

DISTORTION

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HOT
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BOOKS

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For E.





THE PHOBOS SERIES

BOOK ONE: ASCENSION

BOOK TWO: DISTORTION

BOOK THREE: COLLISION



1 teaspoon white Karo
1 big can evaporated milk
equal part boiled water or distilled water
1 egg yoke
mix and chill
Don't feed him meat or formula cold
1 drop vitamin solution per day.

Last words written by James Dean (1931–1955)







ACT I



1. Genesis Channel

Saturday 9 December, 12:13 pm

WE APOLOGIZE FOR THE INTERRUPTION TO THIS SERVICE.

WE ARE WORKING TO RE-ESTABLISH THE CONNECTION WITH THE
CUPIDO

AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE, AND FOR YOUR LOYALTY TO YOUR
FAVOURITE CHANNEL:
THE GENESIS CHANNEL!

2. Shot

D + 159 days, 22h 46m
[23rd week]

Twelve.

We are twelve, gathered all together for the first time in the Visiting Room, the glass bubble that has seen us parading in, two by two, over these past five months: us, the participants in the Genesis programme, the greatest TV game show in all history – and the cruellest lie of all time.

We are twelve people thirsty for glory, who were persuaded that by setting off for Mars we would become immortal.

We are twelve people hungry for love, convinced that everything would have a fairy-tale ending – *they were married, had lots of children and lived happily ever after*. Isn't that we're always reading at the end of a good story?

There's Kris, the German girl, my lifetime friend (even though we only met a year and a half ago), whose big blue eyes gleam beneath her crown of blond braids, like those of a Sleeping Beauty waking up from a too-long sleep.

There's Kelly, the Canadian, the hot-head of the team, all dishevelled from the struggle that set us against each other a

few moments ago, when the girls thought I was some kind of lunatic having a proper paranoid breakdown.

There's Safia from India, the youngest and wisest among us, who I hurt in my frenzy and who has a purplish mark around her neck from the scarf with which I nearly strangled her, though I'd never meant to.

There's Liz the English girl and Fangfang the Singaporean, our top model and our intellectual, each of them supporting one of the injured girl's arms.

All five of them are looking at me in amazement – and in terror. Even Louve, the on-board dog who looks like a poodle, gazes at me with her shining black eyes as though she understands the terrible deception of which she's been the victim, her every bit as much as the rest of us.

'They've sent us to our deaths,' I say for the third time, feeling like razor blades are scraping my throat. 'Serena and the instructors. They led us on-board the ship knowing that there would be nothing waiting for us when we got here, nothing but defective habitats unable to keep us alive for more than a few months. The whole thing is explained in here. Look.'

Saying nothing, the girls slide towards me across the Visiting Room they burst into just moments ago when I opened the hatch. Here at the heart of the *Cupido*, there's no artificial gravity – we seem to be floating in the middle of a void. Outside the window, the Earth is just a glimmering dot among so many millions of others. Resting in my palm is a bright object that should never have come into my possession, but which destiny allowed to fall into my hands: a cellphone with a photovoltaic screen, recharged by the light of the cosmos.



It was the stars that finally lit up the screen, illuminating the truth. It would be a lovely image, if it weren't such a tragic one.

'What does it say on that thing, that's got you so worked up?' asks a voice full of doubt and anger.

It belongs to Alexei, the Russian, who was once the most highly sought-after boy on board, before he became engaged to Kris.

He's standing on the other side of the unbreakable glass that splits the Visiting Room from top to bottom. His voice reaches me through the audio system that allows communication between the two perfectly airtight hemispheres. His steely eyes look daggers at me as though I were the guilty one, the criminal, the shatterer of dreams. Can I blame him? I've had weeks to nurture my suspicions, to believe the unbelievable, to name the unnameable. But them? They suspected nothing, and here I am hurling everything in their faces, all eleven of them, like a slap. They thought they were the lucky ones chosen for the greatest adventure anybody has ever lived through, and they discover they're just victims, destined to die wretchedly.

