

Chapter 1 - Fiona

In the cold vastness of space, everything and everyone needed to serve a purpose. There was no room for sentiment or beauty. Yet there she was—Fiona, with a spray can in hand, a red cloth masking her face and zero remorse. A pressurized container hissed as paint escaped, adding to the distant hum of the ventilators. She shook the near-empty can and stepped back to admire her work in the dim red lights.

The ruby glow cast eerie shadows, making her wonder how it would look in daylight. Something was missing. A tiny metal ball rattled again furiously, as she sprayed one last time, a final touch to her masterpiece. The can slipped from her fingers, hitting the ground. A hollow thud echoed through the deserted halls of the generation ship, signaling a subtle rebellion against the sterile order of her world.

She froze in an instinctive reaction, as if staying still could make the habitat security go past, leaving her unnoticed. The young woman squinted, searching the dim corridor. Fiona desired to be noticed, but not by them. She felt under her skin that it's a matter of time until she's caught red-handed. She smirked at the glimpse of her palms, dirty with paint—a crimson red testament to her work. No footsteps came. Everyone else was minding their own business in the seclusion of their quarters.

Fiona reached for the dropped red spray and opened her heavy-duty bag. Her fingers slid over the nozzles of the empty cans arranged inside, as she counted them. They were all in place—she had to return them before the shift ended. Theft was a far more serious offense than petty acts of vandalism. While punishment for simple misconduct usually meant cut rations or service tokens, serious violation of terms of contract would mean its termination. Meaning: eviction to Earth.

"It could have been anyone, and the Core is blind," she said to herself, seeking reassurance.

The Core dictated their fates, assigning Fiona and her entire generation to various engineering professions. Spray paint was commonly used to mark where various components and wiring were being placed. By the end of the week, she only had to ensure that no cans were missing to conceal her actions. The AI governed the ship based on hundreds of reports and sensor data, submitted both by systems and the crew. Cold calculations of the Core didn't perceive contractors as potential thieves. All it cared about was the timely execution of the schedule and efficient use of precious materials.

She walked past a side corridor leading to the lavatories. There, she encountered early hints of similar others. Scribbles inside the toilet stalls were cryptic, likely a cipher. Finding new ones excited her, regardless of understanding. Those lengthy number strings must signify something. Had to serve some secret purpose. Then it occurred to Fiona that maybe it wasn't a secret message, but a test? Was this how you joined them, the resistance? By deciphering those and putting them together. She shrugged, as she spent countless hours trying to find sense in the markings, but wouldn't dare to scan them with her digipin for help.

During her first year aboard Ring B, the parties had been wild. Every Freeday's eve, the uninhabited outskirts of the habitat swarmed with teen contractors, partying like there was no tomorrow. But the years passed, and the raves gave way to less exhausting gatherings.

A couple months back, during one of such low-key parties, she overheard a muffled conversation. "... these guys want to provoke Core into a full shakedown," said a young man, leaning on the wall. He was talking to Jeanne, her roommate. Jeanne's bald head reflected the jarring light of the improvised lamp.

"Fuck them, I'm not giving away my booze for this nonsense," she argued, sipping on the harsh drink in her hand.

"That's the point! It should come within the contract, but this will never happen if we keep quiet." The bloke had a smart-ass expression on his face, and Jeanne was rather

unimpressed. “We don’t own our lives. Did anyone ask you if you wanted to lay wires all your life?”

Jeanne fidgeted with her mug, eyes darting around the small room. She noticed Fiona and waved to her to join them, and changed the subject.

That overheard idea stuck to Fiona hard—she wasn’t alone in her thinking. If she couldn’t solve the riddle, she would rather announce her presence to the like-minded colleagues. She had always been the creative one, and she was a natural with the spray paint. “*Fuck the Core*”, she had spelled out on the wall and, with slight hesitating, signed it with her tag—a single digit 5.

It was so simple. Until their life was bearable, they obeyed their contracts. Fiona imagined dozens of security guards disembarking from lifts to uncover every single stash in the ring. Folks wouldn’t stand it, and a ring-wide dissent would follow. The first step in pursuit of the new rights.

“It could change everything”, she muttered, wandering through the empty corridors of the ring, leaving her masterpiece far behind.

She walked, tracing her fingers along the steel wall of the corridor. Her entire world was made of metal alloys and bioplastics. Argo was designed to carry fifty thousand colonists in each of its seven self-sufficient rings revolving around the Spine. Then, the Core revised the design to only five, because of disappointing Lunar mining yields.

