

## Chapter 1 - Fiona

Out in the endless void, even a ship the size of *Argo* couldn't make room for beauty. Everything had to serve the Mission. Yet there she was: Fiona, spray can in hand, a red cloth covering her face, and zero remorse. The paint hissed from the can, blending with the distant hum of the vents. Shaking the almost-empty spray, she backed away to admire her work in the dim red lights.

She'd hoarded color sprays for a week, imagining how they'd blaze in daylight. *Just a few more hours.* Fiona narrowed her eyes, noticing something missing: her tag. The tiny metal ball rattled furiously again, and she sprayed one last time, a final touch to her masterpiece.

Then, a sharp cramp seized her hand. Fiona whimpered, the can slipping from her grip. It clanked on the deck and rolled away, its agitator clattering inside. The echo carried through the deserted corridors of the generation ship, announcing her rebellion against the sterile order of her world.

She lunged forward, pinned the runaway can with her foot and froze, ears straining.

"Shit," Fiona mouthed through gritted teeth. The security post was just around the corner. She squinted, searching the dim corridor, ready to bolt at the first hiss of the door opening. Of course, it was only a matter of time before she was caught red-handed. She smirked at her gloves, streaked with crimson paint.

Heart hammering in her chest, she reached for the heavy-duty bag slung over her shoulder. Inch by inch, she opened it, keeping the can underfoot. Inside, an array of colorful sprays sat in neat order. She'd "borrowed" them from the construction site. Was it even theft if she only took discarded items from recycling? Well, only if she failed to return them before the week ended. That was when the Core would notice. Not that it'd kick her out to Earth if she was caught. No, that was reserved for idlers, smugglers, and worse troublemakers.

“Hey! Who’s there?” A searchlight pierced the darkness and found her perfectly.  
*Thanks a lot, orange jumpsuit and your reflective patches. Safety first.*

*Run.*

Fiona kicked the can toward the habitat and darted after it. As she ran, she bent low and snatched it clean off the ground.

“Stop!” the man’s voice echoed off the steel walls of the ship. He was far away. She still had a moment or two.

Struggling to keep her footing, she left the lights behind and charged into the assembly hall. The vast, empty room stretched before her, echoing each hurried step.

She had to hide. Now.

She lunged for the side corridor leading to the lavatories, past her very first graffiti on the steel panel: *Fuck the Core*, signed with her tag: a single digit 5. Not that creative, but you gotta start somewhere—it was her first one. She had stashed her digipin under the bench, careful to make it look like she was just hanging out, in case the device could be tracked. Now, Fiona scooped it up, pressed the digipin against the scanner, and the ladies’ room door slid open. She darted into the nearest stall.

Perched on the toilet lid, she hugged her bag tight. *Inhale. Exhale. Breathe.*

Well, that wasn’t part of the plan. Now her entry to the lav had been logged. Only a couple hundred meters from the graffiti. The Core would flag her for a security check as soon as they raise an incident. But they wouldn’t. They wouldn’t bother with it because of graffiti—that’d be too much trouble, and they didn’t even care about wiping off her earlier works.

She had to lie low for a while. And not doze off. Quite a challenge, since she didn’t get any sleep that night. Her greatest piece had taken extra hours, so she sneaked out as soon as

her roomies started snoring. And in less than two hours, her next shift in electrical engineering was starting.

She glanced at the wall panel with a chipped edge. It was *the* stall.

Fiona tapped the digipin clipped to the chest pocket of her jumpsuit. 6.03am. She should stay there at least a quarter. Just in case. Later, she could still jump on a treadmill to log an alibi and make it back to the cabin before her squad left for breakfast.

She yawned and her sight drifted to the chipped panel again. She might as well check it for new inscriptions while already stuck there. Fiona reached into her cargo pocket for a makeshift knife and pried the aluminum panel open. The sheet came off easily. There it was: her secret obsession.

