

GENESIS PROGRAM



CALL FOR CANDIDATES

*Six girls on one side. Six boys on the other.
Six minutes to meet. An eternity to love . . .*

Make History with a Capital H!

After the multinational investment fund Atlas Capital bought NASA with all its equipment from a heavily indebted US government, they decided to accelerate the advances in space conquest. How? Thanks to advertising revenue . . . and you! Genesis is both a unique space project and an entertainment program the likes of which has never been seen before: our first attempt to colonise Mars, and also the greatest TV show in history. And you can be a part of it!

Find Love with a Capital L!

All young people at peak fertility who are living on Earth are invited to apply to the Genesis program. The twelve chosen contestants – six boys and six girls – will get to know one another during their one-way trip to the red planet, where they will eventually start their families. They will have five months to attempt to win one another over and choose the partner with whom to procreate. In exchange for their participation in this unique adventure, the on-board cameras will broadcast their speed-dating sessions in space, and every other moment of the rest of their lives on Mars, every hour of every day.

GENESIS PROGRAM

Are you aged between 16 and 19?

Do you want to be a part of the genesis of a new world?

*Submit your application today,
and write the most beautiful love story of all time: yours!*

1. Shot

D -55 mins.

‘Léonor, how does it feel to be leaving the Earth for ever?’

‘Léonor, are you looking forward to it?’

‘Léonor, are you scared?’

‘Léonor!’

‘Léonor!!’

‘Léonor!!!’

Hundreds of arms stretching out with cameras and microphone booms reach towards me like tentacles, over the uniformed shoulders that are trying to hold them back.

One journalist manages to force his way through the cordon of security guards to shove his microphone under my nose, fixing me with his rapacious, piercing blue eyes.

‘Any last words, Léonor?’ he asks with a predatory smile. ‘Any regrets, perhaps?’

‘None, how about you?’ I reply, flipping him my middle finger in a gesture I just manage to correct into a V for Victory.

What the hell was that about, asking me if I have any regrets right before leaving – was he just trying to provoke me? What’s the vulture after? Tears? Fistfights? Well, he won’t be getting

either. Serena's given us plenty of warning that the journalists are going to try to corner us, hoping to get themselves a scoop. They must be ravenous: they've been waiting a full year for the chosen candidates to be revealed, as our whole training took place in complete secrecy. Today's the first time they've seen us in the flesh, and it'll be the last too: in a few moments, we're going to be taking off and never coming back. So of course they want to get something huge from it. Everybody knows a photo of a distraught face always sells better. No way am I going to let myself be manipulated by some paparazzo who wants to sell my tears at the price of gold; so I unleash my very loveliest smile, the one I've been practising in the mirror every morning since I signed with my sponsor, the high-end fashion house Rosier & Merceagnac.

Then I tear myself away from the pack that's yelling my name and dash for the staircase leading to the launch platform, my long red hair lifted by the breeze that's coming in from the sea at the edge of the Cape Canaveral air base. I climb the last three steps, repeating my mantra to myself: *You're a Rosier model now, Léo. Do try and stay classy.*

If I'm honest, if I did have to be in fashion, I would have imagined myself more a designer than a model, given my passion for drawing and my approximately zero comfort at being in the public eye. And these astronaut boots and this space suit don't exactly give me gazelle-like grace. The aluminium platform that's serving as my catwalk gives out a metallic moan under my soles. I look up: there it is, the launcher, a rocket as tall as a fifteen-storey building, vaster, more overwhelming . . . more *real* than anything I've dreamed of till now. All round the platform,

four giant screens are showing a diagram that explains the protocol of the Genesis programme to the onlookers, doubtless for the hundredth time.

‘. . . as we welcome our intrepid pioneers, our great conquerors of space!’ says a voice through the monumental speakers. ‘There are twelve of them: twelve young people chosen out of millions of candidates, following an international selection process that has been utterly unprecedented. An extraordinary journey awaits them, the most magnificent journey in human history! They will travel further than Yuri Gagarin, further than Neil Armstrong, further than any human has ever travelled before. Their amazing voyage will unfold in six stages which will be transmitted directly back for broadcast on the Genesis channel, twenty-four / seven, thanks to our interplanetary laser communications system.

