

JESIKAH SUNDIN



LEGACY

BOOK ONE IN "THE BIODOME CHRONICLES"

"IN ORDER TO LIVE, SOMETHING MUST DIE"

LEGACY

BOOK ONE

IN "THE BIODOME CHRONICLES"

by

JESIKAH SUNDIN

Just Imagine...
Developmental Editing & Publishing



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DEDICATED TO

My husband, Myles Sundin

and

My dearest friend, Melissa Patton

*Love is
The funeral pyre
Where I have laid my living body.*

*All the false notions of myself
That once caused fear, pain,*

*Have turned to ash
As I neared God.*

*What has risen
From the tangled web of thought and sinew
Now shines with jubilation
Through the eyes of angels
And screams from the guts of Infinite existence
Itself.*

*Love is the funeral pyre
Where the heart must lay
Its body.*

—Hafiz, *The Gift*, 14th Century *



Chapter One

New Eden Township, Salton Sea, California

Monday, September 28, 2054

Year 19 of Project Phase One

A knock quietly sounded. Leaf lifted his head out of his hands and cast a weary glance at his father's corpse, positioned on a litter stretched across a narrow table. Forgetting the caller at his door, Leaf shifted in his chair and peered out the latticed window. A few heartbeats later, the knock sounded once more.

With a heavy sigh, Leaf trudged across the planked floor and opened the door a crack. But he did not recall a single step, startling when he squinted against the bright morning sun. A young woman from the village curtsied, holding a ceramic pitcher and a wooden bowl filled with hemp rags.

"For you, My Lord."

She offered the contents of her hands with outstretched hands. The tangy smell of vinegar irritated his nose, but he maintained a composed expression.

"Thank you."

"May I be of further service, My Lord?"

"No, but you are most kind for asking."

"Your father was a good man and shall be sorely missed." She bobbed her head with a sad smile.

Leaf's attentions slipped to another place with her words. Chimerical thoughts fed his hazy, dreamlike state, and his heart ached while fighting to remain fastened to reality. He began to repay the honor of her words, but

she had vanished. Leaf frantically looked around the second-story deck and out into the forest. His pulse thrummed in his throat. How long had he stood in the doorway? Spooked, he slowly crept backward into his apartment. The vinegar sloshed when he placed both bowl and pitcher on a small cupboard near the litter.

The serene expression on his father's face struck him anew—eyes closed, with lips positioned into a small smile of eternal acceptance. Heartbeats echoed audibly in Leaf's ears as he waited for his father to awake from the slumbers of this nightmare.

But this was not rest. His father would never awake. The deep and gentle rumble of his voice would no longer fill their home with his laughter, words of guidance, or his kind encouragements. This was real.

Leaf's shoulders shook as the delusions parted. He had not shed a single tear since his father's last breath the prior afternoon, too shocked by grief and by the invisible crown that had been placed upon his head. Even now, the tears failed to come. He raked his fingers down his face, determined to keep his faculties intact.

His sisters needed him, as did the community. Both were terrifying thoughts. An unimaginable yoke of responsibility had fallen upon him, the load increasing as the day progressed. Would he be able to stand come evening meal? Leaf took a deep, shuddering breath. He needed to channel his emotional energy to remain strong, despite his beliefs that he was not equipped for such a future.

Candlelight flickered as he reached for the pitcher, making shadows dance upon the walls. Vinegar quickly covered the stench of death as the honey-colored liquid splashed into the wooden bowl. He grabbed an immersed rag and lightly wrung out excess liquid.

Soft and reverent, he brushed the rag over the lifeless skin of his father's arm and then the other. The first task now complete, Leaf lowered the sheet and washed his father's torso. His hand stopped over his father's chest, to see if he could feel the warm rhythm of a beating heart. He swallowed against the cold silence.

Would acceptance always be this difficult?

