

## **Episode 3**

### **Act 1- Sergey**

*UNS Nighthawk DCS-47*

**Awaiting rendezvous with Drya transport vessel *Guish***

**Engineering**

**2319.05.16.1155**

Chief Engineer's Mate Sergey Roman Vasilyev strode into the engine room, a grim glower on his face. He made for the drink dispenser without making eye contact with any of the engineers. They knew better than to make eye contact with him either.

Without needing to issue a command, the dispenser popped out a tall mug of steaming black coffee. He removed the lid, something he would have thrashed any of the other engineers for doing and inhaled the aroma. Nothing like processed chemicals resequenced into artificial combinations to liven a day. He guzzled a generous portion, relishing in the heat just below the tipping point between hot and searing.

Securing the lid back on the mug, Sergey turned to the tool table. He reached his hand into the package there and removed a donut. Without looking at it, he took a bite. When he tasted a sticky glaze of sugar, instead of the satisfying blandness of crispy fried dough he looked down. His glower, which had started to fade with the intake of coffee, returned.

Across the room, Damage Control Specialist 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Georgia Argyris whistled, "Uh oh, looks like the newbie tried to liven up the donut selection."

Beside her Anti-Matter Specialist 1<sup>st</sup> Class Orsola Bellarmine grinned, “This ought to be good.”

Ignoring the two engineers, Sergey bellowed, “Qun! What the hell is this in my hand?”

Trainee Yuen Qun smiled at him, “A donut, Chief.”

“And what is on the exterior of this donut?”

“Glaze, Chief.”

“Should there be glaze on a donut?”

“Ummm...if it’s a glaze donut.”

Sergey allowed his face to switch to a smile. As he intended, the sudden shift caused Qun to shrink back. “A funny joke there, Trainee. See how happy it made me.”

Qun continued to cringe, looking more uncomfortable. Satisfied that the young man had been sufficiently unbalanced so that he wouldn’t attempt to engage in any more jokes, Sergey held his fingers out, “Now, Trainee, what do you suppose would happen if I were to touch something in here with these fingers?”

“You’d get glaze on them, Chief.”

“Now, what do you suppose would happen if glaze got on the fusion reactors control circuit? Or the anti-matter containment system?”

“Um...I don’t know, Chief.”

“A good answer. Neither do I. And when we’re talking about anti-matter, I don’t like things I don’t know. Because there’s no learning from that mistake. Only sudden and complete annihilation for you and all sixty-four people onboard. Do you want to risk annihilating the ship because you wanted a little more sugar in your morning snack?”

“No, Chief.”

“Good. You *can* learn. Now, dispose of these and next time, bring the proper type of snack. *Nighthawk* runs on hydrogen and anti-matter. But the crew runs on caffeine and sugar.”

Yun scampered past Sergey, grabbed the box and dashed out of engineering. As he went out, Engineer’s Apprentice Cesar Gallego hissed, “I told you.”

Sergey turned to Gallego who had a smug expression on his face as he watched Yun leave. It took Gallego a second to notice Sergey’s gaze on him. Unphased, no doubt thinking himself an expert on Sergey by now, Gallego smiled. “Trainee’s, huh.”

Across the room, Bellarmine and Argyris groaned. Sergey locked his eyes on Gallego until he started to shift uncomfortably. Then he stood up, looking a little panicked, “Um, I should get started on those repairs to the plasma ducts on the number two engine.”

“Sounds like a genius idea.”

Gallego picked up a tool kit from the locker, “I thought maintenance would be light on this ship. Everything’s brand new.”

“That’s the problem.” Sergey said, “New stuff doesn’t know what it’s doing yet. It needs time to settle in. Now, take the engine on an old *Osaka* class destroyer. That thing will run forever. It’s old and comfortable. It knows what it’s supposed to do. Super heat matter and propel it into space. *Nighthawk*’s engines are still learning. They need guidance. Go give her some guidance.”

“Right, Chief.” Gallego said, looking uneasily between Sergey and the two other engineers before slipping into the maintenance hatch.

“The old teaching the ship speech?” A new voice said, “Haven’t heard that one in awhile.”

“I only break it out for especially stubborn cases.” Sergey said and turned to face Lieutenant Commander Darryl Lamay.

“I’m pleased to know *Nighthawk* will be in good hands when I leave, regardless of what my replacement is like.” Lamay said with a wide smile.

“Well, sir, you know what they say, an officer is like a plasma engine.”

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Sergey futzed with the collar of this dress uniform. He exchanged a sympathetic look with Chief Pilot Ivan De Vasquez. Neither man enjoyed the stiff uniform.

Beside them, Chief Rosa Colchado, chuckled, “Those uniforms look a little snug on you boys.”

Sergey narrowed his eyes and frowned at her, “You’re one to talk.”

“Maybe. But I at least have the good sense to get a new uniform when necessary. I’m not the one whose past forty and still thinks she’ll fit into something she wore at twenty.”

“I don’t see why you wouldn’t.” Chief Medical Specialist Hiroshi Kita said.

“Come off it, Doc. We all know every time you eat one too many pies the ship sickbay suddenly needs more fat burning nanites from storage.” Sergey said.

“As a physician I would never abuse my position for my own personal needs.” Kita protested. This received a round of chuckles from the rest of the chiefs.

“Let’s go you lot.” Master Chief Sarala Misra stepped out of her room into the chief’s common room, “We can ridicule Sergey about his weight later. Now we have to go meet his new boss.”

“And just after you finished breaking in the old one.” Colchado said with a slap on Sergey’s back. He grunted in reply.

In the ship’s main mess, the tables had been cleared and the place packed with almost the entire crew. Only a minimal crew stood watch in CIC. The banquet had been planned for 1100, within the narrow window of the day when the entire crew was generally awake. It was important to have everyone here but not important enough to mess with sleep schedules.

