

THE CHILDREN OF MOEBIUS

ÉLODIE
TIREL

1. SANCTUARY



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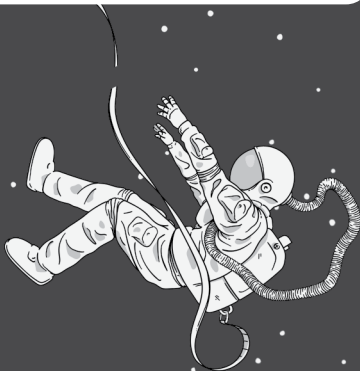
ÉLODIE TIREL

Élodie Tirel is a prolific French author, a Tolkien fan, and a YA literature enthusiast. Her first fantasy novel, *The heirs of Stiryx* (*Les héritiers du Stiryx*), won the Merlin Award in 2008. Élodie Tirel has since discovered her passion for writing. Her unfailing imagination teems with fantastic stories and her laptop is always at hand. She's had around thirty works published, including *Luna, the Moon Elf* (*Luna l'elfe de lune*), which was a success in both France and Quebec. It has sold over 200,000 copies and was also released as a graphic novel and an audio book.

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PROLOGUE

*Taman, Alhamra solar system,
Andromeda constellation, 6265.*

— Dad, what's this flower called?

The man with the dark blue skin and pale blue eyes follows his son's little finger to an enormous plant.

— We call it "Tear of Gaia". Its large petals trap raindrops and release them one by one, like tears, after the rain has stopped.

— It's beautiful!

— I prefer that one there!' his elder brother says, indicating a cluster of small scarlet corollas. It's much prettier!

The planet Taman, which means garden in a long-dead language, owes its name to its vibrant and astonishing variety of vegetation. The most beautiful specimens were found at the Cynodhor botanical garden, only a few kilometres from the capital, Lacanys. It was a haven of peace, one where captain Llandarys

loved to stroll and spend time with his sons, Atreus, Even and Orion, aged six, eight and ten years respectively. Far away from the frenzy of the space station, the silence of the park allowed him to recharge.

— Can we go see the sandhoppers in the big pond? asked Even

The man looked discreetly at his digiband and shook his head.

— Unfortunately, it's late. If we want to be on time to eat, we have to leave now.

The three boys sighed with disappointment.

— Can we come back tomorrow?

— No, Atreus, tomorrow I work.

— But, it's the holidays!

— Why don't we live in Lacanys? grumbled Orion. There's nothing to do at home, we end up being bored.

— You exaggerate! The base is large and there's plenty of things to do.

— Yes, but all my friends in the virtualverse live in the capital and can see each other in person whenever they like. Not me.

— When you're older, you can pilot a shuttle there yourself.

— Really?! the boy exclaimed, brightening up at once.

The man ruffled his hair, smiling. His sons were brave boys. To reach the shuttle, docked

at the park entrance, the father and sons took a narrow winding path, bordered by giant sycaners. The air was mild and fragrant, the flowers released their sweet, seductive aromas. The evening promised to be even more pleasant.

Once in the shuttle, the three brothers settled onto the big curved banquette while their dad sat down at the controls. Overhead, the panoramic roof revealed the pink-orange sky streaked with fine ribbons of purple clouds. The young Atreus made himself comfortable, stretching out on the seat, his eyes fixed on the stars that were just beginning to glimmer in the heavens.

— Why do we never go to space? he asked suddenly.

— Because we're happy on Taman. Why would you want to go elsewhere?

— To discover new planets, new worlds, suggested Orion.

— The journey will take a while. One lifetime won't be enough to reach another hospitable planet.

— So then, what's the point of keeping the *Moebius*?

The captain sighed.

— The *Moebius* is important to us. It's a part of our history. It's the symbol of our earthly

origins. If the Founders had not made the decision to land here, we would never have a life as peaceful as this.

— Was life not peaceful on Earth? Even wondered aloud.

— Far from it. When you're older, I'll show you the holovideos of Earth and you'll understand why our ancestors wanted to escape it at all costs.

— Why can't we watch them now? I'm big already, protested the eldest.

— They're violent images and extremely disturbing. Images of destruction, pollution, war, and death.

— What does war mean? Atreus wanted to know.

His father scratched his chin.

— That's very complicated. In short, let's say that when people or countries confront each other because they disagree about something or don't believe in the same things, well, they fight with weapons.