He returned the rag to the bowl and attempted to roll his father onto his side. Leaf strained against the stiff body's weight, a small grunt escaping through his clenched teeth. With a final heave, the body rolled onto its side, the weight supported by one of Leaf's arms. A linden tree tattoo stretched between his father's shoulder blades in black dye. Leaf traced the branches, trunk, and roots as he thought of the medieval symbol of love and marriage. His father now joined his mother in Heaven, death no longer parting the blissful union they once shared.

The rag dripped heavy with vinegar. Leaf brushed the solution along his father's neck, shoulders, and down his spine, lowering his father onto his back when finished. Leaf covered his father's chest, then lifted the sheet and exposed the legs. Blood had pooled beneath the skin near the feet. The sight

was gruesome, but Leaf refused to look away as he trailed the rag down each leg.

Fresh pain ached inside his chest.

“I am so afraid,” he whispered when vinegar tears dribbled onto the litter. “How am I to fare without you, Father? How shall I care for my sisters when the community disbands? How shall I ever be worthy of such honor given in The Legacy when I have never seen the Outside world? You asked so much of me in just two breaths, and I fear I shall disappoint you.”

With shaky arms, he leaned onto the table and continued whispering all the things he wished he would have told his father, all the questions he was previously too afraid to ask, desperate for the pain to ease in his chest. But it would not lessen.

Turning around to gather himself, Leaf returned the rag to the bowl and then fingered the garments his sister Willow had prepared. She had stayed up late into the night embroidering an oak tree on the chest of the tunic, their family symbol signifying Nobility belonging to the Earth Element House. However, the tunic would need modification in order to properly dress their father’s stiff body.

In the corner of the main room lay Willow’s spinning wheel and sewing basket. The soft thud of his footsteps echoed in his home’s silence as he fetched the shears. Lifting the linen tunic, he cut a straight line down the back. The garment fluttered in the air with a snap of his wrist. Leaf draped the tunic over his father’s chest, gingerly maneuvering each arm into place, tucking the back folds beneath the body.

The linen breeches slipped on easily at first. Mid-thigh, the breeches caught and Leaf had to tug until the garment reached his father’s waist. His fingers quaked with fatigue; nevertheless, he managed to tie the laces.

Stifling a yawn, Leaf peered at the open cupboard, contemplating if he had forgotten anything. His father’s studded leather belt, stamped in a leaf design, was tucked on a shelf. The air in Leaf’s chest tightened once more. He was already parting with so much. Somehow he knew his father would not mind wearing Leaf’s belt instead. He slipped it off, then reached for the one in the cupboard.

“You are needed. Do not ever feel unworthy or insignificant,” his father’s deep voice soothed from his memories. Soft, aged leather slipped through Leaf’s hands while wrapping his father’s belt around his own waist. “A leaf’s sole purpose is to nourish the tree,” his father’s voice comforted once more, “from the newly budding green on each branch to the decaying yellow that litters the roots. The tree is a community, an ecosystem, and you are a necessary and noble ingredient to sustain its very existence.”

The voice faded and Leaf took his father’s hand in his, the fingers unyielding from the rigor mortis. Though the body was now properly prepared for cremation, he did not wish to inform the undertaker quite yet. Instead, he pulled up a high-back wooden chair and continued to hold his father’s hand, too afraid to let go. Time tumbled past in a blur and his eyes grew heavy. Giving into the bone-weary exhaustion, he slumped forward until his

forehead touched his father's hand in honor, gripping the blue-tinged fingers tighter in search of comfort and direction.

He did not know when he had fallen asleep. But he woke with a start, flinging his body back against the chair when a warm hand touched his shoulder. Connor, the Fire Element, crouched next to him with eyebrows drawn together, his large frame aglow from the natural light pouring in from the latticed window.