A wave of excitement swept over Fiona, as she slid her fingertips over the crude markings carved on the panel's backside. She'd always been thrilled to discover new numbers etched on its surface every now and then. However, a solution to the riddle remained elusive. Over the past months, she'd spent countless hours trying to find sense in the cipher, but wouldn't dare to scan it with her digipin for an AI-assisted help. Who knows what could happen?

She pressed the tip of her shiv against the panel's surface. She could leave there a message of her own. Reach out. Whoever scratched those must've worked against the system. Maybe she wasn't alone in her thinking.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

She jumped, and the shiv's tip screeched at the aluminum, leaving a long scar across the numbers.

*Fuck.*

They found her. Fiona, eyes wide, peeked out of the bathroom stall.

“I know you’re in there. You better come out!” the man yelled from the corridor outside, and jostled the door handle, furious, yanking it over and over despite the door’s sharp beeping: *entrance denied*. Good, he wasn’t security—just a squealer. Lucky her. Fiona had to strain her ears to hear his next words. “She’s not getting away with this. You stay here and I’ll get the guards.”

*Shit.*

The bag. She had to get rid of it. *Think, Fiona. Think.*

She glanced at the row of spray cans in her bag, then at the open space left by the removed panel. This had to work. She shoved the cans between pipes, sensors, valves, anything to get rid of them. Her face wrap and gloves went inside as well. The panel clicked softly as she put it back in place.

“It could have been anyone, and the Core is blind,” she whispered to herself.

The AI used data coming from dozens of sources, but thankfully, cameras weren’t among them. *Low-priority system*. Meaning: the installation was delayed indefinitely. Every time cameras got installed, they got vandalized overnight.

Life on a half-built ship governed by an AI overseer? Fine, whatever. But being watched by it day and night? Fuck no. Mission Control gave up and deprioritized the installation. Apparently, more important shit needed to get done if they wanted *Argo* to be ready for Proxima in fifteen years.

Fiona kicked her shoes off and unzipped her jumpsuit, letting it drop to the floor as soon as she freed her arms from its coarse sleeves. She had sportswear underneath: part of her alibi for being out in the morning. She tucked the overalls into the bag, threw its strap over her shoulder, flushed the toilet and went for the door, chin up. They had nothing on her.

She opened the door wide, with her cutest smile on, ready to play victim. But nobody was there. She peeked out onto the empty corridor, shrugged and headed for one of the

assembly hall's many staircases. She glanced over her shoulder as she heard a faint scream down the corridor. Was someone calling for help to get her? She quickened her pace and got to the stairwell.

Panting, she squeezed the steel railing hard. Because, of course, the gym was on the fifth floor. Getting there was already an exercise, as if the Core wanted to discourage its use. After all, the more you exercise, the more you get to eat. Funny enough, Fiona's dietary profile hadn't been adjusted despite she'd been spending half of her tokens on her fitness alibi.

She climbed past the media lounge and hurried into the gym. Normally, she'd jog for twenty minutes or so to keep up appearances in case security was about to check the logs. Now, she had little time left. Fiona dropped her bag to the floor and jumped on the track. As soon as she plugged in her digipin, its holo interface lit up.

She didn't have much time left until breakfast, so she had to run fast to cover her regular distance. Consistency was key to avoiding detection, no excuses. Already jogging, she reached up to the ceiling for a slender helmet hanging on a flexible cord and put it on.

The program flickered alive. Now she was running through a dense jungle of Proxima. The lush, dark red foliage surrounded her as she darted up the hill. Could she make it to the top in fifteen? The path wound between the trunks of giant plants. Their pink flowers always looked the same. The dotted, purple-stained petals were only inches out of reach. They reminded Fiona of the plastic rose her boyfriend had given her back home in the Atalanta ring. The flower was her only keepsake from her childhood years.

Sam. She wondered what he'd been up to. She hadn't seen him since their graduations. When the Core had reassigned her to Butes, tearing her out of her world. She cherished that memory every day. Initially, because she desperately missed home. Later—so as not to forget why she hated the Core.

