

Lost Souls

Book One of the Disciples
of Cassini Trilogy

Penny de Byl

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Prologue



David Layton watched helplessly as the pavement suddenly came up to meet his nose, hard.

“Arsehole,” he shouted at the inconsiderate cyclist who had sideswiped him and quickly rode off into the distance. David picked himself up, screwing up his nose as he brushed off the remainder of his hotdog, now decorating the front of his shirt. He felt a warm sensation on his top lip. Wiping it away with his wrist, he discovered he had a minor nosebleed.

No consideration . . . some people, he thought to himself. He looked around the lunchtime bustle in Melbourne’s Treasury Park. No one was sympathetic or concerned about his predicament. Regarding

his watch, he realized there was only ten minutes before he had to be back at school. There was no time to run home for a new shirt. Deflated, he started back for work, cautiously walking to one side of the footpath.

All of a sudden, he felt a shiver, although it was a perfectly sunny spring day. He dismissed it as a shock from his recent ordeal. But then he felt faint. Lightheaded and dizzy, he made a beeline for the closest park bench. Bent over with his head between his knees, he got the strangest feeling that he was being pulled upward. Soon he could see himself keeled over on the bench, from above, as though he was floating. The very idea that this could be an out-of-body experience barely had time to make its way into his mind when there was a bright flash and everything went black.

David Layton's body slumped forward. Limp and lifeless, it toppled off the seat. Copious amounts of a viscous clear fluid began flowing from his open mouth onto the dirt.

*

Detective Inspector Zoe Moore flashed her ID card as she entered the morgue. She caught a glimpse of her dark Jamaican features in the glass doors as she entered. *Damn . . . lipstick*, she thought. Her morning schedule had been interrupted by the call from Superintendent Story, insisting she take on a new case.

Pathological cause of death was one of Zoe's least favorite topics. It became worse, as part of her job, when the pathologist was Professor Durant. Durant was sixty-seven. Zoe was thirty-five. It wasn't the age gap that Zoe blamed for her aversion toward him, but rather the way he tended to waffle on in great detail. All Zoe wanted was a short list of dot-pointed facts and to get on with her day. Having to consult Professor Durant, she knew this was not going to happen anytime soon.

"My dear, I've been expecting you." The professor grinned. He was working behind a large viewing lens positioned above a naked female body. He came around the operating table and offered his hand to her. Zoe couldn't fathom how anyone could spend so much time in the company of soulless cadavers. The very smell of death made her want to throw up.

"Hello, Professor. I'm here for the results on David Layton," she said, gingerly shaking his hand, knowing full well where it had been.

“Of course, of course,” he began. “A very puzzling case indeed.” He looked at her over the rim of his glasses, ushering her to another table. “I think this one will fascinate even you.”

“Oh? So he didn’t just choke on his lunch?” she enquired.

“Oh no, my dear. Quite the opposite.” He hesitated. “Though really it’s not the opposite at all. The opposite of choking would be not choking, I assume. Well, that much is true. I can categorically declare that he did not choke. But a cause of death is the opposite of choking . . .”

He paused in contemplation searching for some clever words. Zoe took the opportunity to interrupt.

“He didn’t choke? Suffocate? The paramedics at the scene were very certain . . .”

“Pithel. Paramedics. What would they know? They can’t see inside. They can’t analyze fluids. No, my dear, I’m afraid they wouldn’t have been able to ascertain what had happened to this poor guy, not just by looking at him.”

The professor folded back the shroud on the table to reveal the grayish-blue pallor torso of twenty-eight-year-old David Layton’s corpse. He signaled for Zoe to come over for a closer look and put his fingers into Mr. Layton’s mouth. He opened it, slightly feeling around for nothing in particular.

“No . . . no choking. No severe interalveolar edema or desquamated respiratory epithelium as we would usually see with asphyxiation. Also, the contusions on the face and nasal bleeding appear to be superficial and unrelated,” he offered.

Zoe had been to enough autopsies to know that suffocation victims presented with extreme fluid and skinning in the lungs. She also knew from interviewing witnesses in the park that David Layton’s facial injuries were the result of a preceding collision with a cyclist. The cyclist had not yet been identified.