‘*One*, the simultaneous launch of the twin capsules, girls in one and boys in the other, towards the *Cupido* spacecraft that is currently awaiting them in orbit around the Earth;

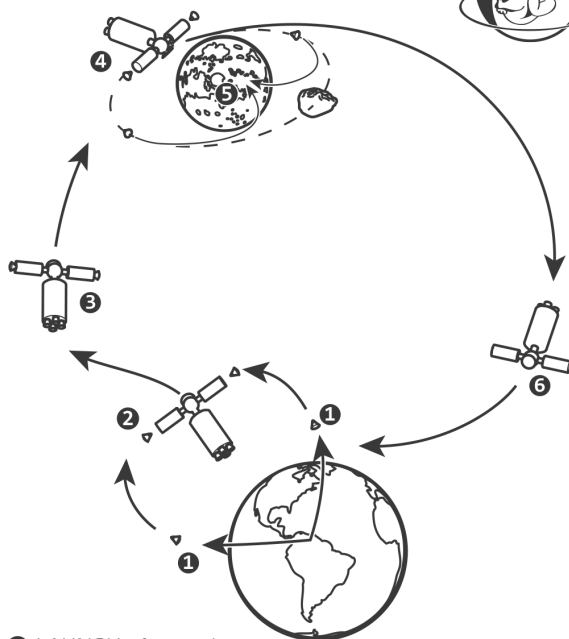
‘*Two*, connecting the two capsules to either side of the *Cupido*, in two separate compartments;

‘*Three*, activating the nuclear booster and sending the *Cupido* on a trajectory towards Mars, for an interplanetary transit of one hundred and sixty-one days;

‘*Four*, aligning the *Cupido* with the Martian orbit, in the wake of the red planet’s moon Phobos – ideal positioning for targeting the landing site;

‘*Five*, the final casting-off of the two capsules, as the lucky candidates are welcomed into Mars’s gravity well;

GENESIS / PROTOCOL



- 1 LAUNCH of capsules
- 2 CONNECTION of capsules to the *Cupido*
- 3 INTERPLANETARY TRANSIT of 161 days
- 4 ALIGNMENT with orbit of Phobos
- 5 FINAL CASTING-OFF of capsules onto Mars
- 6 RETURN of empty *Cupido* to terrestrial orbit



‘Six, the *Cupido* returns empty to the terrestrial orbit, ready for the next cohort of astronauts to be sent off two years from now.’

I join the other girls, who are already lined up at the foot of the launcher, in front of a curtain that’s a rainbow of logos in every colour and every size – big logos for the *platinum* sponsors (they’re the ones who’ve shelled out a whole load to buy themselves a passenger); medium-sized logos for the *gold* sponsors (those who have placed their products in the ship that’s waiting for us up there in space, just hoping they’ll appear on screen as often as possible); small logos for those small-fry *silver* sponsors (though even these have had to sacrifice half of their year’s ad spend for the right to one square centimetre of that curtain). There are dozens of spotlights aimed at me, more dazzling than the July sun. Cameras mounted on rails spin all around the platform, buzzing like insects. I try to give them my best smile, to play the part of a girl who finds this all completely normal, though the reality is I’m about as comfortable as a fish out of water. I’m feeling so hot it’s like the thermal regulator on my undersuit is broken. I can’t wait for the ceremony to be over and to be up there in space, headed out towards my destiny!

Kris puts her hand on mine.

‘You’re the reason we’re here, Léo the Determinator!’ her crystal-clear voice slips into my ear.

The Determinator is the nickname Kris uses when she wants to tease me about my stubborn side. But she’s entitled to call me whatever she likes: she’s practically a sister to me, ever since the morning when we first met on the single runway of a tiny

airport, lost in the furnace that is California's Death Valley. That was a year ago. I was straight off the plane from France, she had flown in from Germany the night before; of the six girls selected for the Genesis programme, we were the first to arrive at the training camp that recreated the conditions on Mars. We were delirious with happiness. We were dying of fear. I confided in her like I'd never done in anyone before, the words coming naturally to me in English, the official language of the Genesis programme. I told her about my life as an abandoned child, the welfare services, the waltz of foster families – it did me a world of good. It was friendship at first sight, a friendship that never failed. Kris lit up my days all through the training programme with her cheerfulness, and I supported her with my famous certainties – things like *We'll get there, soldier Kris, no question about it.*

