

**LA TENIENTE FARAH. EI JARDÍN DE LAS MENTIRAS**  
**(Lieutenant Farah. The Garden of Lies)**

(Chapters 1 & 2)

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## CHAPTER 1

The huge hangar door opens slowly, and a very dry, red breeze enters, the sort that injects a cold orange mist into the very marrow of your bones. Farah squints in disgust. She feels the day is born rust-coloured, that the new is born old. She was only ten back then, but she hasn't forgotten how the dawns at her parents' house, in the south of the region called Europe, had a more fiery luminosity. The sky was bluer, and life was more intense. You could close your eyes and let that white sun caress you without the ultraviolet radiation causing a brutal cancer to erupt and destroy you from within. That was many years ago, when they had not yet needed to emigrate to Mars.

An AR robot-cop arrives, moving on its six wheels, and Farah shakes her head in annoyance. In these times of magnetic levitation, she finds those fat wheels pathetic, as also the long metallic neck that looks like a soft tube and the enormous eyes like an ancient camera lens.

*"Light, Lieutenant Farah GJW3489. I'm Sergeant AR 4669TJU."*

Farah looks at the robot officer with hostility, although she knows it's not the robot's fault; it's because the current government of pragmatic, technological puritans designs them that way, with coke-bottle eyes and the retro-aesthetic of the first Rovers sent to Mars more than 100 years ago. Their voice is pleasant, the speech software is perfect, but it has that neutral tone, even when being kind, which drives her up the wall, because it makes them so little like humans. "Lieutenant, order TR-45-B specifies that Sergeant AR 4669TJU, here in attendance, will be in charge of the special operations mission on Mercury as per document number..."

She already knows the order. Farah switches off from the robot-sergeant's bureaucratic jargon and talks to herself, the conversation of a single child and orphan, a girl who, from the time she was young, got used to being her own best friend. She's not going to argue with anyone about the fact that these robot officers don't get stressed, know no fear, take no drugs, have huge amounts of data stored in their computer brains... And yet she shakes her head sceptically. They're too perfect in their electronic brains to understand how pathetically imperfect we humans can be.

The AR has finished his boring, bureaucratic speech: a double murder, the criminal, a policeman until a few hours ago, barricaded inside with a hostage. A policeman she knows better than she'd like.

*"New orders, Sergeant AR."*

The robot focuses its glass eyes on her.

*"I'm taking over command of the mission."*

The AR has an order from the Security Council to execute a plan, but a hierarchical superior now tells it that the plan is different. Its processor is working at high speed, and it switches on a fan. Farah can't hide a sarcastic smile: robots sweat too.

“Lieutenant, the protocol for this order...”

“Forget it. My second name is Improvisation.”

“I will note it in your personal file on my database, Lieutenant.”

Farah shakes her head. How are they going to be policemen if they don't have the tiniest bloody sense of humour?

“Sergeant, alert the team to start boarding immediately.”

The AR hesitates for a moment, or is processing; in this case, it's one and the same.

“We're in an emergency, 2-4. Activate your hard disk!”

The robot's software enables it to recognise, in the decibels and the vibration of the voice, when it's being given an order, one with a negative emotional charge likely to turn into a crisis of the sort humans call a 'quarrel'. So, it does an about-face and sends a message out to the group's wristbands.

It's -10 °C in the hangar. Farah is frozen inside her fake leather bomber jacket which cost her several weeks of data salary. She bought it from Clasitech, an online site which services purchases from Muskville, the second city of Mars. She doesn't like clothing with built-in automatic climate control. She prefers to sweat when it's hot and shiver when it's cold in order to feel alive. She definitely doesn't consider herself to be one of those stuck-up techno-sustainable snobs with their worthless environmentalism, though perhaps she is more of a snob than she wants to believe. She grimaces as she thinks that no idiots consider themselves to be one.

Her agents already have their weapons, and they watch her shivering as they synchronise the software in their wristbands, comfortably warm in their climatised uniforms. They must think she's mad; maybe she is. Being the youngest lieutenant in the entire Solar System always provokes reaction: curiosity, disdain, suspicion. No one has ever given her anything. She was top of her year and came first in every exam and test over all the men, women and trans, many of them with decades of experience in the police force itself. She does have to admit that algorithms have fewer prejudices than people.

