

# Chapter 1

Directly ahead, a small shiny silvery something that resembled a wheel on an axle disturbed the star-speckled black of space. This last mission was almost over and Captain Jonas Stryker felt a mix of relief and satisfaction. The objective had been purely commercial, to take necessities, real or desired, to the huge space station being constructed at the fourth Earth-Moon Lagrange point, a place equidistant from the Earth and the Moon but sixty degrees ahead of the Moon as it orbited Earth. This short tour of commercial duty was required for all Space Corps officers with potential for higher things, to give them experience of how the other spacers lived. He had been pleased to be given the missions because it meant he was recognized, but he was most certainly pleased they were almost over and he could return to the more standard military duty.

The mission had a certain degree of danger. The station was being constructed from a huge stream of rocks being thrown up from the Moon by giant mass drivers. It was intended that the rocks would arrive at L4 quite slowly in a narrow column, but inevitably some would bounce off others and be diverted. Such rocks might be travelling relatively slowly, but a ship still had to avoid being hit. The corporation supplying L4 selected the oldest available ships so that collision with any stray rocks that made the ship unfit for further service would lead to minimal financial loss. They might even break even from selling the metal and the parts to the station. Metals of known composition were very valuable for space constructions.

Whether the crew would survive such a strike was dependant on the nature of the strike. The experienced spacers suspected the corporation viewed its profits as being far more important than the crews' lives. Fortunately, this mission had gone without problems and while complete pressure suits were worn near the "boulder belt", no collision had occurred.

This particular flight had a second objective, which was for Stryker to assess the newly commissioned Paul Mitchell. Mitchell had only mediocre reports from the Academy. Nothing wrong had been noted, but then again, nothing right stood out. He was quiet and reserved, which could be a great asset on long space flights as he would not annoy anybody, at least not actively. He was the sort of person nobody noticed whether he was there or not, which left open the question, was he sufficiently competent to be sent on long flights?

This was a problem because so far Stryker had not given Mitchell any real opportunities. He had noted a rather nervous-looking young Lieutenant, so to get the mission off to a smooth start he took the ship out himself. Because of the hazardous nature in the vicinity of L4 he had docked and taken the ship out himself. Flying from A to B in space was essentially boring with nothing much to

do, so while Mitchell had done nothing wrong, he had done nothing of significance. There was only one thing left to do, so Mitchell had better do it.

"So, Lieutenant," Stryker said, while staring out the small window, "you recognize what's ahead?"

"I would guess Space Station Gamma," Paul Mitchell said with a grin.

"Guess?" The question was sharp.

"It's Space Station Gamma." No grin now.

"And Space Station Gamma is?" Stryker continued staring at space outside, but there was a penetrating tone behind the question.

"It's the main station for Earth shuttles to dock and transfer people and goods to space ships."

"And?"

"Where we're going to dock?" came the tentative response.

"You asking me?" Stryker shook his head in despair. "Got any other ideas what we're going to do?"

"No sir. We're going to dock."

"So what's the next step?"

"Get permission. Get an allocated docking bay, which, since we're not unloading anything, will be on the axle. Then get the ship into position to approach the axle bays."

"Then given our rate of approach," Stryker said as he pointed to the station that was very gradually appearing slightly larger, "I recommend you get on with it before we crash into it."

"Yes sir," Mitchell said.

Stryker was pleased to see that Mitchell had fired retrothrusters before he started on any part of his list. "Good idea to buy more time. That station has crap efficiency, and the controllers are as likely as not to be playing cards on yet another coffee break, or even asleep." He had tried to be supportive, and was a little disappointed that Mitchell could not manage a response. Being asleep was a strong possibility, as it was "night time" on the station. Mitchell had radioed ahead notifying them of their expected time of arrival, so all should be well, but it still had to be. If they were asleep, that would be another small test for Mitchell.