Kris told me that she came from an industrial area in Germany that had been devastated, eroded by unemployment like so many parts of Europe. Her father had died in an accident on the assembly line just days before the town's last factory was automated, and her mother had followed him a few years later, carried off by grief and untreated pneumonia. Kris at the time had just turned seventeen. She had decided to set off for Berlin in search of a new life, and there she had ended up as a cook in an all-night restaurant (she claims confidently that she cooks like a real expert, and that her crème brûlée with lemon zest is to die for!). The fact that we were both orphans brought us close; such a coincidence, I told myself, out of a population of several thousand candidates! Except it was no coincidence, as we soon realised. The other four

girls who joined us that evening were, each in her own way, completely without any ties, with nothing and nobody to keep them back on Earth: that was one of the selection criteria for the Genesis programme.

‘On the left of this curtain, you will see our six female contestants. On the right, our six male contestants. Pretty girls and handsome boys, brought together on Cape Canaveral peninsula in Florida!’

A rostrum has been set up at right angles to the curtain, topped by a lectern behind which perches a bald, well-built man in a grey suit. It’s him, the voice in the speakers: Director Lock, our Mr Mars, in person. He used to be one of NASA’s top execs, before the new Ultra-liberal government in the US put his space agency up for sale along with a whole heap of things like the postal service, the highways and the whole set of national museums . . . A huge garage sale, the great electoral promise of President Green, all to try to wipe out the country’s enormous debt. *‘Take America out of the red with President Green!’* – that was his campaign slogan.

A private company acquired NASA two years ago, for an undisclosed sum. Atlas Capital: an investment fund, the kind that buys up companies in trouble with the sole aim of gutting them and maximising how much cash they can extract. With NASA, it all went according to plan. Atlas immediately booted out half the staff; roughly speaking, all those who weren’t working directly on the conquest of Mars, a project that was quite advanced at the time of the purchase but which had never been brought to completion owing to the lack of public funds. The Atlas people salvaged everything: the launch base

at Cape Canaveral, the control centre at Houston, the craft waiting in orbit around Earth, the equipment already left on Mars by earlier unmanned missions – everything! They decided to relaunch the project, and more: to make it the greatest reality TV show of all time, thanks to which they were confident about recouping their investment, recovering their costs and filling their pockets. And so the Genesis programme was born, with Gordon Lock as its technical director.

‘Today you are meeting the fortunate chosen ones for the first time,’ he went on. ‘After all these months of waiting and speculation since the announcement of the Genesis programme, after millions of volunteers applied, you are seeing them right now just as I see them, on the two parts of your screen . . .’

From up on his perch, Director Lock is able to see both sides of the curtain. Behind him hangs the huge logo of the Genesis programme: a planet Mars in which the silhouette of a foetus is curled up. The same logo is sewn onto the pocket of his waistcoat, and onto the helmet of each of the security guards. A womb-planet – it’s actually quite daring; I bet the publicity team worked day and night to come up with that. It’s pretty in-your-face as a logo, but at the same time it’s memorable, it hits the nail precisely on the head, and it isn’t lying about the programme’s ultimate goal: establishing a fertile human colony on Mars. If I’d been given a brief like that, I can’t imagine I would have done any better.

‘. . . but the boys and girls, however, have never met. They have lived through their training year in two separate camps, at the heart of Death Valley, the girls on one side and the boys on the other. They have received, in parallel, robust instruction

to make them experts in their respective domains. They have never met . . . until today!’

Director Lock pauses and then looks at us, his pupils shining with excitement, glancing once to the right, once to the left. All around the platform, the four giant screens convey his image increased in size a hundred-fold. I can’t help thinking about how I’d sketch his portrait if I dared. That’s my way of seeing the world, through my artist’s eye. It allows me to position things at a bit of a distance, as someone who all too often reacts instantly in the moment. It helps me to get a bit more perspective on people who impress me, as someone who has so often been looked down on myself. In this case, for example, the director’s bare forehead made me think of a bald planet. His sun-reddened skin, seeded with pores, conjured up the surface of Mars, blasted with craters. They say people often resemble their dogs; Gordon Lock, however, resembles his planet: it would make a cool caricature, something not too mean and which no doubt would have made him smile himself. No sooner do I imagine it, than I feel the muscles of my face unclench, my diaphragm relax.