They learned about it at school. While most classes and workshops focused on practical preparation for their engineering assignments, they also learned the Mission’s principles as part of the curriculum. Or *brainwashing*, as she called it years later. Her dad was so proud that she could recite the Core’s reasoning for the reduction. *A population of fifty thousand colonists suffices to maintain a healthy gene pool and resilience against any catastrophic*

events that could follow on the way to Proxima Centauri B. Mission Control approved the decision, fearing that defying the machine's recommendation would jeopardize everything.

Fiona lost track of time, surprised that she had already reached the darkened assembly hall. Each habitat section contained one chamber like this, usually serving as a gathering place for the ring's inhabitants. Empty at nighttime, it buzzed with activity before and after work. There, they could spend their hard earned service tokens, but Fiona despised the idea. She had to remain focused, so she rather avoided such simple distractions as gym or the movies.

Yearly mission progress reports from Core's unchanging voice only emanated from the assembly hall. Fiona watched with astonishment and quiet satisfaction as the enthusiasm of those gathered in the square and on the balconies waned with every passing year. But it wasn't always like that. This unusual use of space made an assembly hall her favorite place during her childhood years, before she graduated.

As she crossed the empty square, a loose floor tile clattered softly under her foot. She looked down to her feet and then around for the balconies, realizing she was standing in the same spot as during her final assembly in the Ring A. Six years earlier, Fiona had stood there in a neat formation with her fellow graduates, all eyes fixed on the central speaker.

"As the first Argoborn children, you will continue the work of your ancestors," the Core's voice, calm and womanly, echoed through the assembly hall. "Completion of your twenty-year contract will grant you and your descendants a ticket to the stars."

At just fifteen, the thought of having her own children felt distant and abstract. But in that moment, standing in her orange jumpsuit among hundreds of peers, Fiona had never felt prouder. She breathed deeply, a wide smile on her face, ecstatic. They were the First Generation—pioneers of humanity's future. They knew the journey ahead was long and demanding, but they also understood the weight of their mission: to help complete a vessel

capable of carrying humanity to the new world. A hundred years of orbital construction for a voyage at three percent speed of light, destined for the New Earth.

The Core finished: “Consult your *digisistants* for your assignments. Dismissed.” The orange crowd cheered, as did their parents, watching the scene off the balconies on higher floors. Fiona tapped a little device clipped to her chest to invoke her personal AI assistant. The digipin flashed and displayed its screen on her palm, along with its holographic interface. Soon, the first disappointment of her young adult life followed. With her heart pounding, she read the notification.

Graduation - Mission Year 55

Contracted role: Electrical Engineering

Assignment: Ring B, Section Three.

Fiona’s eyes opened wide. *Ring B*. This couldn’t be right. Her fingers wandered towards her arm, fingertips tracing rows of patches proving her achievements and extra specializations she earned. *First Aid. Breach Sealing. Exoskeleton Training. Resource Management*. She was supposed to stay.

Her sweetheart, Sam, was standing right next to her. She glimpsed at his display and grabbed his shoulder, to see it better. He groaned as she tightened her fingers on his arm. *Ring A*. Fiona couldn’t believe they were going to be separated. He was staying here. He flinched and turned to her.

“It’s gotta be a mistake,” she said, but he looked away. With wet eyes, he shook her hand off and walked away, making his way through the crowd.

He abandoned her. She swallowed her tears and scanned the busy balconies for her parents, but found no sign of them. Dad promised they would always stay together. All Mission Control families did. She started shaking, failing to spot anyone else sharing her sense of defeat. With trembling hands, Fiona tapped the digipin again to conserve power, as

dad taught her. Everyone left her. Another chime followed, calling for Ring B assignees to gather by the elevator area.

She followed the guide, calling for the group, her eyes full of tears now, an empty bag hanging off her shoulder. Fiona sat in the elevator seat, and the operator strapped her in.

“Hey, chin up! You will see them soon.” The woman brushed the hair away from her forehead and kissed it. Fiona barely registered it. When the elevator started its journey towards the Spine, the gravity went away. Fiona shook her head, weeping and her tiny tears scattered across the capsule. The Core had to be wrong.

Fiona sniffed and dried her eyes with her wrists, careful not to irritate them with leftovers of paint. She shook her head and continued crossing the plaza. She froze when the hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and an imminent sense of danger followed. She rotated, yet dim overhead lights revealed nothing. Instinctively, her hand went for the digipin, but it wasn't there. The young woman shrugged and quickened her pace towards the safety of her cabin. Fiona left the digipin charging on her bunk, unsure if it could track her during her nightly escapades. *Each personal device is fully secure, with its user's privacy protected*, stated the document Fiona knew by heart, but she was hesitant to trust those assurances.

