got point. By now the snake-heads probably know we're here, so watch out for their seeker squads. And keep an eye out for booby traps - the Cardies love 'em. Eriksson and Churnix - you've got our flanks. Brin, since you seem to enjoy dragging your ass, you've got our six. McManus, you hang with Brin and try not to get into a fight. Korlut - you're on me! Let's move out!"

Alpha team, led by Petty Officer 1st Class Melissa Brown on point, moved back into the jungle canopy, heading west toward their target.

* * *

Their journey was arduous. The vegetation and uneven terrain made progress slow. The heat and humidity slowly sapped their strength and tiny insects continually buzzed them, adding to their misery level.

Brin and McManus moved through the jungle silently, both occasionally casting wary glances at the other.

Petty Officer Brown came to a shallow stream that crossed their direction of travel. The water bubbled over small rocks and green moss. It looked cool and inviting, but Brown had no doubt that there were microscopic organisms that would love to turn her stomach inside out.

She found a relatively narrow spot for crossing. She looked around, then stepped forward on a relatively dry, flat rock in the middle of the stream.

As she placed her weight on the rock, she heard a distinctive, metallic *snick*. She had time to close her eyes and whisper a plaintive "*God . . .*" when the anti-personnel mine hidden under the rock detonated with a loud *Krumph!*

Akinola watched in horror as Brown was blown to bits in a geyser of blood, water and gore. He had time to grab Corpsman Korlut and drag him down before the first beams of phased energy passed over their heads, shredding leaves and cutting small trees in two. The fire from the Cardassian squad was intense but mostly ineffective. The thick foliage masked Alpha team's thermal signatures, making it difficult for the Cardassian troops to lock on their targets.

Akinola pulled a photon grenade from his vest, as did Korlut. They popped the primers, counted to three, than tossed the grenades in graceful arcs over the stream.

The twin explosions combined to create one ear-splitting, blinding cacophony, almost but not quite drowning out the screams of the Cardassian soldiers that did not die instantly.

* * *

Brin and McManus began to thrash through the jungle to join the fray, oblivious to the sting of thorn bushes and the painful thrashing of thick vines that bruised forearms and shins.

McManus, unfortunately, was too eager to join the fight and allowed his momentum to take him out of cover. He tried to stop and backtrack, but a bolt of blue energy caught him just below the right collarbone, knocking him back several meters.

Brin squeezed off several rounds with his own rifle in the direction of the Cardassian position, then scrambled on his belly to grab McManus by his armor webbing and drag him under cover. Phaser blasts impacted all around him, filling the air with the smell of burnt vegetation and ozone. A cloud of steam escaped from the damaged plants, making the already dense air even more thick.

Solly checked McManus' pulse at his neck. The Scotsman still had a pulse, but it seemed thready. At least the armor had kept McManus from being killed outright.

The Orion considered signaling the corpsman, but instead, he hoisted the unconscious man over his shoulder, phaser rifle still at the ready, and moved toward denser jungle in hopes of finding the rest of the team.

* * *

On the bridge of the *Bluefin* the news was not good.

"*Albacore* reports and inbound Cardassian vessel," said Lt. Slintass. He turned, a grim expression on his face. "*Galor* - class."

Captain Reninger grimaced. "How much time do we have?"

"Less than two hours before the *Galor* is in weapon's range."

The Centauran Captain nodded absently as he played possible scenarios through his mind. "Have *Albacore* and *White Sands* form up on us. They are not, repeat *not* to attempt engaging that ship."

"Aye sir," replied the Andorian Ops officer as he turned back to his station. Almost immediately, he whirled in his seat, facing the captain. "Sir! Team Alpha has encountered a Cardassian patrol and is engaged in a fire-fight."

"Casualties?" queried Reninger.

"One confirmed KIA, no other reports of injury yet."

"Are they requesting extraction?"

"Wait one . . . No sir, Master Chief Akinola requests permission to proceed with the mission."

Captain Reninger exhaled sharply. "Very well. But tell him they have one hour and fifty minutes, then we're yanking them out of there!"

* * *

"Damn!" exclaimed Akinola as he slapped shut his communicator.

"What?" asked Gorlut.

"The clock is winding down - a Cardassian warship just entered the system. We've got less than two hours to hit that installation."

A rustling in the brush caused both Akinola and Gorlut to swing their weapons around. They relaxed as Solly Brin stumbled toward them, carrying the still unconscious McManus.

The Red Orion placed McManus carefully to the ground and Gorlut immediately began to tend to the injured man.

"You okay?" asked Akinola.

Solly nodded, still winded from carrying McManus nearly a kilometer through thick vegetation. "Yeah . . . anybody else . . . hurt?"

Akinola's expression clouded in remorse. "Brown bought it. She tripped a mine." They were all silent for a moment, remembering the freckle-faced, brown-haired girl from Canada. "We've got to break through this Cardie patrol, though," continued Akinola. "One of their new *Galor* battleships is less than two hours away."

Brin frowned and nodded in understanding.

"You got a plan, Master Chief?"

Akinola rose from his crouch and ramped up the power on his phaser rifle.

"Yeah - kill the Cardie patrol, get to our objective and take out those missiles."

"Oh. Good plan."

* * *

The Cardassian squad leader, Trongus, crept through the underbrush, his weapon at the ready. He estimated enemy strength at no more than ten, likely fewer. His face broke into a tight grin as he recalled how the mine placed in the stream had killed one of the enemy. He was pleased that placing the mine at the narrow point of the stream had worked so well.