I breathe.

I cast my eyes over Mr Mars, who is after all the genius behind the whole programme. They come to rest on the large digital clock suspended in the air above the launch platform. It displays the countdown in sparkling numbers: D -52 mins . . .

‘Man has already gone to space. He has already eaten, slept, worked there. But he has never fallen in love. That, then, is the essential ingredient for the success of the Genesis programme. It’s the prerequisite for the pioneers to be able to procreate,

establish their families, put down the foundations of a lasting colony on Mars, making History with a capital H. Let me now call upon somebody who can explain it better than anyone, the executive producer of the Genesis programme: the distinguished Professor Serena McBee herself . . . !'

Make History with a capital H, just like they'd written on the call for applications . . . That's why I'd sent in my details without a single second's hesitation, as soon as I'd seen the ad in a free newspaper on the Paris metro: because I had no *history*, even with a small *h*, of my own. Love and all that crap isn't really my cup of tea. When you're abandoned unconscious at the age of three in a trash can, you're pretty well placed to understand that love doesn't count for much. Because that's it, that's my history, nuts as it may seem: thrown away like an old tissue, rescued in extremis by paramedics, revived in hospital, thrown out to social services. Love has never been a part of my life, and it's not going to be making a surprise entrance now.

What I want is something more solid, more durable. What I want is glory, and I know that I'm not going to get it here on Earth, not since I had to quit school and my drawing classes to go and work at the Eden Food France factory just to get by. I swore to myself that I wouldn't give up my dreams a second time, that I'd be the first girl to plant my easel on Mars. It was this hope that gave me the fight to get through ten rounds of interviews with the Genesis programme recruiters, until I met Serena McBee in person. It was this hope that propelled me all the way through my year's preparation in the desert of Death Valley, despite the fifteen-hour training days and the nights too filled with adrenaline to sleep. Straight ahead,

Léonor! Don't turn around, there's nothing for you here. No family, no bonds. Earth has nothing to offer outcasts like you. But Mars! Look at the stars, they're calling you – and most important of all, never look back.

And I hadn't looked back, ever since I posted my application form to the Genesis programme. It was in the postbox at the entrance of the hostel for young workers where I lived, not far from the factory – in other words, a different life. But this morning, as we wait for the person to whom we owe our place on the launch platform, I can't help looking over my shoulder.

I'm taking a look back at last.

And what I see sends a nasty pang to my stomach, something vicious I hadn't expected.

The journalists seem terribly far away, as though they're at the bottom of a dizzying abyss. The shadow cast by the launcher is too dark for me to make out their expressions. I don't know these people who are blaring out my name as though I were a thing they owned. They're nothing to me. And yet, from this day forth, they will never stop peering at me via the cameras, commenting on my tiniest gesture, dissecting my every insignificant word. The thought makes my belly clench until I feel sick. I hate this feeling of senseless hesitation, this unbearable doubt that pours into my veins like a poison, that transforms the normal anxiety of my departure into something more profound, more dangerous . . .

(Could Léo, the Determinator, have broken down? hisses a little voice in my head. Or has she only just realised the incredibly stupid thing she's doing?)

Serena McBee appears all of a sudden on the rostrum, tall and slender in her grey suit in the Genesis colours, at the neckline of which swish the frills of an elegant white silk blouse that is as dazzling as her smile. Gossiping tongues say this smile is frozen on by now, because Serena is so botoxed that she can't manage very much expression; but I know that's not true, that under the bob of impeccably cut silvery hair, Serena's smooth face is simply the reflection of a deep inner tranquillity. Every time I see those huge water-green eyes, calm like the surface of a lake, the magic works. I feel the knot in my stomach relax. I seem to hear Serena's peaceful, level voice: *What doesn't kill us makes us stronger*. That's what she's always said to us, right the way through our preparation, to help us whenever we were a bit down.

'Good morning, my dear Gordon; good morning, ladies and gentlemen of the media; good morning to all of you who at this moment are watching us from the four corners of the globe,' she announces, gracefully straightening the collar of her suit, adorned with a delicate silver brooch in the shape of a bee. 'And finally good morning to you, my very dear contestants! Seeing you now looking so wonderful, so radiant, I can't help thinking back to what you were barely a year ago . . . Unpolished gems. And today you are perfectly shaped to suit the mission that awaits you. If only you knew how proud I am of you!'