The faces of the boys, pressed up against the reinforced glass, make them look like men on death row in their final session in the visiting room. Not the Visiting Room of our sensational courtships, no, the real visiting room of a real jail, where the prisoners receive their final visitors before setting off down the corridor that leads to the electric chair.

The forehead of Samson from Nigeria makes a pool of ink against the glass, and Kenji's from Japan a pool of milk. The powerful hands of Tao, the Chinese acrobat, press against the glass as though he wants to shatter it, which is certainly

impossible. As for the last two, Mozart from Brazil and Marcus the American, they aren't looking at the small telephone screen – they're watching me.

My freckled face, still soiled with dried blood.

My red mane of hair, tangling with the shreds of my torn chiffon dress.

My bare shoulder, from which the Salamander bursts out, that long scar I've spent my whole life hiding. It took just seconds to reveal it to the entire craft.

'*Noah Report*,' reads Kris, her voice trembling, as she leans over the telephone screen. 'That's what it says, Alex: *Noah Report*.'

She clears her throat so as to be able to speak more loudly, so that everyone can hear.

'Report Summary: The sensors indicate that the six pairs of rats, lizards and cockroaches that were sent secretly to the seventh habitat of the Martian base survived for eight months, and reproduced at a pace comparable to terrestrial conditions. But at the end of the ninth month, every one of the organisms died suddenly, for reasons unknown.'

'Conclusion: As things stand, and until there is a better understanding of what caused the inexplicable loss of the trial animals, the habitats are considered not capable of sustaining life in the long term.'

Alexei thumps his fist hard against the glass, interrupting Kris's reading.

There is a crease across his usually smooth, high forehead.

His elegant white outfit with the grey seam does appear to be encumbering him all of a sudden; there's something

incongruous about his perfectly combed hair, like a movie star's. In the movie he's currently a part of, whether he likes it or not, there's no juvenile lead ready to save the day, no superhero who can rescue the world, and, most of all, no prince charming. There are only losers, and all of them are at breaking point.

'It can't be true!' he cries – his Russian accent, usually so mild, rolls as furiously as a swell in the midst of a storm. 'The report's a fake!'

'It's signed by Gordon Lock, Archibald Dragovic and Ruben Rodriguez.' whispers Kris, as she continues to make out the writing on the telephone screen. 'The names of the technical director of the programme and my own biology instructor are right there, in black and white.'

'You'll believe anything!' Alexei cuts her off. 'There's no evidence they're the ones who actually wrote that tissue of lies.'

I can't help thinking his tone of voice sounds more like a father speaking to his daughter than a fiancé addressing his bride-to-be. But Kris says nothing and, standing behind me, Fangfang nods vigorously, clinging to the hope that all this might be no more than a bad dream.

'Alexei is right,' she says. 'It's definitely a hoax, some kind of mean joke. You must have gotten it wrong, Léo.'

She so wants to believe what she's saying.

I can see a silent prayer in her eyes; she's begging me to answer her with something like *Oh yes, of course, I got it wrong, now you mention it it's obvious, thank goodness you're here, Fangfang, right as always!*

But the words that come out of my mouth are the opposite of what she's hoping for.

‘Fangfang, Alexei, this is no joke. I did not get it wrong. Crazy as it may seem, Serena has sacrificed us all for money. This is the truth. She launched the show despite the flaws in the installations, to rake in the billions from the advertising, the sponsors and the viewers’ gifts. She didn’t even try to deny it. She knows that she hasn’t got time for that. The only thing that matters to her is that we tell her that we’ll land nicely on Mars tomorrow, Sunday, as set out in the protocols and announced on the TV broadcast, without making waves. It will then be up to us to try to fix the habitats once we’re in place. In exchange, she commits to not depressurising them remotely.’

‘Hang on,’ murmurs Safia, looking horribly pale, as though all the blood hadn’t yet returned to her head after the terrible accident that almost ended her life. ‘That’s unbelievable. That would mean she wants to buy our silence in exchange for the tiny hope that we just might pull through?’

