

THE CENTAURI SURVIVORS

(Original first chapter)

By

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Author's note

If there was ever a “director’s cut” of *The Centauri Survivors*, this chapter would be in it. For most of the development of the book this was the first chapter, describing the discovery and betrayal, that would set in motion all of the action for the rest of the story, played out in the century after these events occur.

I am delighted to be able to share this chapter with you now as an insight into how it all began, and a taster of what’s in store for the *Centauri Survivors*.

*European Extremely Large Telescope
(E-ELT)
Atacama Desert, Chile
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Marcel Dillon looked down from the summit of Cerro Armazones and thought about how he was going to betray his colleagues.

Behind him, the dark wings of the telescope's dome were open, exposing it to the stars. In his hands, Dillon cupped the steel flask of hot coffee, and he shivered as the wind cut through the material of his jacket. He looked over his shoulder, but no one had followed him out. The concourse in front of the observatory was bare apart from the squat mass of the old Land Rover Discovery, which sat waiting to take them back down to civilisation. In front of him, the arid slope of the mountain swept away into darkness.

He looked up through the bitter, clear air to the starlit trail of matter that made up the local arm of the Milky Way.

My God, he thought, we must go there, we must.

He glanced behind himself again and spoke out loud, indulging in the solitude.

"We are coming. We will build ships and we will cross the void; we will find a new home amongst the stars, we will engage with whatever, and whoever is out there, and..."

And what? He thought, what exactly will we do? Offer friendship, or trade, or war? Which version of ourselves will we take to the stars?

But he knew the answer to that question already. Humanity would arrive with every version of itself, for how could it be otherwise? We will come as guests, tourists, and invaders.

A distant whine of metal grabbed his attention, and he spun around to see his colleague, Alain, silhouetted against the light of the observatory entrance.

“Marcel! Quick, get in here!”

He flicked the remaining coffee across the gravel and ran back up the incline.

“What, what’s happened?” he shouted, but Alain had already retreated into the warmth of the control complex.

Maybe they’d seen something in the astronomical data, some pattern or insight, or perhaps the old lady had had an accident.

The ‘old lady’ in question was their Project Leader, Dr Zera North. Marcel respected Dr North and was even fond of her despite her abrupt manner, and for this and many other reasons, he hoped it was data. Of course, if any of them really did have an accident up here, they’d have to wait hours for any medical support to arrive.

He ran across the concourse and through the open door into the complex, tossing his coat on the floor before he jogged up to the control room.

Alain stood at one of the desks, moving from one foot to the other in that way he always did when he thought they’d found something significant. Dr North was next to him, hunched behind a bank of screens. Marcel could hear that necklace of large yellow beads clacking over the top of her fleece jacket.

He realised it was the data after all and slowed down to a walk.

“Marcel, come, come, we need you!” Dr North beckoned to him, “bring your brain please.” That was a favourite phrase of hers, it meant she wanted him to think hard about what she was about to show him. She eased herself away from the desk so he could pull up a chair and look for himself.

He stole a glance at Alain, but his colleague gave nothing away, simply nodding towards the papers on the table and the rows of numbers in front of them. Marcel placed the empty flask on the desk and sat down.

“Okay,” he said, “what have we got.”

Neither of the other two said anything.

The screens in front of him showed data on their target from a variety of different sources, like the same image observed by different CCTV cameras. There were their own data, images enhanced with the E-ELT’s own Adaptive Optics, and data from other telescopes, including the James Webb Space finally launched just two years ago, and now orbiting one and a half million kilometres above them.

All of this data related to one object, a planet they knew existed, but which was still only a rock of unknown composition. Their task had been to unpick the data and discover the cocktail of elements in the planet’s atmosphere, and make a more accurate assessment of its size, and mass. The answer to these questions would provide the answer to the question, that the world always asked.

Really, it was two questions: ‘is it habitable?’ And, ‘is there life there?’