In the eyes of the general public, Serena McBee is the undisputed queen of male-female relations, a Stanford-trained psychiatrist who for twenty years has produced and fronted one of the most watched talk shows in the United States, *The Professor Serena McBee Consultation*, onto which she invites

celebrities and their partners – a kind of couples therapy with live hypnosis session, her speciality. Atlas has given her carte blanche to stage the Martian mission; while Director Lock supervises the technical aspects, the show itself is in her charge, start to finish.

But to me and the other girls standing up against the curtain, Serena McBee is much more than the executive producer of the Genesis programme. She is the fairy godmother who has chosen us to go to Mars. She is the lucky star without whom our dream would never be realised. She is the good stepmother who saw I could do something with my life other than preparing dog-food at the Eden Food France factory: Serena managed to achieve the magic trick of transforming this Winalot Cinderella into an outer-space princess.

'Six girls on one side. Six boys on the other. Six minutes to meet. An eternity to love,' she reminds the spectators. 'We received more than eighty million applications for this mission, and that alone would make it a huge success! Today I must say thank you from the bottom of my heart to all those who sent in their application forms. I would like to tell them that they shouldn't have any regrets if they haven't been accepted on this occasion; they might be a part of the next rocket in two years' time. And I'd like to explain to them how we reached our final selection. You see, for a long time, those in charge of preserving the NASA flame and the other space programmes were making a mistake. They thought what they needed to do was send robust couples to space, couples whose relationships had been tested over years of living together. They were wrong. Already-formed couples have less chance of surviving the isolation of space

and the prospect of never again returning to the planet where they have their memories, their lives, their families. With this in mind, the preparatory psychological studies we carried out during the selection process led us to select young men and women with the fewest attachments possible: orphans and those with no families. It is because their love *will be born* in space that it will be able to survive in their new world! It is because they have nothing to regret on Earth that they have everything to hope for on Mars! Our fortunate volunteers, all of them young adults or emancipated minors, will go through the interplanetary transfer side by side, the *Cupido* split into two hermetic sections. Each day of the week, for a little over five months, one participant will be able to invite a passenger of the opposite sex of his or her choosing for six minutes of one-on-one speed-dating in the *Visiting Room* located where the boys' compartment meets the girls' –'

'With no touching allowed,' interrupts Director Lock, waving his index finger at the cameras. 'The Genesis programme is also an entertainment programme, and it's rated U for a family audience!'

'You needn't worry, my dear Gordon. A reinforced glass screen separates the *Visiting Room* into two sections: our lovebirds will only be able to touch each other with their eyes. Every Sunday, they will draw up their *Heart List*, a ranking that you will be able to follow in real time on the Genesis channel, dear viewers, until the craft comes into alignment with the orbit of Phobos, on Sunday 10 December, by which time each will have chosen his or her partner. That very day, the couples will come down to land on Mars, where they will

be officially married. Don't forget! Throughout the journey you will be able to pledge gifts by dialling the number that's up on your screen right now, to increase your favourite participant's *Dowry*. The money collected will allow them to acquire by auction the equipment that NASA has been leaving on Mars over these past years. Since the base was purchased, we have baptised it *New Eden*, as it will welcome these Adams and Eves to a new paradise!

'And might I remind you, my dear viewers, that the more credits a participant has in their Dowry, the more comfortable the life they'll be able to live with their future spouse: they will live in a larger habitat among the six available *Love Nests*, with the seventh Nest acting as an emergency back-up module; they will have more food to consume; they will benefit from a more complete survival kit. And of course, it isn't impossible that your gifts might have an effect on the rankings . . . Somebody wealthier is always more seductive, as money goes hand in hand with love, as it always has done. And so we're counting on you . . . or rather, our twelve contestants are counting on you!'

Serena pauses.

She puts her hands with their polished nails onto the rim of the lectern and inhales deeply, sweeping the audience with her water-green eyes.

'And now, the big moment has arrived! Right now they are still strangers, but they are destined to be the most legendary lovers of all time . . . They won't see each other until they are in space, but now is the moment they will hear one another's voices for the first time . . . I'm so excited for them, and I'm sure you are too. Director Lock, over to you!'