‘That’s right, Safia. That’s the squalid deal that Serena offered me, after having confessed everything. That we should keep playing the game, as if there was absolutely nothing wrong.’

But Alexei is no longer listening – or rather, he’s only hearing what he wants to hear.

‘*Serena confessed everything to you?*’ he spits. ‘You’re kidding, right? You want us to buy that? That Serena *confessed everything* in front of billions of viewers?’

‘The transmission was cut off. There are only six viewers watching us at this moment: Serena, Gordon, and the instructors, minus Roberto Salvatore who ran away when he learned that

I had this telephone. It belonged to Ruben Rodriguez, the third signatory to the report, who was in charge of NASA's animal collections where they got the guinea pigs that went before us. The guy tried to warn me at the last minute, on the launch platform. He must have been overcome with remorse when he saw us about to board the rocket. Unfortunately, his intervention came too late. I didn't understand what he was trying to tell me. Now he's been murdered, like Sherman Fisher before him.'

'Murdered? Yeah, really?' retorted Alexei. 'And you were there to witness that? You've got some proof? It's funny, I could have sworn you'd spent the last five months with us on this craft, not on Earth playing Sherlock Holmes.'

'Alex, I'm begging you, stop this,' says Kris.

But Alexei doesn't stop.

His shouting gets louder and louder.

He fires off questions that sound like accusations.

'What's your game, Léonor? Do you find it entertaining, all this bullshit? And anyway – what the hell is that thing behind your shoulder?'

I feel all eyes on my back like laser beams. Here in this bubble of transparent glass there's nowhere for me to escape to. My dress is now no more than a shredded rag on my defenceless body. My long red hair floats in the zero gravity and cannot hide me. My eighteen years of camouflage are nothing more than a useless memory. Now I am the Salamander. The Salamander is me.

'Are you sick, is that it?' Alexei rages. 'You've got some disgusting disease that's going to kill you and you want us to believe we're all going to die with you?'

Mozart gives a quiet groan.

'Will you just *shut it*?'

Head down, he charges at Alexei, who takes the blow in the middle of his chest. But with absolutely no gravity, the impact meets no resistance: the Russian is thrown across the Visiting Room, against the glass wall that looks out over the emptiness of space.

'You're the one who's going to shut it,' he shouts. 'Scumbag! What difference does it make to you, anyway, to know that you're going to die? If you'd stayed on Earth you would only have taken an overdose in your shitty favela anyway!'

Mozart doesn't trouble himself with an answer; he spins like a torpedo towards Alexei, striking him an uppercut. With his back already to the wall, the Russian can't step back: the fist crashes against his jaw with a dull thud.

'I'll make you pay for that!' he spits, wiping his bloody mouth with the back of his hand.

Ignoring Kris's shrill cries, he presses against the wall and propels himself, in turn, at Mozart. They cling to each other, each fighting the zero gravity as much as they're struggling against their opponent. You might mistake it for a dance, some strange synchronised swimming in the infinite sea of space. Except for the murderous gleam in their rolling eyes. There are thin trickles of blood coming from Alexei's mouth and spreading slowly through space; each time Mozart turns, his brown curls rise up, revealing the little metal ball shining in his neck: the *death's egg*, that capsule filled with poison, grafted onto every member of the Aranha gang.

‘Dying . . .’ murmurs Kenji.

He unsticks his forehead from the glass to pull the hood of his futuristic grey kimono back over his head. It’s lined with wave-shielding sheets of aluminium, which are supposed to stop the cosmic rays that are filtering through the glass bubble of the Visiting Room. With this protection – which is pretty ridiculous when you think of the deadly danger we’re *actually* in – Kenji is looking at the moon Phobos. It’s as though this huge battered black rock was hypnotising him. He is repeating the same words, unrelenting, this boy so gifted with a phenomenal memory, so phobic and so unsuited to this mission, like a machine that’s frozen on an algorithm and going round and round on a loop, like an obsessive watching his obsession becoming a reality.