"You have done well, Son of Earth. Go outside and freshen your mind while my family pays their respects. I shall care for the remaining details for your home." The last words ended in a choked whisper and Connor grimaced with sorrow. The Fire Element's eyes lowered to the belt tied to Leaf's waist, eliciting a sad smile of approval. "Willow and Laurel shall return shortly," he continued. "Cook wished to know what to prepare for evening meal in your family's honor this eve."

Leaf cleared his throat to respond, but the muscles were too tight. Instead, he rose from the chair as if a mere wisp of smoke and then staggered past Lady Brianna, Connor's wife, who stood in the doorway with red-rimmed eyes and a paled complexion. Coal, their eldest son, placed his hand upon Leaf's shoulder and bowed in respect. Unable to speak, Leaf paused to acknowledge the gesture and then dragged his feet toward the railing of the large deck.

The trees stood still, nary a leaf moving from the lack of bio-wind. He breathed in the fresh air, clearing his nose of death and vinegar. His forearms rested against the railing as he stooped forward and hung his head. Long, scratch-like patterns in the wood grain momentarily diverted his mind. Detachment dangerously encroached, drawing nearer with whispered promises of no pain. He wanted to succumb to the false relief but resisted.

Soft footsteps to his right snapped Leaf's focus back to reality. The Daughter of Fire, Connor's eldest, approached from the stairwell. Lady Ember remained outside upon the deck and stared into the forest at a respectable distance from him without offering condolences or peering his direction.

More footsteps sounded from the stairwell as the Wind and Water Element Houses arrived. Leaf looked over his shoulder and timidly met the eyes of Skylar, Son of Wind. His friend bowed deeply, on the verge of tears, then spun quickly on his heel to follow his father into the apartment.

Ember remained posted along the railing, reflecting upon the woods, which forested nearly half of the main biodome. Somehow she understood his desire to not feel alone while simultaneously wishing to be left alone. A perfect balance of support he did not know he craved until this moment. The emotions of others and their desire to express their sympathy and care for his family drained his reserves. There was no fault with the community; their love and support was overwhelming. But he was a private individual and found strength in quiet solitude.

Voices and footsteps mingled behind him. His eyes remained fixed on the evergreens and deciduous trees beneath the geodesic sky. Occasionally,

he glanced toward the clearing and grassy path along the apartments in search of Willow and Laurel.

Shadows shifted as the sun moved, and he studied the angles to discern the time when he no longer sensed activity in his home. He faced the stairwell to acknowledge Lady Ember before returning inside, but the space was empty. For the second time this morning, another had vanished while in his company. He blinked back the confusion and squared his shoulders.

Back inside the apartment, Leaf rested his hand upon his father's chest and kissed him on the cheek, whispering, "I love you."

The words formed a heavy sigh as sorrow twisted in his stomach. He needed another occupation to busy his mind. Uncertain of what else to do, he began smoothing out ripples in the linen. Picking and pulling at various folds ruffled by those who touched his father one last time, his thoughts wandered to the various traditions of the Cremation Ceremony. The elder women of the community would shroud his father's body but not until Leaf checked his father's garments for any personal items in view of the village.

He never quite understood this tradition as all bodies were prepared with clean clothing. Nevertheless, the head male of the home would pull out an item of sentimental value from a pocket. Where did the sentimental item come from? Did he place it inside his father's pocket, or did another leave an object for Leaf to discover? If he recalled correctly, most in his role seemed surprised and touched by what they found. His father had appeared astonished and then overcome when he had pulled out Mother's carved-dragon hair comb while performing this custom during her Cremation Ceremony eight years ago. Willow cherished the keepsake, a gift given to her from father shortly after the Second Ceremony for Mother's ashes.

Should he search the pockets and pretend ignorance before the gathering? Or honor the tradition and remain genuinely surprised?

Leaf narrowed his eyes, frustrated over the moral dilemma. He lowered his head into his hands and shuffled his feet, considering each argument. Would he scandalize his home if he failed to pull an object from his father's pocket? How weighted was this tradition? Until today, he had never been personally involved in funeral arrangements.