The jingle of the Genesis programme rings out from the speakers. It's the chorus of '*Cosmic Love*', the duet performed at the organisers' request by two great international stars, the Canadian Jimmy Giant and the American Stella Magnifica. For a few moments, the bass makes the whole height of the curtain tremble. I know it's a stupid thing to say, especially as the lyrics are pretty dumb, but I do get chills when I hear this song that's been specially composed for us – and partly for me. I imagine this is what football players feel when the national anthem comes on; except that I'm not a stadium goddess, just a little orphan who can't believe where she's standing. I've practically got tears in my eyes from these emotional rollercoasters – first going pale with nerves, then feeling like I'll burst from doubt, and now practically crying out from sheer delight.

Him: *You sky-rocketed my life*

Her: *You taught me how to fly*

Him: *Higher than the clouds*

Her: *Higher than the stars*

Both: *Nothing can stop our cosmic love*

Our cosmic love

Our co-o-osmic lo-o-o-ove!

The music stops abruptly to give way to a pre-recorded drum-roll.

I feel my heart leap in my chest, echoing the last *boom!* – this is it, the final stretch!

2. Reverse Shot

*Launch platform, Cape Canaveral Air Base
Sunday 2 July, 12:30pm*

The enormous backs of Gordon Lock and Serena McBee rise up opposite the six young women and young men holding their breath on either side of the curtain, tiny silhouettes buttoned into their white suits, carefully lined up like tin cans in a bowling alley.

There is a monitor set into the base of the lectern, which is visible only to the speakers.

The words of the speech scroll up the prompter as Gordon Lock utters them.

'It now falls to me to ask each participant to reaffirm their commitment, solemnly, one final time.'

Gordon Lock's hands are clutching the edge of the lectern.

A drop of sweat runs down his brow and splashes onto the screen, obscuring the words 'one final time'.

3. Shot

D -30 mins.

I've always told myself that I would never have any reason to care, no interest in knowing who might be behind the curtain. I've always told myself that this whole 'perfect couple' story is just a bit of sentimentality to give the masses something to dream about, that Mars was the only thing that mattered. And most of all, I've always sworn that I wouldn't allow myself to get carried away by the hysteria of the game, that I'd go through it at as much distance as I could, sticking to my own rules. But now that the moment has come, I can't take my eyes off the stupid piece of fabric hanging between me and my future.

And what if there isn't a boy I like?

(And what if there isn't one who likes you, what then?)

And yet I'll have to end up with one of them. Sleep with him. Carry his children. This dizzying sequence of thoughts makes my head spin like it did my first time in the centrifuge.

At that moment I feel Kris's hand tighten around mine.

Is she really expecting to meet the man of her life? She's

spent every evening of our year in training with her nose in the romantic novels she so loves – it's her little weakness – imagining which of the heroes the boy she'd end up marrying would look like.

I keep my eyes riveted on the curtain.

I don't dare look at Kris for fear that she'll read the concern on my face, me who's supposed to be She-Who-Never-Doubts.

Director Lock turns towards the side of the curtain that remains invisible to us and leans into his microphone.

'Tao, eighteen years old, a citizen of the People's Republic of China, sponsored by the Huoma automobile construction company, Engineering Officer: do you agree to represent humanity on Mars from this day forth until the last day of your life?'

A booming 'I accept' resounds from behind the curtain. At once my brain gets carried away, trying to envisage the person who could have given out such a war cry.

Tall . . . deep voice . . . no hesitation . . . no regret . . .

But Director Lock is already turning to the first girl in our line-up.

'Fangfang, twenty years old, a citizen of the Republic of Singapore, sponsored by the Croesus Business Bank, Planetology Officer: do you agree to represent humanity on Mars from this day forth until the last day of your life?'

'I accept!' cries Fangfang, straightening her square glasses over her perfectly plucked eyebrows.

She puffs out her chest, as if better to exhibit the Croesus logo on her suit, sewn in Latin letters paired with Chinese ideograms. Always at her best, Fangfang, the eldest of us,



the voice of reason whose steadfastness and seriousness I so admire.

I'd really like to be calm like her right now, but my heart is still racing in my chest.