Professor Durant continued, “When sudden death occurs in young adults, it usually turns out to be a congenital or acquired cardiovascular disease. However, my investigations have not discovered anything unusual. Neither can I find any symptoms to suggest—”

Zoe interrupted, “So, Professor, you know what didn’t kill him, but do you have any idea what did?”

“None,” replied the professor. “It’s like he was alive . . . and then he wasn’t.”

“What about the fluid found excreted from his mouth?” she queried, reading from her notes.

“A bit of a puzzle, I’m afraid,” the professor frowned.

Zoe was becoming irritated. She didn’t have time for the professor’s guessing games. All she wanted to know was the cause of death so she could hopefully close the case, given there were no unusual circumstances.

“What was the fluid?” Zoe asked in hope of prying more information from the professor.

He walked over to his computer and opened a file. He began reading from it.

“It’s 98.4 percent water, 0.6 percent salt, and 0.2 percent albumin.”

Zoe stood agape.

“Albumin? As in . . .”

“Yes,” replied the professor, “albumin as in the globular proteins found in amniotic fluid. And yes, my dear, it appears to be human.”

Chapter 1



Marcela Warrick stepped out of the taxi into the bright Australian sun, shielding her eyes. The summer weather in Sydney was a far cry from the freezing temperatures and knee-deep snow she had left some thirty-five hours earlier at London's Heathrow airport. There was a slight nip in the early morning air, but the direct sunlight was scathingly harsh. She paid the driver, a little Indian man, who hurried around to the rear of the car to get her luggage. As the taxi drove away, Marcela looked up at the impressive twenty-story building that was *Everjein Enterprises*, her new employers.

Marcela was an English rose in every sense of the word. She had a pale white complexion with short wispy dark-brown hair that fell freely across her face. The knee-high boots she was wearing heightened her

slender, petite build. These were boots she desperately wanted to dispense with, having only worn them, as they would have put her luggage allowance over the limit, a privilege for which the airline wanted to charge her an extra ninety pounds.

She teetered on her heels, struggling to drag her suitcase, hand luggage, and laptop bag to the entrance. As she looked up to locate the double sliding doors into the building, she noticed a well-dressed man grinning at her. His blue suit shone in the bright light, his eyes hidden by sunglasses, the type she recalled Tom Cruise wearing in the *Top Gun* movie. He had raven-black hair contrasted by a gorgeous white smile of almost perfect teeth. His lack of assistance began to annoy her.

“Thanks for the help,” she whispered sarcastically under her breath. Unfortunately, he had heard her. His smile widened as he raised his hand and waved it up high. Marcela was momentarily confused by his actions until she noticed he was waving in front of the door-opening sensor. The giant double doors quietly slid open.

“Thanks,” she offered with cynicism.

“Glad I could be of service,” he replied, his voice velvety smooth with only a hit of an Australian accent. He entered the doors in front of her, cutting her off and striding inside. She was left struggling with her luggage.

By the time she had regained her balance and composure, the doors had closed. Marcela found herself trying to jump and shake to get the sensor to notice her. The doors didn’t budge. As she was about to place the luggage on the ground to free up a waving arm, she felt the weight lifted from her laptop bag. Someone was removing it from her shoulder.

“Here, let me take that,” said a gentle European female voice.

Marcela gazed up to see a tall slim blonde smiling back at her, carrying the laptop bag. A small delicate crucifix hanging on a gold chain around her neck sparkled in the bright sunlight. It contrasted against the soft black of her fitted linen dress. Marcela identified her accent as Dutch. The beautiful stranger assisted her inside the building with her other baggage. They stopped at a small lounge area just in front of reception and placed the bags on a sofa.

“I’m Constans Rijnder.” The blonde offered her hand.

“Marcela Warrick.”

“Oh, you are English. Just arrived in Australia?” Constans asked.

“Yes,” Marcela replied. “And I’ve not slept in thirty-five hours.” She sighed.

“Sit down here and I’ll sign you in.” Constans beckoned Marcela. “Just wave and smile when I point at you,” she added as she walked over to the reception desk.