Regardless of his own opinions on the subject, he decided that traditions mattered to the community. If there was no object to be found, then he needed to search for one, and hopefully before his sisters returned home.

Without further thought, his fingers scooped inside a pocket and touched only the soft linen. He blinked his eyes and forced breath into his body. Walking to the other side of the litter, he repeated the same process, and stilled. Stiff paper brushed against his fingertips. What could possibly be in his father's pocket with this texture? His father did not possess playing cards nor partook in such games.

Holding his breath once more, Leaf pulled the object out. Small, repeating geometric patterns—similar to the geodesic sky—covered the card-sized paper. Perplexed, he carefully turned it over. An image of a snuffed out candle mocked his grief.

His eyes darted around the apartment. Hair pricked the back of his neck. Then anger surged through him in a single, violent wave as he gripped the card.

Yesterday afternoon returned in an overwhelming rush, and Leaf felt his father's weight in his arms all over again. The Rows—the main agricultural garden—had been empty. Villagers had returned home for the afternoon hour of rest prior to evening meal. On their way to shelve tools in The Forge, his father had gasped for air and clutched his left arm with large, labor-worn hands, his face contorting in pain. Leaf caught him as he stumbled to the ground. The world stopped that very moment. Fear owned every breath. Every heartbeat. Willow and Coal rushed over from The Orchard, his sister's cry for help unheard. Last words for Leaf to gather his sisters and leave New Eden were spoken between wheezes and through clenched teeth. And then eyes, so very much like his youngest sister's, stared unfocused upon Leaf's face.

"Is all well?"

Leaf started, sucking in a quick breath. Light glinted off of Willow's golden hair as she stood in the doorway. Her swollen eyes remained averted to the floor, even when he hesitated to reply.

"Yes, all is in order," he finally answered, his voice raspy. "Father is clothed, you may look." Although Leaf's hand shook, he slipped the card into his pocket unnoticed. "Shall I leave, providing you a private moment?"

Willow blanched as she stared at their father. Trembling fingers pressed into her lips as she held back a forming sob. The skin circling her eyes swelled, bruised from weeping and lack of sleep.

"I do not wish to be alone." She shook her head slightly. "Please remain in the room."

"Of course." Leaf looked behind him to sit, and paused. "Where is Laurel?"

His sister's eyes rounded. "I am not sure. She desired to play outside as I met with Cook. Afterward, I walked the forest, my mind drawn to other attentions. My concentration is growing faint, it seems."

"Willow," he sighed in exasperation. "This is our last opportunity alone with Father before the procession. Shall I fetch her or will you?"

Both glanced at the body stretched between them and then met each other's eyes; and Leaf's shoulders fell when angry tears trailed down her cheeks.

"How could you be so unfeeling?"

Leaf closed his eyes for a couple of heartbeats. "What would you have me do? Laurel was in your charge. Our sister deserves final farewells, same as you."

"I did not set out to ruin such plans." She looked at Father's belt around Leaf's waist and then turned her head toward the wall. "You are not the only one affected by Father's death, Leaf Watson."

“Laurel is eight years old and you are nearly sixteen. I am not suggesting that you ruined such plans. I am reminding you that she needs our protection. We are her parents now.”

“Protection from what, exactly?” She wiped a tear from her cheek, tilting her head to the side. “That is a most peculiar statement.”

His fingers touched the card in his pocket as angry thoughts continued to assault his mind. “Protection against the fear of losing a parent and feeling unsafe. We need to consider her feelings and needs above our own at present and, therefore, we should ensure she does not feel alone as well.”

“Please do not patronize me. I am not a selfish person despite your claims. Must I remind you that I stitched funeral garments until dawn?”

Leaf groaned in frustration. “Stop twisting my words, Willow Oak. I have said no such thing and would appreciate a modicum of respect.”

“Yes, *My Lord*.” She dipped into a curtsy and then covered her face with her hands as the restrained sob finally released.