Marcel looked at the screens, and then up at his colleagues. They’d seen

something, and they wanted him to see it too.

“What does the inference software say?” he said, “come on, you guys have been looking at this more than I have.”

“Never mind the software,” said Dr North, pushing her wire-frame spectacles back up her nose, “don’t hide behind the machines, Dr Dillon, I want to know what you think. Behave like a proper scientist: look at the data and give me your opinion.”

He turned back to the screens and started to draw the disparate information together for himself.

“Oh, come on,” said Alain after a moment, “you’ve only got to look at it for a few seconds to see...”

Dr North raised a finger to silence him, “hush!”
She turned to Marcel.

“Pay no attention to our colleague here, he would have us on the talk shows every month with a new planet.”

Alain muttered something and then paced away. Marcel watched him for a moment and then turned back to the screens. The mass of steel and glass above them creaked and moaned as the wind gusted across the infrastructure.

The object of their fascination was a planet orbiting the star Alpha Centauri ‘B’, a mere four light years away. With its companion stars, Centauri ‘A’ and Proxima Centauri, this cluster was our closest stellar neighbour. The team had spent months gathering and collating the data, and Marcel knew only too well there was more than just academic interest in this project. If this data confirmed the potential of this planet, another home for humanity

might just be within our reach; and before the night was over, he would have to go back out into the frosty air and make a phone call.

He turned back to the numbers.

“What are you saying to me?” he whispered under his breath as he scanned the data. Dr North seemed convinced that this was a very special planet, the one, but they had to be cautious. There’d been too many false alarms in the past.

They were looking for a very special planet. Not a lumbering gas giant, like Saturn or Jupiter, easy to pick out amongst the observatory readings; and not a hard-baked lump of rock, like Mercury, scorched and lifeless. What they were looking for was something much harder to find, much more elusive. A place that could breathe; a warm, wet planet that could cradle life itself. This place wouldn’t be too hot or too cold, in fact, it would be just right, like the story of the girl who ate the baby bear’s porridge because it was at the perfect temperature. No wonder they called them Goldilocks planets.

Alain, who had been pacing around the control room, came back to the desk.

“Well?” he said.

“Give me a chance!” snapped Marcel.

“Come, Alain,” said Dr North, “we shall make tea. We must leave Marcel to the business of seeing, or not seeing, what you and I have seen.”

Marcel listened to the clump of boots as the two of them walked across the room and out towards the facility’s small galley kitchen. He breathed deeply and rubbed his eyes. His neck ached, and he felt light-headed, dizzy. He was never entirely comfortable with the effects of the altitude

and he could feel them now. Somewhere, far away, he could hear the clatter of cups, the cadence of Alain's voice.

"Ok," he whispered, turning back to the screens, "show me who you are."

He scrolled through the numbers and studied the images, cross-checking the different observations. As the minutes passed, he forgot about his colleagues and lost himself in the data.

And gradually it emerges right before him. Like a whisper amidst the noise of all the numbers. It is the nature of the prey that it would hide itself, and he knows that if he looks at one data point, he will miss it, even three or four won't flush it out; but if he takes all of it together, it is there: mass and temperature, oxygen, carbon dioxide, and even water. It's all there.

Marcel shut his eyes and the rows of numbers floated across his eyelids. He didn't want to believe it; and not just because he didn't want to be disappointed again. He realised now how scared he was of making the call, of committing to an opinion.

He wanted to tell them they were wrong. He wanted the data to be inconclusive, vague; he wanted to hide in the reassurance of caution, to press for more months of observations, data gathering. But there was Dr North's voice again:

"Don't hide behind the machines, Marcel."

And he knew that he couldn't hide anymore. The numbers refused to contradict themselves; they did not offer the comfort of uncertainty. This planet wasn't a burning rock or a gassy wasteland, this planet really was just right.

He paused outside the door of the kitchen, listening to the muffled voices.