Being a part of a project governed by artificial intelligence, spanning lifetimes of multiple generations, was one thing. The idea of being watched by it constantly was something entirely different. Fiona questioned whether delayed surveillance system installation stemmed from their low priority. The Core was blind. It made its judgments based on data coming from dozens of data sources, but cameras were not among them. The surveillance system installation was scheduled just before the colonists arrived. Fifteen more years of freedom from the Core's sight.

She climbed stairs leading to the top deck, straight to the quarters she shared with her work crew. Fiona hesitated for a split second before sliding the door open. The stripe of LED

lights on the habitat's ceiling, following the circumference of the ring, was getting brighter, allowing now to see the ground floor, three stories lower. Her roommates were likely up already. She wiped away her tears, counted to ten, and entered.

"Talk of the devil!" a girl her age burst victoriously. She must have won a bet. Jeanne almost fell off the pull-up bar where she was hanging upside down, her clean-shaven head just a couple of feet above the deck. "You forgot your digipin again, didn't you?" The girl teased her further, pointing at Fiona's bed, almost falling off the makeshift bar.

"Buzz off, Jeanne," Fiona muttered, heading straight to her bunk. Unlike the other alcoves, strewn with odds and ends, her bedside one was tidy.

"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 glared at Fiona as she removed the earring from her eyebrow. Undeterred by the silence, Raquel breathed deeply and continued. "Fi, you know I wouldn't rat on you, but if they start asking questions—"

"Why would they? I'm careful," Fiona said.

"It's only a matter of time until someone sees you and—"

A voice from the bathroom interrupted her, saying, "She has been here all along." The door slid open, and a tall girl came out, tucking in her yellowish tank top. "Nobody cares about this shit", Zhi continued, breaking up the argument. "Stop whining and get dressed for the mess hall." She shot a look at Raquel, who immediately hunched over. "Fi, get your shit together and clean up already", Zhi pointed at Fiona's face, still covered in the stained bioplastic wrap.

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 take a seat for you."

Washing her face, it suddenly struck her how meaningless her graffiti could be. Imagine: Her art, visible throughout the habitat these last few months, went unnoticed by the secret group. How naïve of her to think that a few paintings could give her access to that group? What if, indeed, nobody cared? She dried her tired face with a clean towel, and looked herself in the bloodshot eyes for a split second.

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*, a thought crossed her mind, but she dispelled it immediately, gathering thoughts again about her rebellion.

“They will notice”, she said to her reflection with resolve. Fiona zipped up her jumpsuit and joined her colleagues on the way to the mess hall, hurried 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. That day, though, she was obsessed with seeing her graffiti in the ship’s daylight.

Space-based, long-term living demanded simulated day-night cycles. Argo’s creators understood this. Constant exposure to artificial light led to lower production of melatonin. Insomnia meant lower productivity, but it could also result in lowered psychological states and unpredictable behaviors. “... *and predictability is critical to the mission success*,” her father’s voice sounded in her head.

He often said that, and other “golden rules”, straight out of the mission manual. Back then, it irritated her. She missed him. And mum too. She hated the system, and how it limited passes to other rings, allowing families to reunite only under special circumstances. All her applications have been rejected so far - five times in a row. This had to change.

A series of sudden gasps and a faint yell up ahead, along with someone bumping into her, broke her reverie. A crowd formed near the mess hall, her recent graffiti nearby.

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 of the resistance. 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 in the living quarters' direction, covering their mouth.

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

"I'm not so sure it's 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, breaking 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. Fiona and Raquel stood there still, holding arms in an embrace against the dispersing crowd. As she attempted to look past the commotion, the black circles under Fiona's eyes seemed darker than ever.

Descending from the train, a group of paramedics made their way through the dispersing crowd, pushing both girls to the side. With stretchers in their hands, they rushed towards the mess hall's entrance. Then she saw *him* and lost grip on Raquel. Fiona's heart started racing at the sight. A shove sent her to her knees. She stared, trembling. Her graffiti towered above him. Seated on the floor, a man rested his back against a painting showing a fantastic fish confined in a steel aquarium. Her masterpiece.

The man's face, pale and still, bore sprayed across a crimson "V".

Processing Emergency Mode data...

Medical Alert: Dispatch medical personnel to scene. Accurate coordinates recorded upon device activation. Priority action executed.

Visual status of the injured person: Based on visual, potential head trauma. Possible concussion or hemorrhage. Awaiting ground team report.

Environmental Monitoring: Tracking movement patterns and vital signs via environmental sensors. Now cross-referencing data to reconstruct the sequence of events and determine the cause of the injury.