From the sofa, Marcela watched as Constans conversed with the young plump redheaded receptionist. As promised, Constans turned and pointed at Marcela. The girl stood up and followed Constans finger until she laid eyes on Marcela. Marcela smiled and waved at the receptionist. A nod of acknowledgement was exchanged among all three, and the redhead went to work on her computer. Constans stood at the reception desk, drumming her fingers. From where she sat, Marcela could just hear Constans long red nails as they came in contact with the black marble surface. Constans looked like something from the pages of Victoria’s secret. She had legs that went all the way up to her shoulders, long luxurious blonde hair, and a pout to die for.

Within moments, Constans was walking back over to Marcela with a name badge and security pass.

“Thank you so much,” said Marcela.

“Of course. Not a problem.” Constans smiled. “Come on, the briefing will be starting soon. I’ll show you where you can put your luggage.”

After Constans helped Marcela secure her luggage in a staff locker, the two took the elevator to the top floor of the building. Marcela stepped out into a glass-encased space. The room was full of people enjoying a magnificent view over the Sydney Opera House and Harbor. Constans smiled and gave a subtle giggle on seeing Marcela’s reaction to the vista.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” she said.

“Now this is a view I could get used to.”

“Not too much . . . I hope. We are leaving tomorrow,” Constans reminded her.

The people were standing, chatting in small groups and drinking coffee. Constans disappeared for a short while and returned to Marcela with a cup.

“Here. Looks like you need it.” Constans beamed.

Marcela smiled and nodded, taking the coffee. It was strong and bitter, like most conference coffee, but just what she needed. She drank slowly and savored the view. As she looked around the room, she noticed the arrogant so-and-so who had opened the entrance door for her. The sunglasses were gone. He was in the middle of a group and was the center of attention. He looked up briefly, long enough

for their eyes to meet. He paused his conversation momentarily, acknowledging her with a wink. She grimaced.

A young man and woman started making their way through the group, asking everyone to move into the seminar room. Marcela put her coffee cup on the nearest table and followed Constans. She realized she had no idea who Constans was. Feeling extremely jet-lagged and not knowing where she was meant to go, she thought sticking with Constans, someone who seemed to know what she was doing, was her best bet. The leggy blonde escorted Marcela into the seminar room.

As they entered, Marcela could see it was no usual seminar room. It was the size of the large lecture theaters she remembered from her undergraduate degree at the University of London. The room could easily hold a thousand people. The seats were in-the-round, with the stage down situated at the bottom-center. It was like the inside of a large cone. There was a single pedestal lectern on the stage. A chandelier of viewing screens hung from the ceiling.

Constans ushered Marcela down to the stage where there were several others milling about, including her arrogant, chivalry-less acquaintance. The other people started taking seats in the audience.

As they reached the stage, a familiar-looking, large, white-haired man in a gray suit and very bright green tie approached Marcela. He grabbed her hand tightly in a handshake. It shook her entire body.

“Dr. Marcela Warrick, Thomas Burlington,” he announced.

“Yes, of course.” Marcela remembered her new boss from their Skype conversations.

“So nice to meet you in person,” he said. “Sorry to throw you in the deep end with all this.” And before she could reply, he’d moved on to speak with the others on the stage.

“Come sit over here with me,” Constans beckoned.

She indicated to a section of chairs positioned at the front between the audience and the stage. They sat down and were soon joined by those who were standing on the stage. Thomas Burlington remained. Marcela had met him eighteen months ago when Everjein was advertising for new employees. He hadn’t appeared so big via Skype, though his big personality and booming voice had certainly given that impression. He must have been close to sixty-five. He was the founder and chief executive officer of the company.

The lights lowered in the audience area and a spotlight shone on the stage. The overhead screens came to life with a revolving three-dimensional version of the Everjein logo, a fern leaf encasing a

stylized version of the earth with three happy iconic people standing in the middle, holding hands.

“Welcome,” began Burlington, bellowing to the entire audience. The room instantly fell quiet. A skinny guy in jeans and a white shirt slinked onto the stage, trying not to appear obvious but failing miserably. He handed the big man a lapel microphone and a handheld clicker and backed off into the darkness. Burlington clipped the microphone onto his tie and tapped it to check if it was working.