Beside him, De Vasquez grumbled quietly, “All this pomp for a new officer. Glad we don’t do it for all of them.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised if we see it more often. Once an officer sees a fancy event they love to have more.” Sergey replied.

“We’ll be welcoming every alien we meet into the navy just to give them an excuse to get all dressed up.” De Vasquez chuckled.

“Let’s form them up.” Misra said, either ignoring them or having missed the whole exchange.

“Aye, Master Chief.” They all echoed.

Striding into the mess, his back straight and his head held rigid, Sergey moved to stand before the entrance the officers would shortly be using. He pivoted smartly on his heel and barked out, “Engineering company, fall in.”

Before him the ship’s engineers stood in a straight line already assembled into position. Sergey bit back a smile at their efficiency. It wouldn’t do for them to see him pleased. He had a hard-fought reputation as an old curmudgeon to uphold.

Around them the rest of the ship’s departments formed up behind their chiefs. Once everyone was in place, Misra called everyone to stand at ease. Now would be the much loved

'hurry up and wait' period. Fortunately, they had timed it well and only ten or fifteen minutes went by before the hatch to the mess opened.

"Company, attention!" Misra bellowed.

The crew snapped to attention and Sergey swiveled around to stand at the head of the engineers. Captain Afolayan strode in leading the rest of the officers. Among them were four feathered Drya. Most were a bright blue but the one in the officer's uniform had streaks of green plumage.

"At ease." Afolayan ordered and took his place at the front of the room, the officers and Drya behind him. "Join me in welcoming the latest additions to the crew from the Drya Ascendency; Drone Specialist 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Lulo Lam, Navigation Specialist Uvo Sanm, Medical Specialist 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Grox Tylo and Lieutenant Toral Manix, our new Chief Engineer."

Afolayan clapped his hands together which was the signal for the rest of the crew to do the same. At the sudden sound in the echoey room, the vestigial wings on the Drya's backs fluttered and the feathers on their heads lifted. All but from the officer, Manix. Sergey nodded approvingly at that.

With a gesture from Afolayan, Manix stepped forward, "Thank you for the warm welcome, Captain. It is a great honor for my people to receive the embrace of the people of Earth."

Sergey fought back a chuckle at that. They all knew the integration of the Drya into the planets of the United Nations of Earth was anything but a warm embrace. Groups like TOR had sprung up as the first Drya refugees appeared. Fleeing from the destruction of their homeworld at the hands of the Osirji, Drya had been streaming into the UNE for decades and there had been tension the entire time.

It had taken nearly a generation for them to even receive citizenship. The first Drya military officer had come nearly a decade ago but that had been a slow trickle. Now, the remnants of the Drya navy were formally being integrated with the UNE.

Manix continued talking and Sergey had his Navi switch off the automatic translation. Instead of Manix's words being rendered flawlessly in his own native Ukrainian, they instead could be heard as an incomprehensible series of clicks and whistles. Momentarily Sergey wondered if the Drya could even make human language sounds. He thought he could mimic some of the Drya's words but doubted it would be anything other than gibberish.

Not wanting to be caught unaware if Manix said something important, Sergey switched the translation back on. As expected, the rest of the speech was pointless drivel. Officers were the same regardless of species it seemed.

After Manix finished speaking, the captain released everyone to relax and begin the banquet. Service drones appeared carrying trays of food and drink. Fortunately, Drya and Human dietary requirements were close enough that the risk of allergic reactions were no different than within any random group of humans. Though, looking at the dishes presented, Sergey doubted they had much overlap in actual taste.

Sergey remained where he was and the rest of the engineers moved up to cluster around him. They waited patiently for Manix and Lamay to finish some idle chatter with the XO before they both moved to join them. As the chief, Sergey knew it was up to him to set the tone.

“Lieutenant, a pleasure to have you with us. I am Chief Sergey Vasilyev, engineer's mate.” Sergey said formally.

Manix extended his hand out and Sergey took it gently. Drya's arms were more center line of their chests than humans and far more frail looking. With a rounded beak dominating

Manix's face, Sergey could read no emotions there. Fortunately, his Navi's translation matrix was sophisticated enough to add some much-needed tonal inflection as he spoke.

“An honor, Chief. Lieutenant Commander Lamay has spoken very highly of you and your team.”

“I hope we can live up to it, sir.”

Manix took a turn speaking to each of the other seven engineers. After the pleasantries were over, most of the engineers dispersed to enjoy the banquet and get to know the enlisted Drya who would be members of other ship departments. Sergey stood with the two officers.

“Lieutenant, would you like a report on the status of the ship sooner than tomorrow's regular staff meeting?”

“No, Commander Lamay has briefed me adequately for now. Tomorrow will be excellent. But we will be rescheduling the regular briefing. Lieutenant Olah has invited us to join her marines with some morning PT which I have accepted.”

Unable to help himself, Sergey stared speechless at Manix for an uncomfortably long time. Shaking himself back to sanity he spluttered, “PT. With the marines. Sir?”

“Yes. A healthy engineer makes for a healthy ship. Wouldn't you agree, Chief?”

“Of course, sir. Very good, sir.”

Manix bobbed his head, “Then I will see you in the morning.”



## **Act 2- Nelson**

### ***UNS Nighthawk DCS-47***

#### **On Patrol**

#### **Drone Flight Deck**

**2319.05.17.1215**

Senior Chief Drone Specialist Nelson Delaney studied the two crates before him like a boy on his birthday. Around him, the rest of the drone techs shifted eagerly, unable to remain still. But they couldn't open the crates yet.

"Come on, Senior Chief." Drone Apprentice Oscar Paravicini groaned, "What are we waiting for?"

"You don't care why we're waiting. You don't mind it." Chief Rosa Colchado said sternly, fixing a steely gaze at Paravicini.