The wheel was a huge slowly spinning torus separated by spokes from an inner structure that acted as a giant bearing. While the length of the spokes meant that the centrifugal force in the outer

torus was almost equivalent to Earth's gravity, it allowed the angular velocity of the torus to be relatively small. That meant that inside the station people could experience "gravity", but without some of the odd effects of the more rapid spin rates of the space ships, or even worse, the centrifuges used on lunar colonies intended to prevent bone decay. Between the spokes were the vast hydroponic tanks that made oxygen and food for the station.

Stryker considered this station to be an engineering triumph. In the top was the fusion reactor, the exhaust of which at first ran down a broad complex of electromagnetic devices to guide the plasma through the centre of the station such that it was eventually focused to run through the centre of the axle, which did not rotate. This plasma had a temperature of millions of degrees Centigrade and there were places along the path to vaporize and eject material that could not or should not be recycled. Behind the wheel but inset into it was the massive but much smaller hub, which spun rapidly in the opposite direction so overall the angular momentum was zero, a consequence of the way the station was spun up.

The axle carried numerous "attachments": parabolic dishes and various antennae directed to the giant ball with its clouds, blue oceans, and green or brown continents "below". These dishes and antennae provided extremely valuable communication services to the Earth. In space, "below" tended to mean what seemed to be below when in the pilot's seat but near a planet or satellite, below meant lower in the local gravitational potential.

"We've been allocated docking bay six," Mitchell reported, following a conversation with the station. He paused and added tentatively, "It's on the other side of the axle."

"Then you had better take the ship around there."

"Aye, sir," came the tentative response.

That lack of confidence did not please Stryker but he was pleased to see that Mitchell took the ship above the station and so avoided the hot plasma exhaust. At least Mitchell had been paying some attention to the manual.

Mitchell had been on only four missions, of which this was the first with Stryker. Mitchell was trying so hard to do things properly, but the question in Stryker's mind was, when something went wrong, was he good enough and would his confidence be sufficient? Yes, he knew everybody had to start somewhere but he had to forget that in the evaluation report.

"So far, so good, Lieutenant. The controls are still yours. Bring her in and dock her."

As expected Mitchell's face suddenly became serious, and apprehensive.

"You should be able to do it and you're no use as a co-pilot if you can't. What happens in the

event the pilot gets injured? You have to have your first time sooner or later and this is it."

"Yes sir," Mitchell said, and began to carefully study the controls.

Stryker gave a despairing shake of his head. Mitchell should be pleased to be given this chance.

Mitchell kept a good distance between the ship and the station and when well past the station he aimed the ship towards docking bay 6. With a little thrust, he brought the ship's velocity marginally below that specified by the textbook. As they drifted towards the space station, he gave gentle thrusts from some of the docking motors to first bring the radar guidance beam onto his scope then he centred it and locked on.

Stryker was watching progress from his screen. So far, Mitchell was overly cautious but since it was his first time that was what he wanted to see.

"Rolling ten degrees clock," Mitchell said, and applied more gentle thrust. Strictly speaking, this was not important since they were weightless during docking, but it always looked good to have your floor aligned with the docking bay floor.

Stryker actually smiled and nodded his approval.

They drifted closer, then Mitchell said apprehensively, "There's something wrong. I'm on the designated line but if you look at the forward camera-input this line is not going to get us to the docking bay. We're too deep."

Stryker frowned, then looked over at another screen. The autoguidance was never wrong, except this time it seemed it was. "You're right. So what are you going to do?"

"Go manual," he said, "but I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Stryker said. This he meant. The preferred procedure in the books was to disengage, drift off, and get this sorted, but on the other hand Mitchell seemed to be doing things correctly so why not let him continue? What he decided would help the assessment. If he followed the cautious book procedure he could not be faulted, but there was a very simple correction that should do it and if Mitchell could find it, that would earn him a top assessment. This locked path procedure was supposed to be fool proof, which meant that something had gone very wrong in the station's navigation systems.

"I shall do a gentle twenty-degree counter yaw in five, four . . ." Stryker nodded approval. Exactly the right manoeuvre. ". . . three, two, one, executing."

The rear of the ship began to turn as required, then halfway through the manoeuvre the rear yaw thruster suddenly opened full, and the rear of the ship swung towards the station.