“No Alain,” Dr North’s voice, adamant, “no, no, no. He will see it. I know he’s cautious and God knows we need some of that, but he will believe.”

The beads clacked again.

“But he is so measured,” said Alain, “so careful, I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, I am more cautious than you think I am. But he won’t know how to say ‘yes’ even if he believes it.”

“His caution has probably saved us several embarrassing moments,” said Dr North, “you remember that data we had six months ago? We would have had some explaining to do if...”

Marcel put his hand on the metal door handle and then pushed sharply. The steamy warmth of the galley kitchen flowed out into the corridor, the smell of coffee and microwaved snacks.

They both turned to look at him. Dr North peered over her spectacles and Alain arched his eyebrows, asking the unspoken question. Marcel looked from one to the other, and the coffee machine released a breathy hiss as liquid struck the hotplate.

“This is it,” he whispered, “this is the one.”

Alain fist-pumped the air, “yes! This one even passes the Marcel test.”

Dr North let out a deep sigh and rested a hand against the galley counter.

“Are you okay Doc?” asked Alain.

“Yes, yes, of course,” she said, raising a hand. “Now I believe that we have a bottle of something hidden away for just this moment. Why don’t

one of you go find it?"

She turned and walked out of the galley and back into the observatory.

"We've found it," whispered Alain, "this really is it; this is the mother lode."

"Maybe they'll name it after her," said Marcel, "they could at least give her that after all these years."

Alain snorted. "That sort of thing always gets carved up by the politicians and financiers. Someone will have paid to sponsor this planet before the week is out."

"I'll get that bottle," said Marcel, "I'll take it outside for a few minutes to make sure it's chilled."

He turned to the door

"Hey, Marcel," said Alain.

"What?"

"It's ours as well, you know. The old lady wouldn't deny us that. We did this, you and me."

Marcel smiled briefly and headed off to one of the storerooms.

Leaving the control room, he walked to the other end of the facility, to the storeroom where they kept all the mundane supplies for the E-ELT staff: coffee and tea, napkins and toilet rolls, paper and ink for the printers.

Marcel opened the door and snapped on the light. It buzzed for a second before fully coming on, illuminating the racks. Behind the packets and boxes, hidden out of site and in direct violation of the observatory

regulations, they'd hidden a bottle of 1928 Krug that Dr North had quietly brought up to the summit months ago.

"Astonishingly expensive champagne," she had said, cradling the bottle, "to mark an astonishingly important event."

It had been a gesture of defiance during a particularly trying time for the team. Marcel and Alain had spent weeks staring at what amounted to celestial noise, while Dr North had gone into battle with the board about their next round of funding.

He rummaged around at the back of the store and there it was, propped up at the back of a cupboard behind some bottles of antibacterial soap. There were no glasses but that didn't matter, rinsed coffee mugs would serve well enough.

Marcel picked up the bottle and walked back out into the corridor, scooping up his jacket as he went. No one saw him as he turned away from the control room and towards one of the other exits. He closed up the Velcro on his jacket and carefully, gently, opened the door, easing his way out into the cold air.

The wind had picked up. It whipped at the lapels of his jacket and burned his nose and ears. He tucked the bottle under his arm and started walking.

For a moment he forgot what he needed to do, why he was out here. The sparse, clear air could make anyone forgetful; it was a hazard of working at these heights, and it seemed to affect him more than it did his colleagues. He paused and frowned, and then he composed himself and started hurrying across the concourse to the edge of the plateau.

When he was about one hundred metres away, he gently laid the bottle on the cold gravel at his feet and looked up again, following the direction of the great telescope, up towards Centauri 'B' and its warm, precious planet.

“Okay,” he said to himself, “let’s do this.”

He moved on further, to where the rim of the plateau fell away to the slopes below and dug out the phone, they’d given him. It had just one number on it. He blinked the water from his eyes, turned the volume up as high as it would go, and called the number.