She feels a vibration in her wristband from the Secretary of the Council. There's no time now for politics.

“Go, go go!”

They rush up the walkway and the ship lifts off at full blast towards Mercury. The south base of the New Tokyo police is already a dot of light in the middle of nowhere when her wristband vibrates madly again. It's the fifth call in three minutes from the Planetary Centre, and the icon for Bror – the Secretary-General of Security who coordinates police operational groups for the Solar System – lights up with a maximum priority code. Farah finds him a good administrator of operative

models and, like all high-ranking bureaucrats, exceptionally gifted, with an IQ above 135, and 69 degrees from the best online universities. He's even hot! Although she immediately rids herself of that thought: for her taste, he lacks mystery.

She turns over her wrist to accept the holographic videocall and a natural-size projection places her in front of a virtual Bror, impeccably dressed in one of those smart outfits which change colour spontaneously, very popular among high-status citizens who want to see themselves as progressives. Their clothes have that vaguely mystical, pre-technological air, but under the medieval monk-like tunic, they wear regulation thermal gear and top-quality radiation shields.

"Lieutenant." His voice sounds tense, but not angry. Bror is an out-and-out puritan; he doesn't believe in anger. "Regulation 101-T clearly indicates that protocol can't be changed without consultation."

"I did consult."

"You consulted?"

"Yes, with myself."

Bror slightly raises an eyebrow; that's a sign of maximum annoyance.

"You can't do that."

"Well, I've done it."

"Your tone is defiant, not friendly."

"They don't pay me this pittance of a salary to be friendly."

"So why are we arguing before we start to talk?"

"I don't know, Bror. You're the only one arguing. We're in a 2-4 alert and you're beating around the bush."

"There was no reason for you to go with the intervention team to Mercury-8."

"But I'm on my way."

"You're not a patrol officer anymore. You've been promoted to lieutenant and coordinator of emergencies. You should run the police operation from base."

"Do you think I don't know the blasted protocol? I got a 10 in the operational models exam."

"The protocol indicates that a 2-4 mission is led by an AR sergeant."

"The protocol doesn't know that the person who is barricaded with a weapon in an explosives zone is a policeman who has an 18-year-old hostage with a pistol pointed at his brain. I am going to supervise the operation personally."

"An AR sergeant is in charge of the operation. That is the order issued for this incident, number J5H786/4."

"But how can you order a machine to be in charge of such a delicate mission?"

“Lieutenant, I can’t tolerate expressions of technological hatred from you. The top-level ARs have software which has provided them with an IQ of 500, five times higher than any of us.”

“Damn it, Bror. It’s a robot! When it wants to pee, it pees oil! It knows nothing about pain.”

“Your supremacist ideas regarding the cyber race are very negative. You already know that disciplinary action has been taken against you three times for this reason, as well as others.”

Farah breathes heavily and a lot of air lands on the hologram. Her bacteria don’t reach the Secretary of the Council, but her anger certainly does.

“Dammit, Bror,” she repeats, “There are two dead civilians up there, another with a gun to his head and a policeman out of control.”

“That’s why the entity with the highest IQ has to go.”

“Are you calling me stupid?”

“I’d never do that. That would be against regulations.”

“Bror, I’m the coordinator of emergencies and I’m going to do this my way.”

“Farah, I could suspend your licence immediately.”

“But you could also not do that.”

For the first time, Farah sees Bror hesitating and although she remains impassive on the outside, she smiles on the inside: ‘Good man, good puritan.’

She sees the Secretary-General for the Security of the Union pause silently for a moment. He tosses back his dark black hair. He’s already over 30, but he hasn’t given himself any genetic injections to improve his facial features, and those facial imperfections give him personality. If he weren’t such a bureaucrat and so boring, he could be an attractive man.

“Lieutenant...”

“Have I stopped being Farah?”

“I’m speaking officially, Lieutenant. I authorise you to go on the mission, but as an observer. Sergeant AR 4669TJU has submitted a plan approved by the National Security Council less than 16 minutes ago, reference number ST-246/TY3. This is the plan to be executed on Mercury to neutralise the rebellious agent TRV 458398, who answers to the basic name of Bosco.”