"What the . . ." Stryker started to yell, and he stared at Mitchell's controls. The yaw throttle was a quarter open, and Mitchell was hitting the kill switch for that thruster, but nothing was happening.

"Full nose auxiliaries down thirty . . ." Stryker yelled this in case Mitchell also took action that would be counter to his. He flung his hand at his yaw thruster control. No response. The tail of the ship continued to swing ever faster towards the station. Mitchell fired the opposite yaw thruster. This would not override the first one but it would buy time. Smashing into the side of the station was inevitable unless he could blast the ship out of the way. The nose continued to lower and was now clear of the station.

"Turn off that second yaw thruster," Stryker ordered, as he would need some yaw when he finally docked. He fired the main motor to half power.

The station began to slowly pass over his ship. The rear of the ship seemed destined to crash into the axle, but the axle continued rising. Stryker held his breath and watched in what seemed like slow motion, but was happening extremely quickly. He breathed a sigh of relief as he watched the rear barely miss the axle. However, the ship continued to swing around. He cut the main motors so the disk would not receive the blast of his exhaust, then he rotated the ship halfway around so the defective thruster was firing to oppose the swing. Gradually the ship moved further from the station, while the yaw slowed. Then the faulty yaw thruster, being a separate attitude control motor and hence not expected to do anything but gentle adjustments, ran out of fuel.

When Stryker could finally view the station, he saw the exhaust of his ship had destroyed or melted a whole line of antennae and dishes. That would take some fixing.

"I didn't order that full thrust," Mitchell bleated. "You gotta believe me. Everything was OK, then it took off by itself."

Stryker nodded. He recalled what he could of the accident. The young Lieutenant had started the yaw properly and they were halfway through it when the motor went crazy. "I know," Stryker said. "You're right. You were doing fine until that motor took off and your hands weren't near that control. Also, I couldn't turn it off. The control wasn't working."

"I guess that doesn't help my career, though." Mitchell's face indicated he thought his career was now completely over.

"I'll try and regain control," Stryker said, "and I am sure the station is going to send some rude messages. We can't try to dock until we get clearance, so right now I want you to write a report on what happened from your point of view. Keep it simple. Restrict it to *only* what you did and what happened. Make no guesses, and don't interpret."

"But –"

"No buts," Stryker said coldly. "Until we know what they're going to do to us, keep it to simple facts that cannot be denied. I shall do the same, and if you wish, you can watch what I write." He smiled sadly at his junior and added wryly, "Remember, I'm in charge and ultimately I'm responsible. And I think I'd better take over the docking when we get permission." He paused, then added, "Before you write, run a diagnostic on the thruster controls."

Stryker watched as Mitchell went through the recommended tests. The control system appeared to be working properly.

"They won't believe me," Mitchell said, his eyes seemingly studying the floor a meter or so in front of him. "The tests all come back right, but I swear –"

"It means the control systems are working, so that means it's a motor fault, and to get at that, you have to dismantle the motor supports and extract it. We don't have the tools for that."

"Then what do we do?"

"We write, we wait, and when we dock, we shall see what awaits us."

Mitchell's report, when he finally got around to writing it, was clear and to the point. Stryker read it carefully, then electronically initialled it as his commanding officer and certified that he believed it was a true and complete account.

"Keep copies," he advised, "and put one copy on a disk and give it to someone you trust."

This added to Mitchell's depression. Everybody knew that law and ethics were not strongly held and there were always suspicions of corruption and a lot of backside covering on the station. As they say, proverbial brown stuff flows downhill and the newbie is at the bottom of the hill.

Stryker looked at his rather sad looking second lieutenant and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "For what it's worth, Mitch, I'm in a worse position than you. I authorised you to dock."

"They're going to throw the book at us, aren't they?" Mitchell's face showed sheer despondency.

"Probably." No point in gilding this. Those with power used this sort of event to show they had it.

"I'm sorry I let you down." He hung his head as if in total shame. Mitchell was slightly built and not very tall. His light brown hair was always untidy, and now he looked more like a schoolboy off to detention than a military officer.