“Welcome,” he started again, “to Everjein. Welcome to the beginning of your new life. You . . . are the future of the human race.” The audience applauded. Burlington pressed the clicker, and the screens were filled with an image of the world-famous physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking.

“The greatest mind the world has ever known, Professor Stephen Hawking, predicted the human race would become extinct in the next thousand years. Our world is so fragile that it will not continue to support the abuse of our species. If we want mankind to endure, we must find a way to live in space,” Burlington commenced dramatically. He paused, and the audience applauded their concurrence.

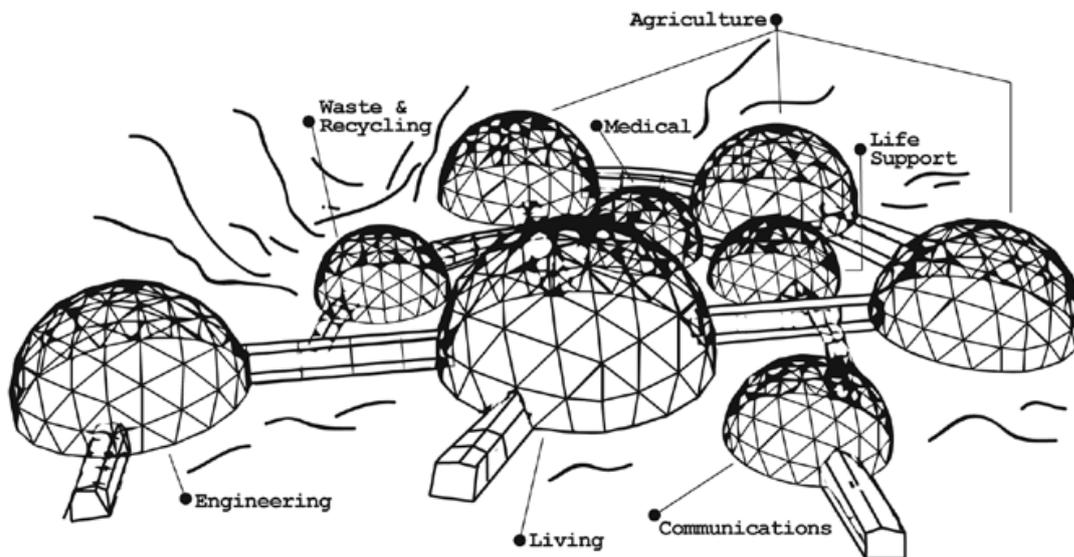
“And some thirty years later . . . finally . . . the governments of the world are responding. You have been called to duty. You have been selected because you are the best and the fittest. As you know, we are just one of five project teams vying for the contract and privilege to take humanity into the next millennium.”

This was Thomas Burlington and Everjein’s opportunity to be written into the history books. After thirty years of rapid global weather changes, mass-scale extinction of flora and fauna, widespread famine, and life threatening biological epidemics, the world powers had finally made the decision to act, not by throwing money at specific problems and advancing individual access to more technology but to admit these methods were not working and a new solution had to be found.

Despite the controversial and questionable experiments into self-contained and self-sufficient enclosed human habitats around the turn of the twenty-first century, the collective world leaders established a taskforce to investigate viable solutions for human habitats on other planets. The Unified Nations Extraterrestrial Biome Establishment Taskforce or UNEXBET was asking for tenders from international companies for the delivery of proven technology that could establish an off-world human colony. The tender was to include undisputable empirical evidence that the company could deliver a cost-effective,

safe, and self-sufficient habitat with its own biological system suitable for deployment to Saturn's largest moon, Saturn VI, better known as Titan. The first stage of the tender process was to establish a terrestrial version of the proposed infrastructure on Earth and run it successfully for five years under the watchful eye of UNEXBET.

Burlington pressed the clicker. The image on the screens changed to an aerial photograph of a snow-covered landscape. In the middle was a large structure consisting of a large central dome surrounded by eight smaller ones. They were positioned in two partial concentric circles around the central dome. The smaller domes were connected to the central one and other neighboring domes by tubes. The whole structure is nestled into the side of a mountain. Parts of the roof of the structure gleamed with the sun reflecting off a highly polished surface. Other parts were transparent. The skeleton of the structure was white and patterned the entire surface with triangles. Marcela was astonished by the sheer magnitude of the infrastructure. It had to be, at least, the size of six football fields.