“Yes?” a woman’s voice, faint in the wind, another accent in another country.

“This is Marcel Dillon,” he whispered.

“Who?”

“Dr Marcel Dillon,” he spoke more loudly now, and glanced behind himself; “from the observatory.”

For a moment there was nothing but the buffeting of the wind, and the dark grey shapes of the rocks below. Was he right about this? It would be a disaster for him if this turned out to be another false alarm.

The woman’s voice grabbed his attention: commanding, confident.

“Marcel; what news do you have for us?”

“We think this is it.” His voice sounded small and desperate on the wind.

“This planet is the one.”

“The Centauri ‘B’ candidate?”

“Yes,”

“Please hold on.”

Again, the phone went silent; he glanced at the screen to make sure he was still on the call.

“Come on,” he whispered to himself, “let’s get this over with.”

“Dr Dillon.”

The voice made him jump.

“Yes!” he said

“This is Callum Mortis.”

Marcel had not expected to speak to the man himself.

“Mr Mortis.”

“Yes well, what have you got for me?” said Mortis.

“Well,” said Marcel, “as you know we’ve been studying the data for the candidate planet around Alpha Centauri ‘B’ and the...”

“You need to speak up,” interrupted Mortis, “you sound like you are standing in a wind tunnel.”

“I needed to leave the observatory to make this call, Mr Mortis,” he shouted, “the weather up here is...”

“Just speak up and tell me what you have found.”

The voice made Marcel wince.

“This could be your candidate planet,” he said, “the mass spectroscopy

readings are well, phenomenal, and as you know, the candidate is right in the middle of the habitable zone, two natural satellites, I can..."

"What does Dr North think?" interrupted Mortis, "and that other guy; Albert, is

it?"

"Alain. They're convinced. Dr North is preparing a statement on behalf of the project."

"And what do you think?"

This was it, the end of any wriggle room he might have had. Marcel glanced back to the building, half expecting to see his colleagues standing there staring at him. "I think it's compelling, Mr Mortis," he said at last, "although there will need to be more observations, further analysis of the data..."

"Stop," said Mortis.

There was silence for a moment while Marcel waited, listening the howl of the surrounding air.

"What do you think Dr Dillon, is this it, yes or no?"

"Well, the data are extraordinary, there's..."

"I said yes or no," shouted Mortis, "YES or NO."

"Yes," squeaked Marcel, "I'm sorry, yes, if I had to make that call, I would say yes, this is the planet you've been looking for."

The phone was silent again, and he glanced at the screen again.

“Send me a report, a summary, within the next four hours, do you understand?” said Mortis.

“Yes,” said Marcel, “but I must be careful, my colleagues will be watching me. There’s only three of us up here and, there’s nowhere to hide.”

Somewhere in the middle of the sentence, he realised he was talking to thin air. Mortis had gone, rung off, he was alone.

Marcel Dillon’s face tingled, and his nose started to run. He turned back towards the observatory and started walking.

He was, he realised, bought and paid for. He’d breached his contract sharing this news before the official announcement, and he’d deceived his colleagues; now he could only pretend to share in their joy, knowing he’d betrayed them.

He pushed the feelings of shame down and thought about why he had taken this risk. He thought about the money he would receive for passing on this information. Quite a lot of money in fact, and he could do so many things with it. He’d given the first payment to his parents, lying to them about getting a bonus. They didn’t have a clue how poor a postdoc researcher’s life really was. He’d paid for them to have a holiday, and that had felt good. Then the next payment came, and he quickly acquired a taste for the life: the Mercedes he wouldn’t otherwise have been able to afford, the skiing trip to Aspen with his new girlfriend, Anya.

But he was Mortis’s man now, and he always would be.

He was almost back at the door when he stopped, turned around, facing

into the wind again, and went back to retrieve the bottle he'd left on the icy gravel.

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