"Lieutenant, one more point. Your report states there were both faults in the navigational

system and more importantly, a mechanical failure. You must stick to that now you've made the claim. I don't want to hear any 'might have beens' from you from now on. It was. Never deviate from that. Not an inch. Got that?"

"Yes sir." Mitchell was clearly depressed, and that bothered Stryker. It was important to be firm.

"Lieutenant, be more positive about it. If you want to get out of this, you make absolutely no concessions. They'll try to make you say it could have been your fault. Under no circumstances must you let them get away with that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," came the doubtful response.

"Then be more assertive." Stryker shook his head and softened his tone as he continued, "I have no idea what happened, but I'm reasonably sure it wasn't anything you did and I'm going to try to get to the bottom of it."

And good luck with that, he thought to himself. Trying to get information from the Corporation to save his reputation would be like trying to move a space ship by spitting at it. Whether he would be found to have been incompetent or the ship would be found to be defective would depend on whether the Space Corps or the Corporation that owned the ship controlled the inquiry. Unfortunately, the chances of his winning the giant Federation Lottery were far better than the chances of getting truth and honesty from the Corporation on this matter.

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It came as no surprise to Stryker that when finally he was permitted to dock and disembark, he was ordered by the station commander to what were euphemistically called gardening duties. He was confined to his quarters and a few other places such as the gymnasium and the Officers' Mess. Gardening duties simply meant, stay out of everybody's way and prepare yourself for whatever is coming. When he closed the door on his quarters and flopped onto the bunk, he noticed it was 0835 hours, Gamma Station standard time.

Where his quarters had previously been a useful place to rest between missions, now they seemed to be simply depressing. They were sparse: a bunk secreted into the wall, a chair anchored to the floor, a table anchored to the floor that also acted as a desk, a computer, and a cabinet in which he could store a limited amount of private material. Adjacent was a smaller compartment with a toilet and a place for washing. Officers were not expected to spend time in these rooms. The

space station was for working, for getting prepared for the next mission and for sleeping. At least with his rank he had a room in the more desirable part of the spinning disk, so at least he had the next best thing to gravity.

There were no personal effects and no pictures of a wife or girlfriend because thanks to the message he received just before the last mission started he knew he no longer had one. After receiving the email he had consigned everything that reminded him of her to the plasma chamber. In retrospect he realized that a long-term relationship with someone who for much of the time was not even on the same, or for that matter, on any planet was fraught with failure.

He needed to know what was going on but he also realized that any efforts on his part could well precipitate the very ending he did not want. There was no way this would be forgotten, but if the military found there were indeed failures as indicated by his report, this might be swept under the carpet. He tried his computer to see if he could gain news, but found he was blocked from the station intranet. He could not even message Mitchell. That felt ominous.

He slept until 1240 hours, then went to the mess for lunch. There was no sign of Mitchell and no signs of friendly greetings from anyone else. He had reached leper status.

At 1640 hours, he received orders to present himself at the base Commander's office. When he entered, there were four people present, the atmosphere was grim, and he knew at once his future was going to be stressful. He ignored the others and saluted the Base Commander, who in turn took control of the interview.

"Captain Stryker. I am about to inform you of the situation. You are advised to say nothing in response. This meeting is being recorded, and anything you say may be used in evidence. Do you understand?"

"I understand your advice," Stryker replied. "I do not understand the situation."

The Base Commander nodded. "That's because I have yet to explain it. Your attempt at docking has caused serious damage to the station, particularly to the communication equipment, so much so that there were serious blackouts across much of the Earth and it will take months to restore those to what they should be. Accordingly, the affected Corporation has demanded a trial, which will be held tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? What charges?"

"They are yet to be finalised –"

"Then I want it on record that I have not even been told of the charges on the eve of this trial. I also request that the relevant yaw thruster be –"



"The ship has been removed by the servicing corporation and the report will be presented in due course."

Stryker stared at the Base Commander. The trial would come first, and any chance he had presumably lay with an appeal. "Then I want it noted that I require an independent assessor to examine that part, including watching the removal of the part from the ship."