"There's no officers here, Chief. You said I could always ask questions." Paravicini said, his tone hesitant.

"That you can." Nelson said, "But I think you answered your own question."

"I did?"

"We have to wait for the LT." Drone Repair Specialist 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Marian Biton said. One of the Drya, Lulo Lam, would be replacing her and Marian would depart for a new assignment in a few weeks. This would be her only opportunity to try out the new drones before they reached any other ship.

"Oh. Right."

Standing beside Paravicini, Drone Apprentice Elsa Muscott nudged him, “It’s not like you’ll understand anything that’s in there anyways.”

“I would too!” Paravicini whined, “Besides, that’s why Lulo’s here. To teach us.”

All eyes shifted to the Drya that stood slightly apart from the group. Lulo Lam wore a navy coverall uniform, like the rest of them, though hers had fairly dramatic alterations to account for her wings and the vastly different body shape. It was hard to read emotions on a face that lacked anything resembling human features but the way her head darted rapidly, side to side, suggested nervousness. Though, it could just be that with her eyes on the side of her head, that’s how all Drya looked around.

Delaney frowned when he noticed the separation from the group. He didn’t think it had been a conscious decision by anyone. But unit cohesion fell apart far more often due to unconscious decisions. Deliberately he glanced at Colchado and inclined his head toward Lam. She nodded her understanding and started shifting the circle of the group further out so that Lam was now no further away than anyone else, but also not surrounded.

“Lulo,” Delaney began, almost using her rank but caught himself. He wouldn’t do that with any of the others unless he was reprimanding them so he couldn’t do it to her, “Will be able to teach us all about these new toys the Drya have donated to the navy. But not till the LT gets here. I assure you, she’s just as eager to play as you are.”

“That she is, Senior Chief.” Lieutenant Moira Tierney said, her voice echoing in the drone bay. She strode over to the group of drone techs and gestured to the crate, “Let’s not keep Oscar waiting any longer.”

Delaney nodded at Tierney and then bent over. He entered his access code and had his Navi transmit his biometric key. The crates lock clicked allowing him to pop the latches.

Colchado stepped up and helped him lift the lid off. As they got a look at the contents, one of the techs whistled.

Inside, secured snugly in foam sat half a dozen drones. Brightly colored they stood out compared to the usual navy silvery metallic or dark black. Several of them were multi-segmented like caterpillars as long as his arm, the others spheres small enough to fit in his hand.

“Okay, Lam, what do we have here?” Tierney said beckoning Lulo to the crate.

Moving deliberately Lam squatted down beside the crate. She removed one of the spheres, “This is an ISY-245. It is an inspection unit, capable of moving almost anywhere on the ship.”

She keyed imaginary buttons in the air projected by the Drya version of a Navi. The drone lifted off of her hand and floated. It darted quickly upward to hover over the group. It then dove down and weaved between everyone’s legs, making a complicated orbit of the group.

“That’s not that impressive.” Paravicini sighed, unable to keep the disappointed from his tone, “Our current drones can do that.”

“Yes, but they must be recharged every eighteen hours.” Lulo replied her town chipper, “These derive their ability to hover by manipulating the ship’s own artificial gravity field. This requires very little power use and can therefore function for almost one hundred hours between charges.”

Delaney nodded appreciatively. One of his biggest hassles came when one of the drones ran out of battery prematurely or got stuck somewhere. That required tearing off wall panels and digging into the guts of the ship to retrieve it. Quintupling the battery life would reduce that need.

Lam replaced the small drone and lifted out one of the multi-segmented models, “And this is a Multi-Repair and Diagnostic model, or MRD.”

She set the drone on the deck and activated it. The drone rolled toward her sideways and then twisted, curling around her leg. Slowly, it corkscrewed up her leg and then across her back. When it reached her shoulders, two manipulator arms extended and unpinned the rank emblem from her collar. Another segment did the same with the pin on her other collar. The drone exchanged the two pins and then gently replaced them on her collar.

“That is incredibly fine motor control.” Trainee Juliet Cinelu said, moving to within centimeters of the drone, still on Lam’s shoulder. “How accurate can your commands be?”

“As accurate as you need. You can define a general level of delicacy and the drone will adapt. But if specific tolerances are required you can define them.”

“What are those pinchers made out of?” Cinelu asked, not taking her eyes off the drone.

“You’ll get a chance to inspect the drones as closely as you like shortly, Trainee.”

Delaney said, sharing the enthusiasm. The girl lacked a certain level of social grace and needed to be deflected before a million more questions came out of the normally quiet Cinelu.

“We will?” Cinelu asked with raw eagerness.

“Absolutely.” Tierney said, “In fact, each of you needs to dissect and study each drone. We need to become intimately familiar with all of them. Drya tech is generally regarded as sturdy and reliable. But it’s still tech. And tech always breaks eventually.”

Normally, being told to strip down multiple drones and perform detailed inspections would have elicited a groan from most of the techs. But this time they all reacted like Cinelu, fountains of enthusiasm. The drone’s bright colors and unfamiliar nature really did make them seem more like toys than work.

The techs all stood up and grabbed their tool bags, eager to get to work. Poor Paravicini looked crest fallen when Colchado placed a hand on his shoulder, “Not us, Oscar. We’re still on watch.”

“But Chief...” Oscar stammered.

Nelson chuckled at the young man reluctantly followed Colchado from the drone bay. The rest of them each took a drone and got to work. Lam transferred a schematic manual to their Navis. Nelson opened his but minimized it in the corner of his vision. He always learned best with his hands.

Time passed without notice, everyone engrossed by the task at hand. Silence reigned until Biton held up a small device, “Anyone know what this is? I can’t find it on the schematic.”

Nelson looked over to what Biton held and then brought up the schematic, While he did he said, “Let us see if we can figure it out, Lulo before you enlighten us.”