'Alexei, eighteen years old, a citizen of the Russian Federation, sponsored by the Ural Gas Company, Medical Officer: do you agree to represent humanity on Mars from this day forth until the last day of your life?'

'I accept!'

The dumbest thoughts, worthy of a twelve-year-old kid, burst from my mind like meteors: Does he like vodka? Does he wear a fur hat? Russia has often been an ally of France, if I remember right from my distant history lessons; might that perhaps be an excuse for some bilateral reconciliation?

'Kirsten, eighteen years old, a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany, sponsored by Apotech Laboratories, Biology Officer: do you agree to represent humanity on Mars from this day forth until the last day of your life?'

Kris's 'I accept!' wakes me like a rifle shot – distinct, powerful, with no reservations and no echo but the crackling of the flashes and the trembling of the red roses in the large vases arranged at the foot of the rostrum.

The director pivots once again, like an unstoppable metronome. He addresses the most junior members of the team: Kenji, representing Japan, financed by Dojo Video Games, and then Safia, the Indian ward supported by Karmaphone telephone manufacturer. She speaks her vow with the same sweetness she brings to everything. I stare at the serene expression on her face, searching in vain for a reflection

of my own agitation. My eyes come to rest on the red dot that decorates her forehead, a third eye in accordance with her religion – this morning it can't help but make me think of the planet Mars, the un-lidded eye watching me from the depths of space, waiting for my turn to come.

(You shouldn't be going, Léonor . . . rustles the little voice, like a breath of air under a poorly sealed door. It'll be the worst decision of your whole existence; you already have your suspicions as to why . . .)

I barely hear the director calling on the fourth boy, Mozart from Brazil, eighteen years old, sponsored by the Brazimo construction company; now there's only this voice inside me, speaking ever louder.

(The scent of roses in your nostrils, that's the last time you're ever going to breathe that . . . the caress of the warm wind on your forehead, that's the last time you're going to feel that . . .)

'Elizabeth, eighteen years old, citizen of the United Kingdom, sponsored by Walter and Seel insurance, Engineering Officer . . .'

Liz, in turn, accepts, revealing a row of dazzling teeth worthy of a toothpaste ad, just as perfect as her straight nose, her high cheekbones, her endless neck emphasised by the ballerina bun on her head. Such class, seriously, and never an ounce of doubt.

During all this time, that infernal tune never stops sounding in my head, like a scratched record.

(The sparkle of the sea, down there at the bottom of Cape Canaveral, that's the last time you're going to see that . . . But the people on Earth, they're going to be seeing you from every possible angle until the last day of your life!)

I chew the inside of my cheeks to silence this voice that is filling me with doubt just when I'm supposed to be a rock of certainty – the voice that the psychological tests were never able to detect or I never would have been selected. It comes from somewhere far away, from my past . . . It comes from somewhere so close, right behind me . . . It's always been there, crouched at the back of my neck, waiting till it's too late – because it is too late, isn't it, too late to go back . . . ?

D -24 mins.

'Samson, eighteen years old, a citizen of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, sponsored by the Petrolus oil company, Biology Officer . . .'

The pain of my teeth chewing into my cheeks muffles everything.

D -23 mins.

'Kelly, nineteen years old, a citizen of Canada, sponsored by Croiseur, the producers of transportation equipment, Navigation Officer . . .'

The warm blood runs onto my tongue. I know that the metallic taste of haemoglobin comes from the iron it contains; after all, I'm the head nurse on the girls' team. But at the same time, I can't get the sticky idea out of my head that it's also the taste of the iron-rich surface of Mars, that screwed-up dead world where nothing grows and nothing lives.

D -22 mins.

‘Marcus, nineteen years old, a citizen of the United States of America, sponsored by the Eden Food International food processing group, Planetology Officer . . .’

At the mention of Eden Food, memories of the factory flash instantly back to me, especially of my few friends there, who I’m never going to see again – just think, if somebody had ever told me that the name of my old employer would make me nostalgic!

D -21 mins.

‘Léonor, eighteen years old, a citizen of the French Republic, sponsored by Rosier & Merceaugnac luxury house of cosmetics, liqueurs, fashion and jewellery, Medical Officer: do you agree to represent humanity on Mars from this day forth until the last day of your life?’

At the exact moment Director Lock speaks this last word, *life*, I feel something go click inside me.

It *isn’t* too late.