"Noted. A communication will be sent to the corporation, but if they have already removed it, that last part cannot be performed."

Stryker slumped. The corporation was hardly going to provide evidence of its own incompetence. He said nothing.

One of the other men stepped forward, gave Stryker an arrogant and superior smile, and said, "However, the charges will include the causing of major damage to Space Station Gamma while drunk in charge."

"Drunk?" Stryker exclaimed. "What –"

"An empty bottle of whisky was found next to your seat." The man's smile was broader and effectively challenged him to get out of this one.

"That's a lie!" Stryker rose to his feet and looked as if he would cross the space and throttle this man.

"Sit!" The Base Commander ordered.

When Stryker obeyed, the Base Commander continued, "You will make your defence at the trial. The corporate system will provide you with a lawyer, and that will be Mr Pearce here, who will now show you out. Listen carefully to his advice." With that, Stryker was waved from the room.

When they reached the hallway and the door was closed, Stryker turned towards this lawyer. He was not impressed. Pearce was middle-aged and showed all the enthusiasm for defending him as someone going for a root canal treatment with no numbing. He cut a sad figure: gaunt, sallow, in a suit that had definitely seen better days, and with a food-stained tie that was tied loosely and left a clear gap between a badly tied knot and the shirt collar. Apart from the fact that he was the sole private lawyer on the station, why was a middle-aged lawyer doing this sort of defence work? The reason was almost certainly because he was not good enough to do anything else. If he were, he would be elsewhere. Who would want to have only losing cases and lost causes, his monopoly guaranteed by prosecuting corporations who wanted him solely because he always lost? He had heard that the corporations needed to be seen to be doing things "properly", but not sufficiently

properly to embarrass themselves.

"You realize you are in deep trouble," Pearce explained. "The court will sentence you to ten years in prison, unless you make a nuisance of yourself in the court, in which case the judge will probably raise it to twenty years –"

"Then you had better get me off," Stryker said. "Before we discuss this further, you should read my report and Mitchell's report."

"The point is," Pearce continued, "I have discussed a deal with the prosecution, and if you plead guilty and undertake to say nothing in your defence, they will request the judge to reduce it to one year, with the possibility of being out in six months for good behaviour."

Stryker stared in despair at his lawyer. "Read my report and then we can discuss things further."

"The deal offer expires at 0900 tomorrow," Pearce warned. He then turned and walked away.

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Stryker knew if he were going to get out of this mess, he would have to do it himself. He knew that if anyone offered Mitchell a deal, he would probably take it and the deal would presumably be dependent on giving approved evidence against him. Stryker's defence would be Gamma Station had not properly aligned the Navbeam, but he also knew that his campaigning against the inefficiencies on the station had ruffled feathers. While it might be true that, as he had said to anyone who would listen, they could not organize the proverbial brewery booze-up, the counter was, if he were convinced of that, why was he not more careful relating to the Navbeam error, if there were one? He would get no sympathy. They wanted to get rid of him, here was an easy opportunity, and they would be holding the trial. The whisky was a clear attempt at framing him. That his lawyer appeared quite disinterested in reading his report further depressed him.

This was all very well, but he knew the report only became relevant in the event of an appeal and an allegation that the decision was unreasonable. A proper defence came first. The servicing company had taken away the ship. If they admitted the thruster was faulty they would be liable so nothing would come from there and the part would mysteriously disappear. He could claim that an independent company should have examined it, but that would have to be on appeal.

When he looked at it coldly there were two contributing factors to this event. One was the problem with the yaw thruster, and the other the problem with the wrong line given by the docking

computer. There was little he could do about Mitchell folding, and Mitchell was his only witness that there was no whisky. If he wanted an honourable exit from this career-ending situation, he must get to the bottom of what had happened.

He stopped pacing when an alert rang for a secure message. He entered a thumbprint and received a surprise. A lawyer was coming from Earth to represent him. He was to say nothing to anyone about the incident until this lawyer briefed him.