Beep. *Ten minutes down, five to go.*

The ship's AI didn't even let her say her goodbyes. No. They yanked her out of Atalanta and into the elevator. And she had been supposed to stay there with her parents, but they hadn't shown up to save her. Why? They had been a Mission Control family, after all. Abandoned, she had sprayed her tears all over the elevator, surrounded by the tiny droplets as gravity went away.

Beep.

Tears slid down Fiona's face, only to fall onto the treadmill racing beneath her feet. She wasn't sure why, but the memories had always been particularly vivid while she wore the headset. Well past the top of the hill, Fiona stopped the workout. The display showed she already logged a twenty-three minute run. She was gonna be late. She pushed the helmet upwards and sniffed, reaching for a towel.

Now she only needed to jog back to the cabin, change into work clothes, and return for breakfast. Easy peasy.

She quickly gave away the brave idea of jogging back. She was beat, so instead she walked, tracing her fingers along the steel wall of the corridor. Her entire world was made of metal alloys and bioplastics. In Atalanta, at least they tried to make it pretty, or less ugly. Safety panels, propaganda wall displays. Butes? Pipes, air ducts and wiring all had been waiting for a more appropriate time to be covered by nicer things to look at. She wondered if it was the same in the other rings, or was it just her karma cashing in?

Each of Argo's five rings was supposed to carry ten thousand whiz-kids to Proxima. Her job: lay wires and build fuse boxes for twenty years, to fulfill the contract and get a *ticket to the stars*. For her and her children. Why to the stars? Damn, she'd like to take a peek at how things had been on Earth first, but no. That was a one-way ticket, and for reasons beyond her comprehension, the Core didn't allow any incoming streams. Only vetted movies:

Mission principles' vids, some bonkers pre-Argo classics from the past century and, of course, her all-time favorite: the Wacko Gecko.

The stripe of LED lights on the habitat's ceiling, following the circumference of the ring, was getting brighter. The ruby glow gave way to a bluish-white hue, meant to trick her pineal gland to suppress melatonin release. Not that it helped her. Without clonazepam and Jeanne's booze, she'd have gone full zombie mode.

She was terribly late, and her roomies were probably up already. The door wasn't locked—that's good. One less log in her event registry. She counted to ten and entered.

"Talk of the devil!" Jeanne burst victoriously, grinning like she'd just won a bet. Hanging upside down from the pull-up bar, she almost slipped off, her clean-shaven head hovering just a feet above the deck. "Well, well. I almost thought you'd turned into a responsible early riser, saving us spots at chow."

"Buzz off, Jeanne," Fiona muttered, heading straight to her bunk. Unlike the other alcoves, strewn with odds and ends, her bedside was tidy. Not that she was a clean freak, she just didn't have stuff. Fiona didn't pack for graduation like the manual said. Instead, she came to Butes with an empty bag. So much for her Resource Management training.

"Oh, come on. I was about to be proud of you, your highness."

"Tragic," Fiona said, unpacking her jumpsuit. Its sleeve was riddled with neatly sewn-on patches, proving her once perfect record: Breach Sealing, Exoskeleton Training, First Aid. Princess-worthy, indeed.

"You're gonna get us in trouble," Raquel's high-pitched voice broke in. Fiona could see the concern etched on her friend's frail face. She stared at Fiona as she fixed her eyebrow ring. Undeterred by the silence, Raquel went on, lowering her voice "Fi, you know I wouldn't rat on you, but if they start asking questions—"

"Why would they? I'm just enjoying morning jogs," Fiona said.

“It’s only a matter of time until someone sees you and—”

A voice from the bathroom interrupted her, saying, “She says she went running, so she went running.” The door slid open, and Zhi came out, tucking in her yellowish tank top. “Nobody cares about this shit,” she continued, breaking up the argument. “Stop whining and get dressed for the mess hall.” She shot a look at Raquel, who immediately hunched over. Zhi pointed at Fiona’s face. “You reek of paint fumes and got some left on your forehead. Fi, get your act together and clean up already.”