“Bosco...”

“I’m transferring all the data on the incident to you.”

“Wish me luck, Bror.”

“You know that the Democratic Administration of Mars is based on scientism; luck is superstition. Apply the protocols and everything will occur as planned. I wish you *light*, Lieutenant.”

“*Light*, Bror. *Light*.”

## CHAPTER 2

Moira wanders anxiously through the apartment where all the mirrors have been systematically removed. She remembers everything that happened that afternoon with paranoid precision, almost minute by minute, even second by second, probably because of the countless times she has gone back to that moment, again and again, obsessively. Maybe in a destructive manner.

The ship had begun to perform the manoeuvres to approach Io, the third largest moon in the Jovian system – barely a speck of dust on a horizon thick with Jupiter’s gigantic gaseous cloud mass, with its murky palette of pale colours and brutal gravitational pull which manages to distort the core of its constantly spinning moon, keeping it molten. Io, the most volcanic world in the Solar System, was the destination of this transport ship carrying equipment and workers to a chemical operation under construction in its northern hemisphere.

Moira had been in the employment of the interplanetary logistics company for only a few months, after completing her degree at the Aeronautics University in New Tokyo. Right now, she was working as an auxiliary pilot, routine work checking that all the parameters were correct. Hours into the flight, Kay sent her a 3D video message which jolted her out of her drowsiness. He was pouting at the camera and sending her kisses from a pharmaceutical space laboratory orbiting Mars. Moira checked that Commander Torres and the co-pilot were concentrating on the control panel, and took advantage of the fact that her seat was behind them to focus on her wristband and send Kay back another 3D kiss. She looked at herself on the screen and she liked what she saw: small nose, long, straight blonde hair, big blue eyes, thin lips.

Most boys found her attractive. Her only concern was that her eyebrows seemed too thick, but that could be fixed with a session at the Astro Salon in New Tokyo as soon as she received her fortnightly pay. She had seen the salon’s website on the multinet, with its cubicles for hair vitamin supplementation, hydration pools... and the hairstyles designed by computer programmers at Mars-Stanford University were amazing.

The journey had been somewhat boring in her auxiliary post behind the commander and the co-pilot, relying on routine navigational data, but now that they were approaching Io, the view from the cabin was spectacular. Those exotic names, which had fascinated her since she was little, popped into her head: Io, Ganymede, Europa, Callisto, Amalthea... miniscule islands floating around powerful Jupiter with its Great Red Spot which she could now study from a distance of just a few

hundred thousand miles. She found the storm which had been raging on its surface for centuries hypnotic.

As Io loomed closer, it was turning into a ball of mouldy yellow cheese which threw out unexpected spurts of dust from its sulphur fumaroles. They were now so close to the surface that they could see the apparently dormant volcano Prometheus in all its splendour, just a thin plume of smoke rising from its crater. Yet again, however, they were underestimating the forces of nature... Just as they were flying over it, the volcano exploded and spat out a colossal burst of sulphur dioxide which rose higher than 180 miles and enveloped the ship in a fiery mustard-coloured cloud.

One of the parameters on the screen flickered and an icy chill ran down Moira's spine. Something wasn't right. The retrojets had switched off.

"Commander! We have a Code 3!"

The Commander swivelled towards Moira, a concerned look on her face.

"Facts."

"Retro 5 has been disabled. 1 and 3 aren't working either."

The Commander assumed manual control of the ship and reset the engines, but the retrojets, which should have slowed their fall and enabled them to land gently, didn't activate. Moira didn't catch the brief whispered conversation between the Commander and her co-pilot, but she could see the latter vehemently agreeing.

The Commander turned towards her.

"It's impossible to abort our manoeuvres and counteract gravity without those three dead retrojets. We're ejecting."

"Retrojets 2 and 4 are functioning, Commander."

"They are not enough. The impact with the surface will occur at 125 mph. The survival rate is estimated at 0.005%. Fatal. And it will occur in 110 seconds."