“Yes, Senior Chief.” The Drya responded.

Before he could dig through the schematic very far, Cinelu called out, her tone dismissive, “That’s the graviton field manipulator.”

“No, that’s this thing over here.” Biton argued.

“No, it’s not. That’s the field regulator.”

Knowing where to look now, Nelson glanced over the schematic, “I think she’s right, Marian. Lulo, care to weight in?”

Lam bobbed her head up and down, “She is correct, Senior Chief.”

Nelson glanced at Cinelu who still had her head buried in her drone. She missed the impressed look Lam cast her. When he turned his head, Nelson also caught a glimpse of an

intense look Marian Biton fixed on Lam. He sympathized with her some. The Drya was taking over her job on *Nighthawk*. He gave her a little smile and she looked down embarrassed.

Another hour passed with only minor discussions. Tierney, Korhonen and Mauro left to relieve Colchado and Paravicini as third watch started. The later pair returned and dove into their own drones.

Nelson's Navi beeped an alarm at 1600. He blinked in surprise at the time. With a groan he stood up, his neck and back muscles protesting. He did a lot of his work hunched over a disassembled drone but his old body had started to protest more and more.

"Okay, boys and girls, let's wrap it up."

"I can keep going, Senior Chief." Cinelu said without looking up.

"Yeah, same here." Schultz and Muscott agreed.

"You, Juliet and Elsa are on watch in two hours and need to eat and relax some. The rest of you should be in your racks getting a full night's sleep."

Everyone got up without much more grumbling. They all stretched and groaned, though no one else had the same shuffling walk that Nelson had to do. Together they walked into the tool locker to store their kits.

In the rear, Nelson was focused more on his aching back than the rest of them and almost ran into Muscott who had stopped in front of him. He waited for a second for her to continue but she remained where she was, her attention focused forward. Taller than Muscott, Nelson peered forward and saw the rest of the techs all fixed on the same thing.

Scrolled across Lam's tool locker in dark black letters of grease was written, "Cluck Cluck!"

Oblivious to the sudden chilling of the rooms mood, Cinelu said dismissively, “That’s stupid. Drya don’t look like chickens.”

## **Act 3- Sergey**

### *UNS Nighthawk DCS-47*

#### **On Patrol**

#### **Marine Barracks, Firing Range**

**2319.05.18.0923**

The sharp report of the rifle echoed through the chamber. Despite the sound absorbing panels and the safety gear covering his ears, Sergey still flinched. His frown deepened.

“You look jumpy, Chief.” Bellarmine said, leaning in close.

“I don’t like loud noises. I’m an engineer. Loud noises mean something broke and we all might be about to die.”

“Yeah, but these loud noises mean someone else is about to die.” Gallego said with a wide grin.

Sergey fixed the young man with a penetrating glare until he had the good sense to cringe, “Despite all evidence to the contrary, you’re an engineer too Cesar. If we’re ever in a position where you have to shoot someone, don’t delude yourself into thinking that it’s the other guy whose going to be the one who dies.”

Gallego shrunk back, deflated. Bellarmine frowned at him. Sergey shifted uncomfortably at her disapproval. Normally, that look was directed from him to one of the other engineers.

Defensively he said, “What? I don’t want him doing something stupid trying to be a hero.”

“You’re just sore and tired.”

“That too.”



Sergey looked away from Bellarmine and back to the marines. Private Ceyda Kaya was standing at the range preparing to fire at the mock drone targets. After the mornings PT, the marines had offered to let the engineers join them for weapons recertification. Manix had eagerly accepted without consulting Sergey.

Pistol training was required for all crew and they each had to recertify once a year. But heavier rifle certification was entirely optional. Sergey hadn't touched one since basic training. He doubted any of the rest of the engineers had either.

Kaya fired ten times in quick succession. Sergey flinched at each shot. When she set the rifle down, he glanced up at the displayed score to see how outclassed they would be. To his amazement it showed only a 40% hit rate, a failing grade. The marines all had gone uncharacteristically quiet. Kaya stared up at the score, a dumbfounded expression on her face.

“Wow. If the marines are failing what the hell is going to happen to us?” Bellarmine whispered.

“Maybe this marine just sucks. There are sucky engineers. There are bound to be sucky marines.” Sergey said dismissively.

“Yeah, but Kaya was the one who took down the drone on the Tor ship. If she can do that this should be nothing.”

“Or if she can do that, they cranked up her difficulty to max. Let's hope they remember to reset it to 'engineer'”.

The marines moved aside, all of them still making an effort to not look at Kaya. 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Kristen Olah, the marines platoon leader patted her on the back before coming over to the engineers. She nodded to Manix.

“I’m glad you decided to join us for this. I could tell after the PT session some of you were ready to jump ship. This shows dedication. We’ll have to retire the lazy engineer jokes. For awhile at least.” Olah said with a smile.

“This will be the most fit and well-trained engine room in the entire fleet thanks to your help, Lieutenant.” Manix said cheerfully.

“We’re going to start today with simulated weapons. I see none of you have had any range time since basic so we’re not going to pass out any live ammo just yet. But in a few week’s time you’ll all get to take the test the marines just took. And I think you’ll all pass.”

Beside him, Gallego started to say something but Sergey stepped on his foot. He doubted Olah would appreciate whatever the boy was about to say, undoubtedly about the marine failing. Fortunately, Gallego took the hint and kept his mouth closed.

Olah lined the engineers up, half at a time, across the firing range. She issued each of them a mock rifle, “Though this is a fake weapon, treat it like the real thing. Maintain muzzle discipline. Only point the rifle at something you intend to kill. Okay, activate training program 2-A on your Navi. Begin when ready.”