“This is Biojein!” Burlington announced. He pronounced it as “biogene” such that it rhymed with Everjein. “It will be your home, in Antarctica, for the next five years. The exact location will not be disclosed for security reasons. It has been chosen by UNEXBET for its remoteness. It’s also one of the closest ecosystems we have on Earth anywhere near Titan’s environment.” The members of the audience swapped approving looks and nods with those around them. “And to tell you all about your new home, I’d like to introduce the man

who designed and built this little beauty, Lloyd Merrick!” Burlington indicated with an open palm to the man sitting on the other side of Constans. He stood up and made his way to the stage under a hail of applause.

Lloyd Merrick was thirty-five. He was of average height and build with curly thinning strawberry-blond, almost-ginger, hair and a thick but short beard and moustache. His heavy dark-rimmed glasses perfectly fitted the cliché of a scientist or mathematician. But in fact, Lloyd hadn’t actually completed his universities studies, opting instead to volunteer with some of the biggest architectural design companies in the world. Lloyd had inherited quite a substantial sum of money from his uncle when he was a teenager, though he didn’t dress like it, and had found life experience a far greater educator. Lloyd displayed little concern for his appearance in a red wooly jumper and 1980s bright blue jeans. Marcela thought he looked harmless enough but concluded the air-conditioning in his office must be awfully cold. She was expecting him to have a Scottish accent given his appearance and was surprised when he spoke instead with a thick Australian one.

“Hi, everyone,” Lloyd began, shyly waving at the audience, having been passed the lapel microphone and clicker from Burlington.

“As Mr. Burlington said, this will be your new home. Its nine geodesic domes are connected with air-locked tunnels. These domes”—he gestured up at the screens as he clicked to a close-up of the largest dome—“are the strongest, lightest, and most cost-effective way of enclosing a space. There are no interior walls . . . well, except in the bathrooms.” Lloyd sniggered. Some of the audience members joined him, mostly men. “Yes . . . well . . . as I was saying, it’s big, strong, and cheap to create. We’ve saved 38 percent on surface area materials compared with a rectangular structure to enclose the same space. The whole structure averages a construction material weight of 10 kilograms for each square meter of ground covered. After off-site prefabrication of the triangular sections, it took us five weeks to assemble. It’s also aerodynamic with a low drag coefficient and can therefore withstand wind strengths up to 160 kilometers per hour and 98 kilograms of snow per square meter.”

Lloyd paused for a while, looking up at the screen to admire his feat of engineering. He seemed lost in the moment for a second before snapping himself out of it. Pressing the clicker, he brought up an image of the interior. It was a blueprint of the cross-section of the dome, showing four levels. Each level appeared to be for different

purposes, displaying icons for beds, bathrooms, exercise equipment, a kitchen, and much more. The very top level that was directly under the roof of the dome and was twice the height of the other levels appeared to be filled with large trees and other vegetation.

“This is inside the biggest dome. It’s the living quarters. It’s one hundred meters in diameter and fifty meters tall from the center. There are three levels for sleeping, eating, and relaxation. At the very top is a rainforest parkland.”

A hand went up in the audience, and Lloyd acknowledged it.

“And you did all this in five weeks?” said a skeptical voice.

“Oh no,” Lloyd responded with a dismissive laugh. “We put the infrastructure up in five weeks. The furnishing and plants have been procured over the last two years. As I speak, the builders and decorators are finishing up.” He peered into the audience to gauge acceptance of his answer. With no resistance, he continued.

“The other eight domes are for”—he started to click through several images in quick succession as he explained them—“food production. There are three for this, engineering that supplies energy and other services, recycling and waste disposal, life support, medical, and communications. The rest you will see when you get there.”

Lloyd, having finished, handed the microphone and clicker back to Burlington as he sauntered onto the stage. Many hands went up in the audience.