Jair, the chief steward, entered the cabin looking shaken, and closed the airlock behind him, but for just a second, Moira could see the passengers out of the corner of her eye: men and women dozing or keeping themselves entertained with multinet and social media content. Calm, even happy, because they didn't know they were going to die within the next minute.

The Commander raised her voice as she opened the panel providing access to the evacuation capsule.

"Hurry, everyone inside. We're headed for Jupiter-19 Base." The co-pilot and chief steward deftly occupied the narrow seats inside the small safety capsule.

"But, Commander, what about the 65 passengers?" asked Moira.

"We can't do anything for them. Get into the capsule."

Moira stood paralysed.

“Come on, idiot!”

From some deep corner in the labyrinth of her brain cells, an order reached the muscles in her neck and she shook her head from side to side indicating ‘No’.

The Commander, in a fit of nerves, spewed out swear words that Moira thought she’d never hear from her educated mouth, and didn’t wait a moment longer. She got into the capsule, closed the compartment and almost instantly, the capsule catapulted into space causing the ship to wobble. Moira took a few hesitant steps towards the control panel as they fell at enormous speed. The retro-chronometer showed 40 seconds to impact. She switched on the communication channel to the passenger cabin.

“The Commander here. The retrojets have broken down and we’re going to impact with the ground at a higher speed than expected. Hold on to your seats and put your heads between your arms.”

*30 seconds.* She swerved the ship to try to do a zigzag which might slow their fall, but the speed of their descent and the two operational engines weren’t able to alter the inertia of their trajectory. *23 seconds.* At the risk of accelerating their descent even further, she reset the engines: they switched off and on again... but only engines 2 and 4. Nothing. *10 seconds.* The yellowish-black surface of Io’s core was coming towards them at enormous speed. Her last thought wasn’t a thought; it was a scream of terror.

The ship slammed hard against the ground, cut through the surface with a loud noise, as if it were breaking a crust of ice, and plunged into a lake of boiling sulphur in a recently formed volcanic crater. The brutal impact caused Moira to lose consciousness briefly. When she recovered, she managed to adjust her oxygen mask and remove her seatbelt. But as she got up from her seat, she almost slipped and fell backwards, because the ship, which had remained afloat for a moment, was now vertical and sinking, with the pilots’ cabin pointing upwards like the prow of a boat. The hatch to the passengers’ cabin was still shut. Moira reached out to push the ‘open’ switch, but the ship was without power. They were sinking and a thick, hot stream of molten lava was already seeping under the door. Not a sound, not a moan from the other side of the door – no sign of human life.

With a final effort, Moira stood on top of the seat and pushed the manual emergency trapdoor in the roof. She pulled herself halfway out. What she saw was a scene from hell: an immense lagoon of liquid sulphur at 120 °C. There was no choice. She launched herself into the boiling liquid. Although she felt intense heat, her suit protected her body, but the permeable oxygen mask didn’t prevent droplets of the fiery, sticky liquid from trickling down her face. It was the pain



which gave her the strength to swim to some little islands of solidified rock some dozens of feet away. She crawled across the solid lava. She was in so much pain that her brain disconnected.

She woke up two days later in a medical centre in Juno, the capital of Jupiter.

Five weeks after the accident, she returned to New Tokyo. She was alive, partially at least. She underwent four plastic surgery operations. The AR doctor informed her that the operations had been successful. Success is a relative concept. The first time she looked at herself in her wristband's selfie-mode, she screamed. A monster was looking back at her from the screen. That was exactly what everyone else would be seeing from now on.

Her skin was like a photo of the surface of Io: yellow lumps, craters, black holes. Only her hair had been salvaged from the disaster, although it looked like a bad haircut with burnt tips. The rest of her head was a battlefield. Her left eyelid was half-missing and the eye looked as if it was going to pop out of its socket, like the eye of a fish. Her ears seemed to have been chewed by a rat. Those eyebrows which had been so abundant had disappeared, and would never grow again on her dead skin. They talked to her about biological cloning treatments which might result in her looking something like the person she had been, or would at least serve not to scare children, but they were very expensive. The company had already informed her that she'd exceeded the payment limits on her insurance. In fact, she was going to have to apply for a loan to be able to finish her stay in the hospital.