Trongus suddenly noticed movement in a clump of whip-grass. His grin widening, he leveled his rifle at the patch of foliage. As he did so, his head suddenly exploded in a shower of brain matter and bone fragments.

The rest of the Cardassian squad panicked and began firing blindly in a circle. One by one, the Cardassians dropped as return fire came from all angles. The odds were now shifted decidedly in favor of the Border Dogs.

Dropping from a tree, Akinola quickly checked the fallen Cardassians. As he turned over one of the Cardies, he was surprised to see a phaser pistol leveled at his face.

Before he could react, the grin on the Cardassian's face vanished and the soldier's eyes rolled back into his head. Akinola was surprised to see the hilt of a knife protruding from the neck of his would-be killer.

Solly Brin walked over, placed his boot on the shoulder of the dead Cardassian, and wrenched his knife free. He wiped the blood off on his sleeve, then suddenly gave the corpse a savage kick.

Akinola had seen blood-fever in an Orion before and knew the young man was in danger of losing himself.

"Let me see your knife, Brin," he said, casually.

Solly blinked at Akinola and the wild-eyed look abated. He handed the knife to the MCPO, butt end first.

Akinola looked over the blade - it was razor sharp with serrations on the upper portion. Engravings in an alien language were visible on the blade.

"Nice knife," he remarked handing it back to Brin. Akinola's gaze suddenly jerked to the right, and he threw his body forward - slamming into the Orion and taking him down to the ground as a barrage of phaser fire slashed by.

Akinola grimaced as a spasm of fiery pain caught his right side. A glancing hit from a phaser set his nerves on fire and paralyzed his right arm and leg. He felt himself being dragged behind cover and saw the Orion begin squeezing off round after round from his own phaser rifle. The face of Corpsman Gorlut appeared in his view. The Rigellian was saying something - Akinola could see his mouth moving, but he heard no words.

In a moment he neither saw nor felt anything.

* * *

Stardate 31785.8 (16 October 2354)

USS Bluefin

Beloti Sector - en route to Star Station Echo, warp 6

Akinola awoke to see the smiling face of Dr. Bradley Peterson hovering over him. The grey-headed physician looked over at Corpsman Gorlut, who was also standing by.

"Welcome to the world of the living, Master Chief! You gave us some tense moments since yesterday."

Akinola cleared his dry throat. "What happened?"

Gorlut answered. "It was a cluster frak. Gamma team walked into an ambush, fortunately no one was killed, but they all had to be extracted. After you went down, more Cardies started showing up. Brin did a hell of a job! He took out a half dozen snake-heads while we regrouped and the Captain managed to pull our asses out of the fire."

"Did we take out their missiles?" Akinola pressed.

Gorlut's expression darkened. "No . . . We didn't have time. We were way outnumbered and outgunned down there. We managed to get out of the system before that *Galor* arrived."

Another figure approached. Akinola turned his head to see Petty Officer 3rd Class Solly Brin standing by - his expression neutral.

"Brin," began Akinola, "Gorlut says you did alright down there . . . thanks for saving my butt!"

An embarrassed smile twitched on the Orion's face. "No problem, Master Chief. You kept me from getting my own head blown off, so I guess we're even."

"Never argue with the Chief of the Boat, Brin," he paused, maintaining eye-contact. "I mean it - thanks!"

Solly nodded, suddenly feeling awkward. "Sure thing. See you later, Master Chief!"

Solly walked down two more cubicles and stopped in front of another bed. Petty Officer McManus lay still, his eyes closed but his chest rose and fell regularly.

Brin hesitated, then began to move off.

"Where might ye be goin' - *pirate?*" challenged McManus in a muzzy tone.

Solly turned. "Nowhere. I just wanted to see if you were dead or not."

McManus chuckled, then winced. "Ow. That wasna smart." He blinked and squinted at the Orion. "Why'd ye do it?"

"Do what?"

"You hauled m' arse out of danger, you thick-headed sod! Why?"

Solly smiled. "You're a Border Dog, even if you do like humping sheep."

The Scotsman glared at Brin for a moment, then his face crinkled into a grin. "Well then, now that we understand each other. You soddin' barbarian!"

"Get better, McManus - the sheep are getting lonely."

* * *

Captain Reninger gazed out the viewport of his ready room. The remains of the after-action report glowed accusingly from his computer terminal. His reverie was interrupted by the door enunciator.

"Come," he called out.

MCPO Akinola entered and stood at attention before the Captain's desk.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Have a seat, Boats," said Reninger, gesturing toward one of the chairs. "I just finished writing the report. God - what a frakked up mission!"

Akinola looked down, deflated. "Yes sir. I accept full responsibility for our failure."

Reninger's eyes widened. "You most certainly will not! Your strike teams performed above and beyond the call! If our intel had been halfway accurate, we would have known there was an entire brigade of Cardassians hidden away down there!" He leaned back, shaking his head. "We're lucky to have gotten away with our tails tucked between our legs."

"Captain, I . . ."

"I'm the one who owes you the apology, Boats. I sent you into Hell without so much as a water pistol!"

Akinola grinned ruefully. "I remember something that a soldier on Earth said - probably four hundred years ago."

"What's that?"

"This ain't Hell, but it sure is close."

Reninger snorted, than chuckled softly. "Go get some rest Boats - you look like you could use it."

"Aye, sir. Goodnight."

END