— With real weapons? Orion exclaimed.

— Yes, with real weapons, fatal to humans, animals and plants alike. Earthlings ended up completely destroying their planet.

This information left the children dumbfounded. How do you manage to destroy a planet? To them, it was inconceivable. Suddenly, young Atreus asked:

— The people who stayed on Earth, did they all die?

— Maybe. It's been over two thousand years that the Founders left that hell to give humanity a chance to start over.

— Do you ever think about going back, just to see? asked Even. The captain smiled at his innocence.

— Not for all the world would I leave our beautiful planet. Our life is on Taman. Not elsewhere.

This declaration left the two older children lost in thought. They would have loved to go on an adventure, to travel across space like their daring ancestors and to discover what Earth looked like today.

— Oh, the aurora borealis! Atreus suddenly exclaimed, his eyes still turned to the stars.

— What are you talking about? his dad said. We don't see aurora borealis at this latitude. And besides, it's not the season for them.

The brothers however looked up and were awestruck by the stunning spectacle overhead. The flares that erupted from their star, usually a distinctive emerald green, were now a shockingly vivid red. A flamboyant red, as if the whole sky was aflame.

Seeing his sons so captivated, the man looked skyward as well.

His heart stopped for a few seconds, frozen in terror.

It wasn't the aurora borealis, it was an explosion!

The space station scientists who had been studying Alhamra for centuries knew that the red dwarf, ten times smaller than the Sun, was a volatile, unstable star. But until today, its eruptions had never endangered the lives of Taman's inhabitants.

Terrified, the captain shouted at his sons to fasten their magnetic belts and shifted the shuttle into top gear. The sudden momentum threw them back against their seats, leaving them almost breathless.

When the engine roared into the space station landing port, built below ground, the portal shut just before the glowing flames razed the rest of the planet, sowing chaos, destruction and death all around.

CHAPTER 01

Moëbius, septembre 6342.

— Girls, we're getting close!

The twins turned their heads in unison to look at their cousin, standing on the threshold of their cabin. The young man with dark blue skin and bright eyes smiled at them.

— Did Atreus send you? Izae asked.

But the boy had already disappeared into the corridor.

The girls exchanged a knowing smile before following him.

— Elias, wait for us!

The two sisters, aged twenty, long and lean, had inherited their father's light blue complexion and striking violet eyes and their mother's long, curly white hair. Izaé wore her mane in a long braid that fell down to the middle of her back, while her sister Iryss preferred her curls unbound and untamed. They

had entirely different personalities but both were instantly revved up by a challenge.

Their cousin, quick as lightning, was already far ahead. He had awakened a few days before them, and so had already recovered his strength. The twins would need some more time to completely shake their muscles loose of their hibernative rigour. But because they'd been born on board, the ship held no secrets for them: they knew exactly where Elias was headed.

He was in fact waiting for them in the control room, an ironic smile hovering on the edge of his lips.

— A little slow there eh, girls!

Normally, Irys would have told him to get lost right then and there, but the captivating spectacle on the holoscreen in the centre of the room held all her attention.

— It's so beautiful!

A pure white planet, encircled by a fine iridescent ring, floated in an inky ocean pierced by brilliant stars. It looked like a rare jewel, a lacquered pearl, floating in the middle of a ring of diamonds. It was almost surreal, a magical beauty.

Amazed, Izaé went up to her uncle.

— Uh ... are you sure that's Earth?

The old man nodded his head gravely.

— I'm sure, he murmured, almost to himself.

Atreus, now eighty-three years old, had spent his life on the spaceship. He was six when his parents had hastily left the planet Taman.

Taman. A paradise of which he had but a few precious images, preserved in the recesses of his memory like sacred relics. The cities of slender glass-and-steel towers, the vibrant garden with multi-hued flowers, the purple forests that stretched as far as the eye could see, the rosy-watered lakes and the sea, the colour of liquid gold. And yet, in the beginning, the Founders had not intended to settle on this exoplanet.

The *Moebius* was in fact headed for Webb 572b, the other Earth, as it was known at that time. However, damage to one of the aneutronic fusion reactors had forced them to make an urgent decision. Turning back to Earth with one engine would have taken too long. They needed to change trajectory and land on the nearest exoplanet, only two lightyears away, in the Andromeda constellation. At the time, this little planet had not been considered because its star Alhamra – a tiny red dwarf, eight billion years old – was deemed too unstable. But it now proved to be their one and only option.