‘Dying . . . I suspected it . . . There’s no escape . . . There never has been . . . The cosmos has never wanted the human species to live on Mars, and we’re all going to die . . .’

Samson and Tao are trying in vain to part the fighters.

Warden, the boys’ Doberman-cross mutt, starts barking loudly, and is instantly imitated by Louve, while the girls throw themselves one after another against the glass barrier crying out the names of those they’d expected to spend the rest of their lives with – long, happy lives, full of thrills, laughter and wonder.

Only Marcus remains apart from the throng.

It’s as though the rest of the boys, tearing each other apart in his hemisphere, don’t exist to him. He doesn’t take his magnetic grey eyes off me, as though there were no one here but us. A vein is throbbing in his forehead, tense with the stress. At the wide opening at the top of his shirt, where his

heart is, the wound he inflicted on himself with the point of his penknife has clotted. An L, an E and an O: the first three letters of my name. As it's dried, the blood ink has changed from scarlet to the deepest purple, almost black, the colour of the countless tattoos that tangle across the rest of his skin.

The idea that I might never get to touch that skin if we were to turn the ship around suddenly grabs hold of my guts, wringing them like a dishcloth.

It hurts like hell!

'Shut up,' I barely manage to mutter, my belly clenched.

The shouts graze my ears.

'Shut up.'

The barking crashes through my eardrums.

'Shut up.'

The more the girls shout themselves hoarse, the more the boys yell, and the more the dogs bark, the more I realise how pitiful this scene is, both huge and tiny; the Visiting Room is a bubble of life in miniature, just a few cubic metres, in the middle of an ocean of death that goes on for ever.

As fragile as a soap bubble.

'Shut up!'

This time I've shouted so loudly that they can't help but hear me.

See me.

Their eyes all turn towards me, some misted over with tears and distress, the others shot through with blood and fury.

'All the way down there on Earth, fifty-five million kilometres from the *Cupido*, Serena and her gang of psychopaths are watching us,' I murmur, breathless, gesturing with my chin

towards the transmission dish attached perched at the top of the Visiting Room. 'In three minutes, taking account of the communication latency, they're going to hear us tear each other apart. They'll hear the insults, the blows and the tears. I can picture the smile creeping onto the face of that botoxed witch, and that gets me so furious. It makes me want to throw up.'

I take a deep breath.

Nobody else is moving a muscle at this moment – not even Alexei.

'This woman has offered us a deal. She's waiting for an answer. She wanted me to decide on behalf of the whole *Cupido* crew, but I refused. Do you know what I told her, before opening the hatch to the girls' quarters and demanding that she re-establish audio contact with the boys' side?'

I can feel my heart racing, like when I had to go up to the front of class when I was a student, terrified at the thought that my back might be visible through my clothes.

'I told Serena that she was all *alone*, but not us, we were *twelve*. I claimed it was a strength. Please let's not make it a weakness. We need to stick together, all twelve of us, stay united in order to make our decision. We don't have dozens of options, only two: land on Mars, as Serena has asked us, and try everything we can for nine months to fix the habitats, without letting any of our circumstances be visible on screen, so it goes without saying we also have to be damn good actors; or turn the *Cupido* right around and bring her down the moment we get back on the air, knowing that we will die of hunger, of thirst and asphyxiation before we reach Earth.'

It's ironic: these eleven pairs of eyes trained on me are really

stressing me out, even though for the last five months I haven't given a damn about being ogled twenty-four / seven by billions of total strangers. Why am I so worked up? Because I care about these eleven, that's why, and I'm afraid of losing them!

'I don't know if we'll be able to get out of this,' I say. 'I don't know how we'll manage to survive on Mars if we do land there, and how long it'll be before we die if we turn around.'

'Deep down, I don't know anything at all. Except one thing: we are twelve.'

Twelve lives.

Twelves voices.

'I suggest we take a vote.'