Another lawyer, and he had no means to pay him if he were any good. His day was getting worse by the second. He would go to the exercise zone and work out. He would take out his frustration on something, and maybe then he would feel better.

His path to the gym did not make him feel any better when, off to one side, he saw someone talking to a rather downcast Mitchell. That Mitchell was downcast was hardly surprising, but there was little he could do right now to help so he continued to the gym.

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The workout had been brutal but all he could take away from that exercise was some sore muscles and an even worse mood. On his return, he had been approached by one man who was somewhat weedy in stature, and apart from being dentally challenged and would one day provide a small fortune for a dentist, he had cunning written all over his face. He was a dapper dresser, which was surprising for being on a space station, but he spoiled the effect by having quite greasy hair and foul breath. He had made some remark about how good it was to see one of the arrogant stuck-up flyboys get their comeuppance, or rather go-downance. Stryker was convinced this man was hoping he would punch him, and he had little doubt there would be cameras ready to record everything. Stryker did the best he could: he ignored him and walked away, with a further string of insults following him. He was halfway back to his room when he realised that was the man he had seen talking to Mitchell.

This staying in his room and pacing around was of no benefit. On missions he would frequently sit back and wait for juniors to do whatever but he was always in control. Now he needed to do something. Perhaps the only thing he could do was to inspect the signalling system and determine why there had been an incorrect radar signal.

This would not be easy. He was explicitly forbidden to go anywhere near the control area. That meant that whatever he found could not be used as evidence. However, it might alert him as to any

lies that were being told and that might be enough. In cross-examination, if he knew what really happened, he could ask some tricky questions and hope. In any case, he needed to know.

He needed to disguise his appearance. Underneath some oversized uniform to be acquired, he would wear two flack vests, one on top of the other, which should alter his shape enough to prevent identification from any surveillance equipment. A visit to the Space Corps storeroom was called for. That part of the station was only visited when you needed something, and then you generally needed the store man to find it. He also suspected that as the store man was slack, the chances of his keeping a good record of what was there would be slim.

His room had one picture on the wall: a very large high definition image of the Moon resplendent in its harsh lunar grey. He carefully took that from the hook and placed it against the wall, then with his multipurpose pocket knife, he unscrewed a small panel to expose a concealed dark brown and very weathered leather pouch that contained, amongst other things, the lock-picking equipment he had acquired during a somewhat questionable youthful life.

It took two attempts before he reached the store. He knew where the two surveillance cameras were and he knew how to avoid them, but there was always the problem of running into someone who knew him. The first time he did, so he gave a cheery "Hi!" and explained where he was going, then he went there, and was seen there, then he went back to his room via the cameras. His second attempt was more successful. It took little effort to pick the lock and he soon found the two pieces of body armour he needed, one oversized and one extra extra oversized, together with a spacer's emergency tool kit and a grossly oversized outer jacket. He booted up the computer that checked out what was taken and entered each item on different days several weeks previously. He then returned to his quarters with his acquisitions.

He waited until 0130 hours then he emerged with dark glasses and a scarf in his pockets and the other acquisitions stuffed in a large plastic bag. He put on his combat-issue gloves and peered into the corridor. The good news was that in the officers' zone all surveillance cameras were turned off during formal "night time". Everyone knew that anything juicy on the security tapes would soon be public knowledge and this zone, after all, was where the senior staff resided.

On determining the corridor was empty, he strode quickly to the entrance to a spoke. Oddly enough, most people on the station did not know you could access these, partly because the official means of getting into the growing area was through elevators and who would climb a very awkward spoke when you could dial a floor in the elevator. Another reason might be because the entrances were hatches that were behind panels that appeared as if they could not be opened. The corridor was to one side of the spoke, which ran all the way to the outside layer of the disk.

As soon as he was doubly sure nobody was coming, he slid the panel, which was actually on rails and was intended for sliding, then he worked the lock. The lock was really more as a "keep out" hint than as a real deterrent and he soon had it picked. He climbed onto a ledge in the spoke, slid the panel back, and then closed the hatch. He then changed into the attire from the plastic bag and after fixing the bag to the hatch he began to climb up the "steps" engraved in the wall of the spoke.