Sergey ran the designated program and his Navi displayed an artificial corridor down the gun range. It looked like any generic corridor on a navy ship. It was well lit and he could clearly see a combat drone as it rounded a corner. Reluctantly, he lifted the mock rifle, aimed and pulled the trigger.

Unexpectedly, the rifle bucked and pressed into his shoulder, causing the shot to go wide. He had forgotten how realistic the mock rifles were. With a grunt of frustration he recentered himself. He scoped in on the drones most vulnerable point, the joints of the weapon turret.

Holding the rifle tighter and ready for the reaction, he tried to remember his training. Like his annual pistol efforts, he relaxed and let the pull of the trigger be a surprise.

The simulated bullet severed the turrets linkage and the weapon flopped sideways, useless. Feeling proud of himself despite his earlier grumpiness, he set the rifle down and shut down the program. He stepped back from the range.

“Very good, Chief.” Olah said.

“Yes, that was an excellent shot. Taking out the turret was brilliant. Way to think like an engineer.” Manix cooed.

“Of course,” Olah added, “It was only four meters from you when you fired and it had more than a minute to approach you with a clear line of attack.”

“Bah.” Sergey said.

The rifle training continued for another twenty minutes before the marines finally released them. Sergey hastily returned to his quarters for a shower and a fresh uniform. His entire morning had been consumed by that waste of time and now he had to rush to make his watch shift in engineering.

Strolling into the engine room, Sergey went directly for the drink dispenser. The machine activated and he removed the mug. Taking a full swallow, he nearly spit the contents out. Instead of a steaming mug of coffee he had gotten only water.

Grumpily, he checked his preference settings and saw that everything was in order. He tried a manual order but the machine returned an error, “What the hell do you mean, coffee not authorized?”

“Lieutenant Manix’s order, Chief.” Bellarmine said from the reactor control board, “No artificial stimulants for engineering staff. He doesn’t want us impaired.”

“Impaired my ass. How are we suppose to keep this ship functioning if we have engineers asleep at their stations?”

Bellarmino shrugged. Sergey grumbled and turned to the tool station. There he found nothing waiting for him, “Qun, where the hell are the donuts? This time you didn’t even bring any.”

“Sorry, Chief. LT’s orders. No food in the engine room.”

Sergey’s mood darkened even further. He said nothing to the rest of the engineers but turned to his station. After running the usual diagnostics and looking over the work schedule he left the engine room and headed back to the chief’s common area. There he ran into the same error when he tried to order a coffee.

Returning to engineering, Sergey considered his options before calling Qun over, “I want you to go to CIC and go to Yuri Morotov. Tell him I want him to order a coffee. Then bring it here to me.”

Qun blinked and looked uneasy, “Chief, didn’t the LT say no more coffee?”

“That’s not for you to worry about. Worry about what I’m telling you to do right now.”

“Yes, Chief.” Qun said.

Qun left and returned ten minutes later with a mug of blessedly soothing coffee. The rest of Sergey’s watch went smoothly. The caffeine eased his headache and he, mostly, forgot about his bodies aches while engaged with the work of maintaining the ship. The next morning, he got up sore and disgruntled about another shift like the last one.

“You look in bright spirits, Sergey.” Jian said as he came into the common room.

Sergey said nothing and just cast a dark look to Jian. This brought a smile to Jian who persisted, “Grumpy before your morning run?”

“Watch it or I’ll ‘suggest’ to Lieutenant Gillette that the tactical department join the engineers.” Sergey threatened, “He’ll think of it as a great joke.”

“Don’t you dare. Or I’ll just have to tell Yuri not to get you any more coffee. Don’t think we didn’t notice what you sent your trainee to do.”

“Low blow.” Sergey growled.

He took his customary seat at the table and sipped his coffee. He would have to remember to get another mug before his technical shift started and the lockout set in. Just the thought of it made him glower.

“This damn new bird-brained officer is going to be the death of me.”

The room around him went silent and Sergey looked up, confused. Across from him Delaney sighed, “Sergey, think before you speak. After what happened yesterday, you’ll want to be more careful with your expressions.”

Sergey blinked and then realization hit him, “Oh right. That nonsense in the drone locker. Yeah, poor choice of words.”

“Smearing ‘cluck cluck’ on a locker. Why would anyone do that?” Jian asked.

“Because they’re an idiot. There may not be any cameras in the tool locker itself but we know everyone that went in there.” Senior Intelligence Chief Alton Kemler answered and then gestured to Gunnery Sergeant Kinard’s usual seat at the breakfast table which sat empty, “The marines will already be questioning whoever it was by now.”

“Obviously they’re an idiot.” Jian replied, “But why do it? What’s even the point?”

“Bigotry. Pure and simple.” Delaney said a deep frown on his face, “For hundreds of years people who looked like me were treated as less than human. Now, the people who would

have done that have turned their animosity to aliens. They tell themselves it's okay because the Drya actually aren't human."

Sergey shook his head, "Oh come on. Why do you always jump to the conclusion that it's racist? Alton's right, it was just some dumb kid trying to play a prank."

Delaney stared at him, "Just a prank?"

"Sure." Sergey said shrugging his shoulders, "I mean, you have to admit, it was a little funny."

"How on Earth could you think that was funny?"

"I never said I thought it was funny." Sergey said defensively.

"You just did."

"I said a little funny. They do kind of look like chickens." With all the other chief's eyes borrowing into him, Sergey kept speaking in a rush, "I only meant that it wasn't necessarily done maliciously. Some kid probably thought it would be a big joke."

Delaney sighed, "Just because it was done as a joke doesn't change anything. In some ways, that's even worse. That shows how little regard they have for the Drya. And they don't even know it."

The look Delaney cast him made Sergey squirm.