“I appreciate you all have a lot of questions,” Burlington acknowledged, indicating to the audience to put their hands down. “But we don’t have enough time right now to go through it all. You’ll have plenty of opportunities tonight to meet with the leadership team. Right now I’d like to get through the rest of the introductions.”

There was a slight murmur of discontent in the audience and the shuffling of people moving in their seats. Burlington ignored it and moved on. “Next I’d like to introduce you to the chief medical officer, Dr. Kian Barret.”

Marcela was keen to meet Dr. Barret. She’d heard a lot about him and read about his research into *in vitro* fertilization and embryo development in low-gravity environments. He was an ex-navy medic who returned to university to specialize in obstetrics. She was none too impressed when the Tom Cruise fly-boy got up onto the stage.

“Welcome.” Barret waved to the audience with confidence. He took the clicker from Burlington and switched the image on the screens. A picture appeared of a state-of-the-art medical examination

room. It gleamed of stainless steel surfaces and blue-gray furnishings. “As Thomas said, I’m Dr. Barret. If you get sick while in Biojein, I want to know about it. I won’t fix you though. That’s the job of Dr. Jason Reid.” Barret gestured toward a man sitting in the front row. Jason half stood up and turned around, waving at the audience.

“My job,” Barret continued, “is to establish a viable human breeding program during the course of the project. It is essential to securing this tender that Everjein presents a robust methodology for human propagation off world. If the entire population of the earth believes they are all going to fly off to another planet together, they are wrong. This project is about the continuation of the human species as a whole. Not individuals. Only the strongest, fittest, and most mentally stable specimens will thrive in the hostility of outer space and the harsh environments on alien planets.” He spoke confidently and fully convicted in his opinion.

Marcela noticed the slight worried look on Constans’s face as she played with the crucifix hanging around her neck. Kian Barret presented as confident and slightly arrogant. Without his glasses, he didn’t look so much like the *Top Gun* Tom Cruise type. In fact, he was taller and leaner, but certainly very fit. He’d lost the suit jacket and was wearing a tight-fitting black T-shirt that highlighted his toned pecks, abs, and biceps. His security and ID cards were clipped to his belt. He had a three-day growth that hugged his strong slender jawline.

“Now before all the ladies in the audience start to get nervous, let me assure you we aren’t expecting you all to get pregnant. In fact, I strongly recommend that you do not, at all costs. It’s not in the best interest of the program to have such an uncontrolled event.”

Marcela and Constans exchanged a smile, as they were sure they heard numerous relieved sighs coming from the women sitting behind them.

“To enable controlled procreation, we’ve enlisted five surrogates. Ladies, would you please stand up?” Five women in the audience stood up. “These beautiful women, who you will get to know over the course of the next five years, have volunteered to carry to term specially chosen embryos that we will be taking into Biojein. Within five years, we expect to have produced at least fifteen children, all born in the biome, all with different genetic traits that would, were the project to continue, significantly reduce any incidences of inbreeding and ensure a healthy future population.” More murmurs came from the audience.

Marcela leant over and whispered to Constans, “Three kids in five years? No thank you.” Constans giggled. Barret was distracted by the pair and glared down at Marcela.

“Do you have anything to add, Dr. Warrick?” Barret asked in a voice reminiscent of one of Marcela’s grade three teachers. She blushed and averted her eyes, not responding.

He knows who I am, Marcela thought but soon realized that he was most likely far more organized than her. He would have already looked through the personal files of all the project leaders. Marcela had been in such a rush to finish her previous project on intensive crop farming at the hydroponics facility, Thanet Earth, Britain’s largest greenhouse facility in Kent, that she’d barely enough time to get to know her own team.

“Thank you, ladies,” said Barret. The women in the audience sat. “Now because she seems to have something she wants to say, I’ll introduce Dr. Marcela Warrick next.” He looked across to Burlington to ensure it was okay. He nodded.

Marcela knew she was overblushing. She was exhausted from the lack of sleep, and her pale complexion disagreed with the Australian climate. The cold air-conditioning wasn’t doing her any favors either. She felt like her cheeks were on fire as she took the stage. The moment became even more awkward when Barret offered to clip the lapel microphone on for her, but the only place he could locate was in the V of her low-cut blouse. The audience giggled at the fumble. Now he was blushing and clearly wasn’t amused. He left Marcela to straighten the microphone and quickly left the stage.