He watched the play of light and shadows upon the planked floor, ashamed of his words spoken in irritation. She had indeed stayed up late to embroider the oak tree on Father’s tunic, crying most of the morning, especially when the undertaker brought Father’s body back home. At present Leaf did not possess the fortitude to endure any conflicts or strong emotions. He could barely meet his own needs, let alone his sister’s, whose penchant for melodrama tested his patience even when he was of a whole and sound mind. But he needed to stay calm. It was now his responsibility to care for her needs, regardless of how he felt, and he would endeavor to treat her with the love their father modeled.

“I have felt my mind slipping away today as well.” Leaf offered a kind smile. He opened his mouth to say more when a light knock interrupted his contrition. Lady Ember stood in the doorway beside Laurel, her head turned toward her shoulder out of respect.

Willow spun toward the door and a smile formed through the tears. She knelt on the floor and then opened her arms. “Oh darling, I am so very sorry. Please forgive my feeble mind.” Laurel walked into her embrace and began to quietly cry, peering over Willow’s shoulder toward their father.

Leaf whispered, “Thank you, My Lady,” angling away as his face warmed. Did Ember hear his confession? Or his argument with Willow?

“My father wishes to inform you that he shall arrive soon. The funeral pyre is prepared.” Ember softened her voice and said, “Laurel was happily playing with Corona, but I knew you would wish for her to be present when the ceremony bearers arrived.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I shall take my leave, My Lord.”

“Lady Ember, wait.” She tarried and studied his face as he hesitated to speak further. He blinked his eyes with shyness. “I appreciate your care of my sister.”

Ember dipped her head, he bowed, and she shut the door.

Leaf stared at the dark wood and wrought iron braces, the handle rhythmically knocking against the door. The house dimmed, casting gray tones over his father's skin. Willow and Laurel quieted in the sudden darkness, staring at the body with blotchy faces and occasional hiccups. Laurel nervously bit on her tiny fingernails and Willow rested her hand upon their sister's small shoulder in comfort.

Leaf pulled out a ceramic bowl, fire nest material, and striking rocks from another cupboard. Within minutes he lit the main candles of their home, positioning additional tallow tapers near the body. The amber light warmed and softened his father's unnaturally pale features.

"Come say your farewells," Leaf encouraged softly, taking their father's hand. "He shall soon be carried away to become one with the elements."

Laurel hugged herself. "Will we bother him?"

"No, *ma chère*." He walked over and knelt before her. "Father is in Heaven. Although his spirit no longer resides in his body, he hears our words as we speak to him. I am quite certain of it."

His littlest sister bit her lower lip and then hesitantly walked to the litter. She reached out a hand and gently laid it upon their father's. Tears squeezed through her closed eyes and ran down her cheeks. Willow walked up to the litter, leaned down, and kissed their father upon the cheek as Leaf had done earlier.

"I love you Father," Willow whispered. "Please give Mother our love."

"Lift me up?" Laurel asked, glancing at Leaf over her shoulder. "I wish to kiss Father as well." Leaf lifted his sister and she delicately kissed their father's cheek, pulling back quickly. "He is so cold. We should cover him with a blanket."

Leaf placed his sister back onto the ground and exchanged a worried look with Willow.

Laurel disappeared into their parent's room. She emerged a few heartbeats later with a woolen lap blanket and draped it across their father with loving ministrations. "There, now he shall be warm."

"Yes, indeed," Leaf said. "I am sure he appreciates your kindness." Laurel looked up at him with a happy smile and his heart constricted.

A quiet knock rung through the silence and the flames bent and knelt before their father when the door opened. Connor stood in the doorway, stepping aside as Brother Markus entered their apartment, carrying the Holy Scriptures in his hand.

"The ceremony bearers are ready," Connor said.

Leaf nodded his head as he and his sisters donned their cloaks of mourning and lifted the hoods. Connor approached the litter and blew out the candles surrounding their father's body, and then waved for others to enter.