A unanimous decision was made to ferry all two hundred passengers to Taman.

That was in 4125.

For over two thousand years, the small colony

of Earthlings had prospered and grown, giving birth to a new civilization whose pale blue skin was a reaction to the light of their star. A people who respected all forms of life, be they human, animal, or vegetal. A model society, fair and equitable, based on cooperation, tolerance, respect and good will. A harmonious life, pleasant and easy for all.

This idyllic world was swept away overnight by the colossal force of a single solar eruption. Only the inhabitants of the space station that housed the *Moebius*, that invaluable witness of times long gone, had escaped the catastrophe. In haste, they had navigated the old interspatial ship towards Earth, the closest habitable planet.

Habitable? They hoped, but nothing was less certain.

The archival holofilms showed a planet in turmoil, ravaged by nuclear radiation, toxic gases, or a warming climate that had melted all the ice on the globe and raised sea levels till they had engulfed entire nations. A hostile cruel world where humans killed each other to survive.

The passengers of the *Moebius* hoped that after two thousand years the situation had changed. It had now been seventy seven years, or over twenty eight thousand days, that they had been travelling across space to reach their destination, hearts filled with hope.

Little Atreus had grown up, he had married the lovely Leonie, and they had had a son. His elder brothers, Even and Orion, had also had children and they were not the only ones. The population aboard the spaceship had nearly doubled; the hydroponic cultured crops were no longer sufficient to feed everyone.

The Commander at the time had therefore proposed that all willing passengers, and the youngest ones in particular, should go into hibernation. It was not an easy decision to make but it had been the most sensible option. After an emotional farewell ceremony, three hundred and sixty six passengers had been put into hibernation. For thirty one years, they had “slept”, their bodies immune to the ravages of time.

Today, in 6342, Elias and his cousins, Izae and Iryss, were the same age as in 6311, but Elias’ father, Atreus was still alive. He was now an old man, wrinkled and weary, a sort of sage affectionately nicknamed the Admiral by the other passengers.

It came as a shock to Elias who, on awakening, barely recognized him. But the glint in his eyes had given him away. This ravaged old man was indeed his father. The young man of nineteen years had embraced his father and mourned his mother who had passed away a few years earlier. The two had then taken a few days to get to know

each other again. Only afterwards had they awakened the twins.

— When do we land? asked Iryss. Atreus smiled.

— Such impatience, my child!

— We will first send out an atmospheric probe, explained Amalia.

A grizzled woman in her fifties, the current Captain of the *Moebius* was still beautiful. She had a stern face, only just softened by her purple eyes, and had captained the ship without faltering for over thirty years. It was her father, Anton, the Captain of the space station on Taman, who had taught her how to navigate the old spaceship. Aneutronic fusion, a mix of hydrogen and boron, was no mystery to her. The *Moebius* had grown unpredictable and age had only increased, if not worsened, its mood swings, but Amalia still knew it by heart.

Izae frowned even harder.

— No, are you kidding me or what?! That's not Earth!

— Why not? retorted her sister.

— The holofilms show a planet with bright, contrasting colours. Even through the mass of white clouds, you could see yellow continents surrounded by dark blue oceans.

Iryss and Elias took another look at this planet draped in a thick white veil.

— With this one, we can't even see the surface, Izae continued. It looks like a gaseous planet. Plus, Earth doesn't have a ring.

— And yet, it is indeed Earth, her uncle insisted. Our navigation instruments are precise and our calculations don't lie.

— That's surprising given the age of this clunker!

— We're still certain we're right. As proof, Earth has a small natural satellite, called the Moon, which you can see just over there. You see that greyish dot?

Atreus pressed on the dot in question and the image of the satellite was magnified a hundred-fold and filled the holoscreen. It was a small rocky planet, pocked with craters that looked like dark gray stains on its surface.

The Admiral zoomed back out to the image of Earth.

— So how do you explain such a dramatic change in appearance? asked Izae.

Amalia took this question. An astrophysicist, she was the expert.

— The clouds have grown so thick and dense they are preventing us from detecting the planet's surface. It could simply be that the composition of the stratosphere, or more worryingly, that of the troposphere has changed.

— The troposphere? Iryss repeated, wrinkling her nose.

