

Doyle doubted anyone was in the docking bay, especially while the gravity had been nixed, but he didn't want any of his companions walking into the butt of an APA soldier's gun. He took point, scouting out the immediate area.

The Jimenez brothers spread out on Doyle's flanks to aid his search. The duo used cover effectively and kept tabs on each other's backs. *Good*, Doyle thought, *at least those two know how to handle themselves. That'll help.*

The station was old, built early in the century from the ashes of the International Space Station after its Near Earth Object collision. It had a grimy feel, with grated catchments and ceiling conduits running every which way. Constantly being added to over the years had given an unfinished texture to the patchwork modules. Hardware trinkets from each era lined a thieving magpie's nest. Doyle used to appreciate its quirky charm, but now it felt chaotic and cramped.

Finding the station's gravity deactivated still troubled him. On the one hand, it added weight to his initial theory that the support crew, worried about their families on Earth, had evacuated and braved unassisted reentry. He could empathize with that. Then why was there still atmosphere present? The air tasted slightly stale, but during extended unoccupied periods it was protocol to cease oxygen cycling completely. Did they simply forget in their panic? Sure, it's possible.

*Unless that's what somebody wants us to think.*

Doyle wasn't taking any chances. He completed his reconnaissance, linking up with Sabin and Pach. He whispered on Commander Ruschen's comms channel, "Clear," then wondered why he had instinctively lowered his voice. Was his subconscious trying to tell him something? He added to his communication, "Go slow."

Ruschen motioned for Alexei to check a junction door on the left. Alexei raised on the balls of his feet to peer through the clear porthole. He gestured that it seemed vacant and tapped his comms band. "Eckerd, open junction A2."

The door slid up. Ruschen led Michi and Django toward it.

From the other side of the docking bay, Doyle noticed Django's uneasy, stilted gait. The Coriolis force produced by torus rotation could cause dizziness and nausea. The rest of *Gaea-02*'s crew seemed unaffected but the biggest of them, Django, clearly felt the odd, veering pull on his body. Being so large shouldn't have made a difference. It finally dawned on Doyle: the reason Django was on their test run at all was that he urgently needed the physical experience in these environments. Had the terraformer never been in space before?

Doyle opened a private channel to Django. "Keep your head still when you move. Just focus on where you want to go. Your body will do the rest. You'll be fine, the queasiness will pass." Django nodded slightly, then stiffened his neck and continued walking.

Commander Ruschen's party passed into the A2 junction and Eckerd sealed the door behind them.

Doyle led his group to a starboard junction. "Open A3." The door whisked up, then down once the quartet had entered.

They skulked along a passageway lit only by the maddening, red security beacons. No sound, apart from the constant background hum of automated air scrubbers.

Doyle knew his way around the station by rote, even in this nightmarish, abandoned state. There were no signs of conflict, no laser-scarring or bullet impacts. Everything appeared to be in place, minus the people.

Pach and Sabin trailed Doyle, with Usef dawdling at the rear. Usef didn't seem interested; he obstinately maintained that this was all a conspiracy theory. Doyle couldn't decide if he was being genuine or was simply too scared to admit the truth.

The dim, crimson crossways bordered on labyrinthine. Slowly moving from bulkhead to sealed bulkhead, Doyle's group passed through countless cloistered rooms and corridors before reaching their destination.

Doyle established a comms channel to Eckerd on *Gaea-02*. "We're at the engineering bay." He was whispering again.