

Prologue Sampler

Of Wind and Sand

by Sylvie Bérard

EDGE

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PROLOGUE

I'm an old woman now. My memory isn't what it used to be. The images get all jumbled in my head, memories piling up like file folders that have been dropped and then picked up hastily, any which way, in an effort to create the illusion of order. My brain is like an old, crazy computer that fragments the documents and then puts them back together as it sees fit. I've lived too long for a single human being. So, sometimes the images get mixed up.

Everything I know about when the humans arrived on this planet is from what I've been told. I was only an embryo in a bottle at the time, thawed out after they made landfall. Despite the fact that Mars II wasn't our initial destination, the crew intended this as a symbolic gesture to mark our arrival here. Like uncorking a bottle of champagne to celebrate a happy occasion. Or a wolf marking his territory. Something like that. In any case, my test tube may have spent time in liquid nitrogen, but I don't recall ever feeling cold. The adults around me treated the cold with a great deal of respect, like some sort of fallen, long-gone god. By day, we suffocated in our protective suits. At night, there was never enough ventilation to dry our damp sheets. The sun was our enemy. It could cook us in place, heating the metal sheeting of the mother ship to burning point.

So, I'm a child of Mars II, the first child to be born on this soil. Nine months after the mother ship landed on this planet,

which the Aboriginals call Sielxth, I was born, the first of a clutch of fifty children screaming their lungs out in this molten, hostile desert, in this world made for Darztl's, made for

Obviously I have no recollection of the festivities that accompanied my birth.

There's always been sand in my life. Sand in the depths of the mother ship where my family lived, sand clogging gears, sand in our throats, sand in our eyes... As a child, when they sent me out to play in the desert, at dawn or dusk, I'd place my toys on the ground and watch them grow into sand castles all on their own, large sand castles, shapes tortured by the scorching wind.

I saw my first Darztl when I was five. My parents were part of the mother ship elite and, as such, among the first families to mingle with the natives in everyday affairs. They never took me with them. But, when they came home, I'd hear them talking about everything they'd seen, about the monstrous creatures that looked like large lizards standing on their hind legs. I'd listen to them in silence. When they knew I was there, they'd talk about how everyone loved their neighbors. When I spied on them in secret, I'd occasionally hear them make less flattering comments about the Aboriginals, describing the fear and disgust they inspired and, occasionally, talking about assimilation and extermination. However, regardless of what people said about them, good or bad, these creatures fascinated me from afar. As soon as I got a chance, I browsed through the databanks, learning about reptiles, with or without feet, ovi-, viv- or ovoviparous, water-dwelling, desert-dwelling, venomous or not, the words sounding like so many magic formulas to my child's ears.

Then, one day, my parents told me we would be moving near the Darztl's. A few days earlier, my father and mother had discussed the possibility of bringing me with them, but my mother had laid down the law. As long as I had to grow up on this inhospitable planet, I should be taught the lay of the land as quickly as possible. The lay of the land... I knew that my parents and their group hoped to learn that through contact with extraterrestrials, making the most of our stay to

find out everything they could about the indigenous species. At that time, it was already clear to the ship's leaders that our temporary stay on the planet, presumably to repair our equipment, was turning into a permanent settlement and they thought it wise to get to know those they already called the enemy. I understood all this, as a child does, not conceptually as such by as a result of the conspiratorial tone my parents used when talking.

On the first evening of this cultural exchange, which was to last three local months, I slipped into the reception room where all of the dignitaries, human and non-human, had gathered. I threaded my way through to the head table where the hosts and their guests sat and I studied my first native. It took my breath away.

I must have been thinking out loud because as soon as I thought, "He's beautiful!" all of the adults in my immediate vicinity started to laugh. The Darztl's wanted to know the source of this mirth and my father, who was sitting at the head table with my mother, said that it was just child's play. Then his translator repeated that phrase in the local language. I didn't understand why my father hadn't repeated what I'd said word for word. I wasn't scolded for sneaking into the reception room. However, the next morning, my father had said, "Don't ever do that again, Chloé. Such affairs are for big people."

We didn't stay with the natives long. My father complained about the heat in the south and my mother couldn't bear to be either too far from humans or too close to those who were not. A long time passed before I saw my next living darztl. But that doesn't mean I didn't continue to see them in my mind's eye.