When the doctors had returned her wristband, she'd found 11 messages from Kay. Some were encouraging, others were tender, where he could barely hold back his tears, and one played her favourite music. As she was going through them in her hospital room, a call from Kay finally came through. She didn't want to turn on the camera, and he didn't ask her to. They spoke; he even made her laugh and briefly forget all that had happened. She insisted that Kay not come to visit her.

The day she was discharged, she dragged herself out into the corridor and when she got to the entrance, there he was waiting for her with his cheerful, healthy athlete's smile. When he looked up and they exchanged glances, Kay's jaw dropped. Moira tried to cover her face with her hands, with her arm, with her bag of personal belongings. Kay ran. He called her later. He was crying. He felt sorry for her, but he mainly felt sorry for himself. He was shattered; seeing her like that had been very hard; he reproached her for not having warned him, preparing him for the shock. Moira told him that she needed time, and he didn't insist. There were no more calls from Kay. There was no more Kay.

She was summoned to a trial, a result of the inquiry opened following the accident. The crew, except for her, had abandoned the ship. She was proud of that. She was so confident about having taken the right action, and so lacking in funds in her bank account, that she didn't even take a

lawyer with her. Big mistake. Commander Torres, so cultured and sophisticated, turned against her like a scorpion. The company backed the Commander. Moira had disobeyed the orders of her superior in an emergency situation. That was a grave offence and grounds for dismissal with no indemnity.

Because that was what the company was after. They didn't want to compensate her, or create a legal opening to enable the relatives of the 65 dead passengers to lodge claims for malpractice. The Commander was seeking to dispel any suspicion that a better solution than escaping could have been found. All the protocols and data were set out which demonstrated that the statistically correct action plan was applied, a plan which Moira failed to carry out.

She explained that she couldn't abandon the passengers and that her duty as a pilot was to save them, but the cyberlawyers immediately destroyed her emotional arguments with facts: she didn't apply the protocols, she didn't save the ship, she didn't save any equipment, she didn't save a single life other than her own and furthermore, she caused additional medical expenses which the company had to defray. Moira began to realise her error. She had seen herself as a hero but in reality, she had saved no one. All she'd managed to do was destroy her face and ruin her life. If she'd climbed into the life-saving capsule, nothing would have become worse onboard ship and her life wouldn't be hell. So, the company has dismissed her without compensation.

She hasn't left the house for a week. The advance on the sale of her apartment has allowed her to pay her hospital debt. She even has enough funds to spend at the Astro Salon as she always wanted to. The only healthy thing she has left is her hair, and it occurs to her that she could at least fix that straggly, burnt, tangled mess.

When she reaches the elegant installation with its blue glass, the way they look at her as soon as she enters – that mixture of compassion, terror, and relief that they are not the ones with her destroyed face – almost makes her take a step backwards and leave. But she clenches her jaw and ticks 'laser head hair removal' on the screen. She's facing a wall of mirrors and can't avoid seeing herself. She also sees the hair technician who puts the treatment helmet on her head. As he's adjusting the parameters, tears of sorrow appear in his eyes. She thinks she hates the technician.

She goes back home furious. She searches on the multinet. On a site for made-to-measure handcrafted prostheses, she orders a ventilated titanium mask which clips together at the back of the neck. It's not an attractive mask; it even looks crude. Better that way.

She has to leave shortly for the ship going to Earth. The few friends to whom she has said goodbye have advised her against going to the old, toxic planet. It's a dirty, dangerous place with

levels of radiation that cause sores and deadly cancers, and children who are born with deformities. But that's precisely where she wants to go, to a place of the disfigured, where she'll be just one more.

She looks at herself in a mirror in the astroport terminal with her metallic mask, rivets all round its perimeter. It's an outlet model which was on sale. The eyes are two small holes, and the mouth is a short rectangle. Two children stare at her openly with a mixture of terror and curiosity until their father grabs them by the hand and hastily pulls them away. The mask inspires more fear than her own destroyed face, but she doesn't care. She'd rather scare than inspire pity; that way, at least they'll leave her in peace. Because that's all she aims for now, that they just leave her in peace, that nobody says anything to her; to be left alone and not have to put up with the charity of pity.