“Hello,” Marcela started. “You’ll have to forgive me if I don’t make any sense. I’m straight off the flight from London and haven’t slept in a couple of days.” She looked down, shuffling her feet, trying to compose her thoughts. Realizing the image of the medical bay was still on the screen, she clicked to the next slide. It was a photograph of her standing in the middle of a hydroponic tomato crop inside a large green house.

“Despite Dr. Barret’s assurances that he’s the most important person on this mission . . . um . . . project, I can inform you that you’ll be finding me a far more valuable friend. You see, I’m an agricultural ecologist, which means I’m in charge of your food supply.” The audience’s eyes brightened, and some laughed. “I’ve a good team working with me. I haven’t met them in person yet, but I can assure you they are the best in the world at what they do.” She looked around the room. “Can you wave if you are in my team?” she

asked. Five people waved an arm in the air. “Oh, there you are!” she exclaimed as she put the Skype images to real faces. “Nice to meet you in person.” She smiled.

“Initially, we won’t have any fresh food as we need time to cultivate and grow crops. So in the meantime, it’ll be vacuum, flat-packed, dehydrated rations, I’m afraid.” There were a few discontented grumbles from the audience, even though they’d all been briefed fully on the nature of the project before signing up. “Hey, if they are good enough for astronauts, they are good enough for us. We’ve got three years’ worth stored in subterranean pits beneath the kitchens.” She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts, trying to remain alert and coherent. “The human body needs at least 2,700 calories per day. That’s almost 12,000 kilojoules. This equates to each of us needing 0.5 hectare of equivalent farming ground. To cater for this, the agricultural domes are 80 meters in diameter and set up for vertical farming with row upon row of hydroponic trays.” Marcela clicked a new image onto the screens. It showed the interior of one of the agricultural domes fitted with twenty levels of neatly arranged and stacked planter boxes suspended from the roof. She heard several amazed inhaled breaths coming from the audience. “In addition, we will have space for a fish farm and chickens. But don’t expect to be eating these anytime soon as they need plenty of time to mature.” She looked at Burlington and mouthed, *Anything else?* He shook his head, and so she decided she should finish up. “Well, that’s all I can think of right now. If you have any questions, please come find me afterward.” She started to step down from the stage when she had a second thought and added, “I’ll be the one asleep in the corner.”

Burlington made his way over to Marcela after she’d sat down and reminded her he needed the microphone back. He gave it directly to Constans. “You may as well take the stage now, Counselor,” he said.

The tentative manner in which Constans took the stage made it clear she didn’t like the spotlight. Marcela wasn’t surprised to find out she’d be the one looking after all their mental health. She’d certainly proven to be very caring.

“I’m Dr. Rijnders,” she began. Constans pronounced her surname almost like *reindeer* in English. “But please call me Constans. I’m on the team to ensure your emotional well-being. We don’t want you *overwintering* in the facility. What I mean is that in the confines of Biojein, the space and being with the same people for five years, there is extreme risk of the development of psychological issues that can affect the whole team. I’ve worked closely with Lloyd over the past

couple of years on the facilities included in living spaces to ensure you will get lots of opportunities to relax and escape.”

Lloyd jumped up from his seat and addressed the audience in excitement. “The rooftop garden was her idea,” he proudly exclaimed. There was a burst of applause and whistling from the audience. Constans blushed, hiding her face beneath her luscious locks.

When the noise settled down, she continued, “That’s all from me for now. But remember, if you ever need to talk about anything, my door . . . if I have a door”—he looked down at Lloyd mockingly—“is always open.”

Constans gave the microphone back to Burlington as they swapped places.

“That’s all for now, folks. Thank you for your attention. There will be busses waiting for you out the front of the building to take you to the hotel. I’ll see all of you tonight at the reception.” There was a final applause from the audience, and people stood up and started to leave.

“Now you can sleep.” Constans smiled at Marcela.

“Yes. Yes, I can,” she said with a sign of relief.