**Act 4- Nelson*****UNS Nighthawk DCS-47*****On Patrol****Drone Flight Deck****2319.05.18.1014**

Tierney gave Nelson a subtle nod. He returned it and then strode forward in front of the group, “Okay, listen up. We’ve got a drill in five. It’s going to be our job to strip this combat drone, repair simulated damage and get it back into the air. Now, while we’re doing that, Tactical is going to be running their own combat drill. As Chief Jian described it, ‘saving the ship while our drones stop for a piss’.”

The drone techs chuckled and Nelson continued, “Our goal is to get this bird back in the air before Tactical destroys all of the attacking ships. Do not make me and Chief Colchado endure Chief Jian’s gloating. He’s a Tac officer so he doesn’t do it very well.”

More chuckles were followed by a chorus of, “Aye, Senior Chief.”

The techs spread out around the drone deck. Tierney, Colchado, Biton, Schultz, Lam and Korhonen set up in a corner. Their Navi’s would bring up simulated controls as if they were in CIC, controlling all repair drones.

Meanwhile, Muscott, Paravicini, Cinelu and himself would handle the hands on part of the work. Anything the repair drones couldn’t handle they would do. The XO had selected the scenario they would be facing so none of them knew exactly what would be required. His team could have almost nothing to do or would be doing everything. It all depended on if the scenario involved faulty repair drones.

Nelson took his time slipping into his gear. He hated the stuffy repair suit. All things considered the suit didn't hamper his movement much but it would still be easier without it. Though, without it, damaged combat drones were prone to leaking radiation. Additionally, should the magnetic shield fail and vent the deck to space he would appreciate not being exposed to a hard vacuum.

While double checking his tools, Nelson kept an eye on Muscott and Paravicini. The two apprentices tried to go faster than Nelson while gearing up but had to back track a few times to correct a small error. Fortunately, they caught each error so he didn't feel the need to intervene. Patience would come in time for them he supposed.

The door to the drone deck opened and Gunnery Sergeant Kinard strode in. He nodded to Nelson before approaching Lieutenant Tierney. Nelson watched curiously. Fortunately, Tierney gestured him over, without him having to ask what the marine wanted.

"The Gunney here wants to have a word with Specialist Biton." Tierney said.

"Right now, Ma'am? Before the drill?"

"We just have a few questions for her." Kinard said evasively.

"I would really like all my people here for the drill, Gunney. Can it wait?" Tierney asked.

"Lieutenant Olah would prefer to speak to her as soon as possible."

Nelson glanced over to Biton with the group of techs running the simulated CIC. Everyone made terrible attempts to hide their interest in what was going on with the marine. Everyone except Biton that was. She made a special point to not look in their direction.

"Gunney, Specialist Biton will be helping over see Specialist Lam's efforts today. Specialist Lam is her replacement. I think you might find the drill informative." Nelson said.



Kinard looked over the group of techs with a frown. After a second, he nodded appreciatively, "I think you might be right. Permission to observe the drill, Lieutenant?"

"Granted. Just hang out back here out of the way." Tierney said. She shared a look with Nelson and then returned to the group. Despite everyone's obvious interest, she answered no questions. Nelson did the same.

Returning to his group, Nelson checked over Cinelu's gear. He was pleased to find everything in order. The young woman had everything in textbook position. If anything it was to perfect.

Nodding to his team, Nelson called out, "We're ready over here, LT."

"Okay, I'll contact CIC and let the XO know we can begin."

Several minutes then ticked by. Part of the scenario would undoubtedly involve an element of waiting. They may know it was a drill and that something would happen. But like a real-world disaster, they never knew when it would happen.

Across the deck he watched eagerly. In a real emergency, the rest of the techs would be in CIC and he would have nothing but telemetry his Navi gave him. Now, he might as well watch.

"Incoming drone. Engine reactor overload. Drone deck, stand by to vent." Tierney ordered.

"Extinguishers." Nelson said, pointing to positions around the drone for Muscott and Paravicini to stand. Cinelu would be part of a damage control party during a battle so would only come in if he called for their help.

"Drone has docked." Colchado said.

“Full coverage. Spray.” Nelson ordered. At the same time, he Muscott and Paravicini waved their extinguishers over the parked drone. His Navi simulated the obscuring smoke but they didn’t actually engage them. Not only would it be a waste of material, the chemical used to extinguish fires could be unhealthy to the rest of the techs not in suits.

“Lam, run exterior analysis. Korhonen get one into the engine compartment.” Tierney ordered

Maintenance drones skittered across the deck and latched onto the larger space worthy one. Nelson’s team stayed out of their way. While the drones diagnosed the problem, Nelson directed his teams drones to prepare to rearm the combat vessel but until the engine trouble was resolved they kept the munitions well away.

“Radiation alarm!” Nelson said, “CIC, we have a radiation alarm coming from combat drone seven.”

“I’ve lost connection to my drone.” Korhonen said. She had been controlling the drone that had gone inside the combat drone.

“Lam, get the hatch open so the deck techs can get in there.” Tierney ordered.

The exterior drone skittered across the hull toward the engine compartment hatch. It stopped there but didn’t do anything. Nelson watched across the room as Lam worked her virtual controls.

“Drone will not respond to commands.” Lam said, the translation software conveying a confused tone.

“Did you reset the tool kit, sweetie?” Biton said, her tone sickly sweet.

Nelson frowned at the exchange. He glanced to the side and saw Kinard watching closely. Forcing himself to leave Biton and Lam to Kinard to observe, Nelson waved his team toward the drone.

“Paravicini, open the hatch. Muscott, as soon as he has the hatch clear, we’re going in and removing the coupling.”

The apprentices dashed over with their tools. At Nelson’s nod, Paravicini ran the screwdriver into each attachment point. He fumbled with it a few times but managed to get the hatch off in under thirty seconds. When he pulled the large metal plate away, Nelson and Muscott dove in.