There’s still time to refuse. It’s my choice, my final freedom, and nothing and no one can take it away from me – not the year of training, not the dozens of contracts I’ve signed, not the legions of viewers lurking in wait like so many moray eels behind their screens for the twenty-three weeks ahead.

(Refuse . . . hisses the little voice sweetly into my ear. You know you’re not made for this mission, with what you’ve got to hide. You know if you take off with the others, you’ll suffer as nobody has ever suffered before. Refuse now . . .)

It is as sweet as a caress.

Sugared like a promise.

Almost friendly.

(They'll bring you down off the platform. You'll lose the limelight, the glory, the infinity of space, to return to the shadows, to anonymity, to the tins of mass-produced dog-food, to that narrow little world of Earth without adventure, without cameras . . . without pain.)

I can still say 'no'.

It would be crazy, the furthest extreme of sheer madness, but it's possible, it's entirely possible!

I just need an insane burst of courage to get it out, that nothing little word, that tiny syllable, when the whole world is waiting for me to say 'yes'. As for Serena who believed in me so strongly, who was ready to bet on an orphan girl nobody wanted . . . She'll understand. She has always understood me and stayed with me, right from the start, whatever my choices.

'Well then, Léonor,' crackles the voice of Director Lock, 'I'm waiting for your answer. The boys are waiting for your answer. The whole of Earth is hanging on your lips . . .'

I raise my head slightly.

Every camera is trained on me.

On the two giant screens standing above our side of the platform, my face is reproduced twice, two mutinous faces riddled with freckles, framed by untameable curls the colour of flames. In that close-up I can see every speck of the Rosier powder the make-up women have covered me with to try to mask the freckles that consume my skin, in vain.

'I refuse,' I breathe out.

'Léo!'



Kris's hand, which has been in mine this whole time, clenches like a vice.

I look towards her. Her face, with skin so perfect it doesn't need any make-up, has lost its angelic beauty. Under her delicately curled blonde hair, which we both spent hours preparing for the launch ceremony, there's the devastation of a battlefield, trembling in agitation.

'You can't do this to me,' she whispers, her eyes shining with tears. 'You can't abandon me, not now!'

All the way up on the rostrum, Director Lock gives a little cough into his mic.

'Young ladies, this is not the moment for whispering. May I remind you that the launcher takes off in exactly twenty minutes?'

'They didn't hear you!' Kris continues to beg in a thin voice taut with emotion. 'Nobody heard you but me. Don't throw it all away; you've always said you were going to be the first person to draw the Martian landscapes! Tell them you accept. Oh, tell them, Léo, I'm begging you. Tell them for yourself . . . for me.'

I gulp.

There is no longer a little voice behind my head, no more knees quaking like jelly.

The moment when I could have changed my destiny has passed. The Determinator has had a small temporary misfire, but it's now fully functional once again.

Because if there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that, for me, Kris is the closest thing I've got to a family. Not the one who threw me away as though I were a piece of trash, not them,



but the one who welcomed me with open arms the very first day we met.

‘I accept, of course . . . !’ I shout, spitting bloodily in front of the entire world. ‘I said I accept!’

4. Reverse Shot

*Launch platform, Cape Canaveral Air Base
Sunday 2 July, 1:05pm*

'The transit phase of the Genesis programme may now officially begin!' Gordon Lock declares.


No sooner has he spoken these words than some of the spectators race towards the stairs, launching themselves at the platform.

The Genesis programme jingle starts to play in a loop in the speakers and mixes with the throat-grazing yells of the journalists calling out the astronauts' names. While the security guards escort the participants at a run towards the launcher, the director's hand closes around the sleeve of the psychiatrist's suit, below the lectern.

Discreetly.

Firmly.

'She hesitated,' he whispers in her ear in a voice that no longer has any warmth in it. 'The last girl. She hesitated, right there on the launch platform, I'm sure of it. I had a sense that she was going to do an about-turn . . . or worse. I'm warning you, Serena: if that girl ever suspects anything . . .'



‘She doesn’t suspect a thing,’ replies Serena McBee drily, pulling her arm free. ‘They have no idea what awaits them, none of them, any more than the dozens of journalists bombarding them, the hundreds of engineers surrounding them or the millions of viewers watching them. They have no idea at all.’