Her sister rolled her eyes.

— That's the layer of atmosphere closest to the ground, the one we breathe, dummy.

— You're saying that we can't be sure the air is breathable? Elias exclaimed. We came all this way for nothing?!

Amalia sighed, visibly exasperated.

— Only the probe sensors can tell us what's really going on.

— Why are we waiting to send them out then? said an impatient Iryss.

— We're too far out. We need to get closer to the Earth.

— And we also have to solve the mystery of this ring, added the Admiral.

Izae examined the fine silvery ring even more closely.

— Do you think it's a natural phenomenon?

The Captain shrugged and zoomed in on the image. A brilliant silver halo, slightly fuzzy, appeared before them.

— It's most definitely not. The rings we know are generally made of cosmic dust or ice. They're often the result of a major collision between a comet or an asteroid. This generates a billion tons of debris that are propelled into space and then are drawn in by a planet's gravitational force.

That is normally a very slow process that could take millions of years to form. But we know that two thousand years ago Earth had no ring. It's impossible that one should have formed in so little time. Not naturally at least.

— And yet, there's a ring, Izae muttered.

— I wonder what it's composed of, Amalia said pensively. We're not yet close enough to know. What I find most intriguing is ... is that glow.

Atreus nodded.

— It could be a magnetic defence, developed by the Earthlings, a sort of shield or alarm system. And if that is the case, it's a sure bet that they won't take kindly to our arrival.

— But we're like them, the same species, I mean, Iryss exclaimed indignantly. They've surely heard of the *Moebius*.

— Heard of the *Moebius*? Amalia repeated, wide-eyed. My dear, it's been over two thousand years that our ancestors left Earth. The current inhabitants probably know nothing of this ship or of us either.

Atreus chimed in.

— Plus, because of our blue skin, they'll likely take us for invaders, savage bloodthirsty aliens that must be exterminated at all costs.

— What a lovely thought! Elias laughed.

— To reassure them, we should just enter into radio contact with them, Izae suggested. Then we

could explain why we're here and that they have nothing to fear.

— If only it were that simple, Atreus replied. In reality, we don't know if the human race has survived. They may all be dead or gone to colonize other exoplanets. But if there are still inhabitants on Earth, I doubt that they'll welcome us with open arms.

The three young people exchanged troubled glances.

Their enthusiasm had waned.

They had spent twenty years growing up on this ship and then another three decades frozen aboard and all for what? What a waste of time, what a failure, what a disappointment!

Elias could no longer contain his anger.

— And if we're not welcome on Earth, or worse, if it's no longer habitable, what will we do? Are we to go back to sleep for another thirty years while you figure out a plan B?

The Admiral and the Captain exchanged an embarrassed look but said nothing.

Izae flicked back a bang from her eyes and turned to the two adults.

— May I ask you a question? Atreus gestured yes with his hand.

— Why did you awaken us from hibernation if you weren't sure that the Earth was hospitable to life?

Her uncle smiled affectionately at her.

— For two reasons, my child. The first is that I promised my wife and brothers that I would wake you when we first sighted Earth. I kept that promise.

— In that case, why did you not wake up Takeo and Saya? Iryss asked.

— As soon as we're done talking, you can go to the hibernation chamber and wake your cousins.

The girls nodded silently.

— And the second reason? Elias continued. Amalia looked him straight in the eyes.

— Atreus has lived a long life, but he is not immortal as you know. As for me, I'm growing older, like everyone else. If for one reason or another, we cannot land on Earth to resettle there, we must continue our journey through space. And I've chosen you three to pilot the *Moebius*.

Iryss almost choked.

— Us? Is that a joke?

— Absolutely not. There's currently fifteen of us looking after the ship, the greenhouse, the engines, but we must think of the future. If Earth doesn't offer conditions favourable to life, we will train you to take up the mantle and lead our people to a new planet.

Elias put a hand over his worried face.

— Uh, can some please put me straight back into my hibernation pod?!

It has now been 77 years since the Moebius passengers left the planet Taman and began their journey back to Earth. The survival of the human species relies on the hope that the planet, deserted 2000 years ago, will be habitable again.

Now that they have reached their goal, the survivors are feverish. The images returned by the cameras of the vessel show what looks like the hoped-for paradise, but appearances are sometimes deceptive...

Who knows what they risk by setting foot on this long-abandoned Earth?

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