Their Navi’s obscured view with hazy smoke. He activated the fan on his suit, blowing the simulated smoke clear. Reaching in, they began disconnecting components from the engine. While he worked, a funny feeling started itching the back of Nelson’s mind.

Looking around the interior of the drone, he tried to figure out what was bothering him. Nothing about the damaged system looked out of place, or rather more out of place than it should. But he couldn’t shake that feeling.

“LT, I’m ending my simulation.” Nelson said and then shut down his Navi’s overlay. He peered into the drone’s compartment, seeing it as it really was. Without the overlay, the coupling they had been working on looked normal. Nothing was out of place. He turned his gaze over the rest of the internal compartment. When his eyes fell onto the plasma relay he let out a curse.

“Everyone get down! Cut the drones!” Nelson yelled before grabbing Muscott by her arm. He hauled as hard as he could manage. They dropped to the deck just around the side of the combat drone when the plasma relay failed. The deck shook with the explosion. A few seconds earlier and he would have been consumed by the fireball that spread across the drone deck.

**Act 5- Sergey*****UNS Nighthawk DCS-47*****On Patrol****Deck Flight Deck****2319.05.18.1048**

*“Fire. Fire. Fire.”* Lieutenant Sedlak, the current OOD’s voice echoed throughout the ship and directly into everyone’s ears via Navi. *“Damage control parties report to drone bay. This is not a drill. Fire. Fire. Fire.”*

Sergey stumbled out of the shower. He had been enjoying the warm water after another pointless morning PT session. Now he was sore, wet, and had a fire to deal with. Not bothering with anything but his skivvies he dashed down the ship’s corridors, struggling not to slip.

Unlike a standard alert he didn’t bother going to the damage control locker. Fire fighting gear was already distributed throughout the ship. He reached the main door to the drone deck which had been sealed as a precaution. Several members of the various damage control parties had already assembled outside the door. Ensign Erwin tossed Sergey a fire suit which he gratefully pulled over his still wet and shivering body.

“Okay, everyone...” Erwin started to say and then took an uncharacteristic pause, “Chief Vasilyev, this is your show.”

Sergey blinked at the young officer’s willingness to stand aside. But he didn’t dwell on it, “Qun, McLeish, stand by on the manual door release. Ladner, Salam, Wasim, Gallego, Erwin, Davis stand ready to dash in and pull anyone out near the door. Argyris, Atieno, you’re with me on fire hose one. Tamer, take Capriotti and Cho for fire hose two.”

The crew repositioned themselves around the big hatch. “CIC, this is DCP. We’re ready to breach the doors to drone deck.”

*“Acknowledged, Chief. Be advised, fire drones on the deck are nonresponsive. We’re redirecting some but they’ll be a few minutes. Make your call.”* Lieutenant Manix replied.

Sergey let out a frustrated breath. He had hoped Lamay would still be taking the engineering station in an emergency. He took one final look at the crew around him and then hefted the big fire hose, “We’re going in. Blow the door.”

Qun and McLeish both pulled the emergency hatch release. Canisters of nitrogen vented around the doors frame, ensuring any air sucked onto the drone deck wouldn’t be combustible oxygen and cause a backdraft. The hatch released and flew open. Sergey and Tamer rushed forward with their fire hoses and sprayed indiscriminately. Smoke billowed out, obscuring their vision. Their Navi’s attempted to filter the smoke out but could only do so much.

After fifteen seconds of a continuous stream from the hose, Sergey shouted, “Rescue party, go!”

Erwin and Davis led the rest of the youngest and fittest crewmembers into the smoke. Several tense moments went by before the group reemerged, carrying or dragging four bodies. Sergey weakened the stream of his hose allowing them to get back into the corridor without difficulty.

“How are they?” Sergey asked once the entire rescue party had gotten out.

“We’ll live.” Delaney groaned, leaning against Erwin, but he gestured down to the emergency suit he was wearing, “Paravicini took the worse of it. And Muscott might have banged her head.”

“Wasim, McLeish, get them to the medics. They’ll be set up around the junction. Sergey ordered, “Nelson, where are the rest of the techs?”

Delaney shook his head, “I don’t know. The drone’s plasma regulator blew. They were on the other side of the drone bay from us. Near the tool locker. Kinard is in there too. And Sergey, they aren’t in suits.”

“Understood.” Sergey said, his heart thudding. “CIC, be advised we have a plasma fire. I say again, plasma fire. We have retrieved four of the drone techs. There are seven crew unaccounted for. We’re going in.”

“Acknowledged. Thirty seconds on fire drones.” Manix said.

“Erwin, take Ladner, Salam, and Tamer’s hose to port. Keep the fire from the fuel tanks. Davis, Qun, Gallego you’ll go with my hose toward the tool locker. It looks to be pretty intense over there. It’s going to get hot. But we have to get those people out. Go!”

The two teams broke away to opposite sides of the drone deck. Sergey pushed forward, spraying the hose over the burning combat drone. Davis tried to get her party around the fire but the heat was too intense. He waved them back and waited for the fire drones to arrive. The drones rolled into the fire, spraying suppressant as they went.

*“Drones are through the fire.” Manix said from CIC, “No sign of any bodies. Wait one. The hatch to the tool locker is partially closed. Running imaging. Seven lifesigns. Unresponsive. The hatch looks damaged and is unsealed. Probably smoke inhalation has left them unconscious.”*

“Understood.” Sergey said and then cursed. They had taken shelter in the tool locker, which had probably saved their lives. But the hatch must have been damaged in the explosion. Unsealed it had let smoke in and made it difficult to rescue them.

“Chief!” Erwin shouted, “The fire is getting close to the fuel tanks. Their temperature is reaching critical point. They could blow at any point.”

Sergey’s mind thundered through options. He could think of only two that might have a chance of both saving the drone techs and stopping the fuel tank from blowing, “CIC, recommend we deploy the GDX.”