The room fell silent, both Raquel and Fiona biting their lips and exchanging worried looks.

Jeanne did a couple more pull ups and dropped to the floor. “Yeah, go ahead Fi, bathroom’s free,” she said, breaking the tense silence. “We’ll save a seat for you, no worries.”

Washing her face, it suddenly struck Fiona how meaningless her graffiti might be. Imagine: her art, visible throughout the habitat these last few months, went unnoticed. Did she change anything? What if, indeed, nobody cared? Nothing has changed. No new cameras, no additional patrols.

She dried her tired face with a clean towel and, for a split second, met her own bloodshot eyes in the polished steel mirror. She focused on her tall forehead, sprinkled here and there with droplets of red paint. She tried to cover them a bit with short curly locks of her dark hair, but with no success. *Maybe I should get a buzz cut too.* She dispelled the thought immediately, focusing back on her personal rebellion.

“They will notice,” she said to her reflection with resolve. Her latest piece, right next to the mess hall, was unignorable. Fiona zipped up her jumpsuit and joined her colleagues on the way to the mess hall, hurrying across the plaza to catch-up. She got ahead of a couple of other work crews to join her team. Usually, she’d stroll along without worry, consistently late



for breakfast. Consistency was a key to stay off-radar. That day, though, she was obsessed with seeing her graffiti in the ship's daylight.

A series of gasps and a faint yell up ahead, along with someone bumping into her, broke her reverie. A crowd formed near the mess hall's entrance.

Onlookers rushed to discover what caused the sudden disturbance. Murmurs of conversations, mixed with shouts of surprise, were growing. Her past graffiti were mostly slogans or just vandalism, but it didn't bring her the much sought attention. This one was different. She pictured this scene in her mind over multiple days, and was utterly relieved once she finished her work. She smiled and straightened her posture, proud that her art gathered such recognition this morning.

Someone stormed back toward the living quarters, covering their mouth.

"That's my best piece, I guess, huh?" Fiona nudged Raquel with her elbow and grinned.

"I'm not so sure about it, Fi." Her friend looked up to the ceiling and covered her ears. An ear-piercing screech made everyone around look up and follow Raquel's suit. A monorail cart arrived three stories above the scene, braking abruptly. Then a horn sounded from its speakers, muffling all the conversations.

A beam of blinding light struck the corridor beneath the cart, urging the crowd to disperse.

The man's voice boomed from the speaker: "Make space. Return to the assembly hall." He commanded with authority, but one could hear uncertainty in his voice. Raquel and Fiona stood there still, holding arms in an embrace against the current of retreating contractors.

A group of paramedics and guards descended from the train on a tetherpad, and soon made their way through the dispersing crowd. With stretchers in their hands, they rushed towards the mess hall's entrance. Pushed out of their way, Fiona swayed and lost her grip on Raquel, knees weak. Fiona's vision blurred, as if her brain didn't want her to see it.

“Make way!”

A shove forced her to the ground. Climbing to her knees, she stared, trembling.

Her graffiti towered above a middle-aged man. Seated on the floor, the stranger rested his back against her painting of a radiant fish confined in a steel aquarium. Her masterpiece.

The man’s face, pale and still, had a crimson “V” sprayed across it.

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Processing Emergency Mode data...

Priority action executed: Medical alert. Dispatch medical personnel to the scene. Accurate coordinates recorded upon device activation. Local security team advised to administer first aid procedure.

Visual status of the injured person: Potential head trauma. Possible concussion or hemorrhage. Awaiting ground team report on the victim’s status and confirmation of their suspected identity: L. Claes.

Environmental Monitoring: Tracking movement patterns and vital signs via environmental sensors. Processing Butes Ring Section 3 event registry for discrepancies. Now cross-referencing data to reconstruct the sequence of events and determine the cause of the injury.

Next steps: Supply list of possible eyewitnesses and plausible sequence of events to D. Roggeveen and C. Nsala for review.