Even if he did work out often, being a space pilot quickly led to being out of condition, he reflected, as more than once he paused to rest. He had tried to keep up the exercises on his ships, but somehow it was never enough, and his wearing a puffer jacket, two flack vests and an overjacket did not help keep his temperature down. He persisted, until after passing two "horizontal" struts, he took the third. He now had to crawl about a fifth of the way around the wheel, while climbing across each spoke on the way. The lower gravity made this easier.

Eventually, he came to the desired section and after putting on the dark glasses and wrapping a scarf around most of his head he opened the hatch and the covering panel. He looked around. As expected, nobody was around. He slid out and closed the hatch. There were several functions in this area and they were all automated. Yes, people did visit, but not usually at this time of the "night".

Access to the desired control room was easy. Too easy, he reflected, if anyone wanted to do damage. He went to the controls and dialled up the screen. He found the data for docking Bay 6, which said that during his docking the signals had been correct, but when he examined the deeper information, the data had been altered ten hours after the docking failure. An even deeper examination showed that an exercise relating to what to do with a faulty signal had been carried out the previous day. He knew. Nobody had corrected the settings following the exercise. He took a record of what he had found onto a portable memory device.

He returned the computer to its original setting and gently opened the door. He looked around. There was nobody around, so he stepped out and started towards the hatch he had used. Then he heard footsteps from behind a corner in front of him. A young woman in a scabby uniform came around the corner. He turned and began to walk the other way. What was a Space Corps Investigation Bureau agent doing here at this time of night?

"Hey you! Stop!"

Stryker kept going, as if he hadn't heard.

"Stop or I shoot!"

Stryker began to run. There was the sound of a shot, and at the same time he was thrown forward by the impact of the bullet hitting his back. He held his footing and lunged for the corner in

front of him. He used a hand on the corner to regain balance and swing around the corner, when he then hugged himself into a doorway. The sound of running came closer.

The woman surged around the corner, pistol ready for firing. Stryker shot one hand out to grab the gun and punched the side of her head with the other. She fell, and as she was falling, he grabbed her and lowered her gently to the floor. He checked her pulse and breathing. Both were strong. He dragged her to the elevator, dialled it, and when it arrived he ordered it and the scibby to go to the outer part of the disk, then he jumped out the door before it closed. He then ran towards another spoke and began climbing towards the centre. The lower gravity made this much easier.

It was then that it occurred to him what the scibby had been doing: proceeding to check the computer exactly as he had. He had not done himself any favours.

The centre of the wheel was essentially weightless so he swam from the hatch. There was an official place to feed unwanted material into the plasma chamber but he knew there were also unofficial emergency spots. He took one of the guidance ropes and pulled himself hand over hand towards his first guess. His luck held; there were no surveillance cameras. He took off the jacket and both vests and noticed the bullet buried in the inner one. Armour piercing! On a space station! Why was she using that? Not that it mattered right now. He shoved the vests into the emergency feeding chamber one at a time, closed the airtight door and sent them into the plasma. Now for the gun. He emptied the chamber and took the cartridges from the magazine, then with two small vice grips from his toolkit, he pulled the bullets from the casings and carefully emptied the powder into jacket pockets. Then he dismantled the gun and one at a time he consigned the parts, the magazine, the tools and finally the jacket to the plasma chamber. He retained his gloves and his lock-picking kit.

Next, he had to find his spoke. This close to the centre, they were rather close together, and it did not take long. Now he had to fall down the spoke, but in a controlled way. To start with he had to propel himself with his hands, but after a while he had to use his hands to slow himself down and eventually to stop near his hatch, which was easily recognized by the plastic bag.

This was the last difficult part. If he were seen emerging from the spoke he would be in dire trouble and there was no way of knowing whether anyone was out there. He gently slid the panel and looked around. Nobody. He closed the hatch, secured the panel, locked it, and jogged towards his room. If anyone saw him, he would say he was taking exercise. That was unlikely to work, but it was better than nothing. In the event, he made his quarters unseen.