Without waiting for an answer from Manix, Sergey shouted, “We’re going to have to flood the compartment. Qun, get to the GDX controls! Davis seal the hatch!”

The crew responded to his order but before he could give the final order, Manix came back, “*Belay that. GDX is lethal to Drya and Lam is in there. Vent the compartment.*”

“Sir, venting the oxygen could be lethal to the whole drone party. Plasma fires will also burn without oxygen.”

*“But not as hot. It will cool down quickly without the easy fuel source. Venting the air will cool the fuel down faster than the GDX. Once you get them out of the tool locker we can dump the GDX.”*

Sergey fumed ready to rail at Manix for his callousness. But years of training kept his response in check, “Hold fast on the GDX. Magnetize boots. Prepare for decompression.”

“Chief!” Qun yelled, “That could kill them!”

“You heard the order, Trainee!” Sergey snapped.

“But if you think the GDX will be better...”

“I do. But that’s not our orders.”

“I got you, Chief.” Qun nodded his head slowly. He then reached out and pulled the GDX release lever. A toxic powder sprayed out from emergency vents all across the drone deck. When

the powder came into contact with the flames they flared briefly before beginning to extinguish. The powder that burned turned into a bluish gas cloud.

The residual heat continued to radiate from everywhere the fire had been. Though the fire had been put out almost immediately, the superheated air would keep the drone deck like an oven for several minutes. If the deck had been vented the heat would have remained trapped in the partially burned places but everything else, including the fuel canisters would have stopped warming.

Sergey turned to the tool locker and bellowed, “Goddamn it, Qun! We need to get that hatch open now! Ladner, emergency respirator, Gallego, Davis get to the hatch. CIC, the GDX was triggered. We need the fire drone to pry open the locker room hatch. Now, now, now!”

*“Acknowledged.”* Sergey couldn’t help but hear coldness in Manix’s reply.

Sergey watched helplessly as the drone worked quickly to pry open the damaged hatch door. Every second more and more toxic fumes filled the air. GDX fumes were not healthy for humans but Manix had been right, they could be lethal to Drya fairly quickly.

When the drone finally pulled the damaged hatch open, Davis, Gallego and Ladner pushed in. Sergey stayed back to keep clear. A moment later they came out carrying the limp form of Lam. When they were clear, Sergey sent everyone else inside to get the rest of the drone techs out.

Once the crew had been evacuated to the safety of the corridor and had been left in the care of the med techs, Sergey rounded on Qun.

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“It was what you wanted, Chief.” Qun said, his voice quavering.

“No! You were supposed to follow orders!”



“I was! I was following your orders. Just like you said to do.”

“No.” Sergey said weakly realizing what he had done.

**Act 6- Nelson***UNS Nighthawk DCS-47***On Patrol****“The Goat Locker” Chief’s Common Room****2319.05.19.1104**

“On the bright side, everyone should make a complete recovery.” Dr. Kita said, “The smoke inhalation probably saved Lam’s life. She was unconscious and hardly breathing when the GDX fumes reached her. She didn’t breathe in much.”

Nelson nodded, a surge of relief rushed through him. The chiefs were all sitting down to breakfast the day after the incident on the hangar. Most of the techs had been released from the small sickbay to rest in their quarters. Ironically, Nelson and his team, the closest to the explosion, had been the least injured thanks to their emergency suits. He had spent the whole night checking on the others while simultaneously, and painstakingly going over every inch of the damaged drone.

Sitting across from him, Nelson noticed Vasilyev release a heavy sigh when Kita made his statement. A look of guilt still hung to Vasilyev’s eyes. Nelson cocked his head confused by this coming from Vasilyev. He couldn’t imagine what the man had to be guilty about. His team had saved the entire drone department, not to mention the ship.

“Do we have any idea what happened?” Jian asked.

Nelson nodded, “It’s still conjecture at this point but everything so far points to a faulty regulator.”

“That’s a pretty serious fault.” Kemler said, “This was never noticed on inspection and maintenance?”

Nelson shook his head, “This was the first time anybody had been inside that drone since it left the factory floor. Diagnostics had revealed nothing suspicious. And there probably wasn’t anything to notice. I think the sudden exposure to atmosphere when we opened the panel exposed the fault.”

Kemler leaned forward, his look intent, “How certain are you of that?”

Nelson frowned. The intelligence chief’s question concerned him. “As certain as I can be so far. We’ll know more with some more tests but everything so far looks that way. Why?”

“Curiosity.” Kemler said, leaning back in his chair.

“Come on, Alton, what aren’t you telling us?”

Kemler’s silence said more in response than any words he could have said. As the ship’s intelligence officer Kemler knew things they rest of them couldn’t. Nelson appreciated that he didn’t bother denying anything. He couldn’t tell them but he also respected them enough not to lie to them.

“So, this wasn’t done by the same person who vandalized Lam’s locker?” Jian asked, his concern evident in his tone.

“We’re pretty sure that was done by Marian Biton.” Kinard spoke, his voice husky from the smoke inhalation. “I was observing her during the drill. She was far more interested in insinuating Lam didn’t know what she was doing. I saw no sign she was anticipating something.”

“Biton...she’s the one Lam is replacing?” Jian asked.

“Yes,” Kinard said, “I haven’t been able to question most of the drone techs yet, for obvious reasons. But from what I got from Muscott, who didn’t get hurt, Biton has made no secret of her bitterness about being reassigned.”

Nelson said letting out a heavy sigh, “I can’t believe I didn’t see this before now. I knew she was unhappy about leaving. But I never even imagined she felt that way about Drya.”

Across the table Vasilyev stared down at the table, his voice quiet, “We all see what we want to see. Especially about ourselves.”

With that, Vasilyev stood up from the table and left the room. Nelson watched him go, pondering his words.