The ceremony bearers represented the three remaining Noble houses of the community—Connor, the Fire Element; Timothy, the Wind Element; and Alex, the Water Element's husband—along with Jeff, the town barrister.

The men lifted the bamboo poles and placed them upon their shoulders as they slowly marched from the apartment with Brother Markus at the lead.

Leaf regarded each man warily, searching their faces for any sign that they had placed the mysterious card in his father's pocket. He had not found a replacement item and no longer cared for such a tradition. The community may be astonished when nothing of value resided upon one of the head Nobles of their township. But Leaf would ensure that the legacy of his father was not summarized by an object. Heat flushed through his body as angry thoughts simmered once more, but he cooled his temper to appear unaware. He was already entrusted with the biggest secret of New Eden Township. He could retain another.

Laurel's hand clasped his, and he looked down and offered a reassuring smile as they left their home. He squinted his eyes in the mid-day sunlight, listening to Willow weep as she stepped beside him.

Mourners had gathered in the clearing as he and his family descended the stairs to the biodome floor. Brother Markus prayed loudly in Latin, drowning out muffled cries and soft sobs, as all of New Eden Township marched in a procession with hoods high and heads low to the prepared funeral pyre in The Rows.

The cool air of the forest enveloped them as they traveled the dirt path. A gentle bio-wind released a bouquet of autumn leaves to spiral through the air and rain upon their bodies. The mournful wind continued to breeze and the woolen blanket Laurel placed upon their father flapped, threads dancing in the air. The path eventually wound through The Orchard and into the meadow framing The Rows.

A large metal structure, punctured with sizeable holes and filled with ceremonial wood, had been wheeled into the meadow from the undertaker's shop. Juniper branches lined the outside of the metal frame for the community to set upon his father. Tall lit torches were positioned in the soil at each corner, marking the four cardinal directions. Black, wispy smoke curled from each torch and ascended to the dome ceiling like souls released to Heaven.

The ceremony bearers lowered the litter upon the prepared wood and then stood to the side as all the families encircled the pyre.

Brother Markus bowed before Leaf's father as he began the opening prayer. "Thank you Heavenly Father for gifting us with Joel Watson, an extraordinary and honorable man. His life will forever bless our souls, and his memory will remain alive through the love and good deeds we extend to one another. It is with a heavy but thankful heart that we commit his spirit unto you." The Holy Scriptures pressed against the monk's heart as he lifted his free hand and gave the sign of the cross. The community chanted "Amen" in reply. Satisfied, the monk met Leaf's eyes and gestured for him to come forward.

Leaf glanced furtively at The Elements. Each familiar face creased and shadowed with grief. There were no obvious indicators that they or their families had placed the card on his father. Could it have been a resident from the village? His thoughts had been lost to the woods for a period, and

he had not greeted those who came to pay his father respect. Although, Leaf's apartment had only been officially open to the Noble families.

Swallowing nervously, Leaf reached out and placed his hand in one pocket, revealing it was empty, and then performed the same task on the other. The faces of those gathered reflected confusion, including those of the Noble houses. This was the first time an object was not found upon the deceased before cremation. Objects even were found on newborns. Willow placed a hand over her mouth in astonishment, fear pooling in her eyes. Leaf maintained a steady countenance, ignoring the reactions.

Brother Markus cleared his throat before continuing, "May the elder matriarchs come forth."

Four women in their late sixties and seventies came forward, the lead carrying a folded shroud in her hands. Respectful precision guided their movements as they quickly wrapped the ceremonial cloth around his father in several layers. Once their occupation was complete, they each picked up a juniper branch and placed it on top of his father's body, bowing as they did so. Following their example, the community formed lines on either side of the funeral pyre, placing juniper twigs and branches upon the shrouded body, bowing before his father's corpse.

When the last family paid their respects, the Fire Element handed Leaf an unlit torch. Leaf's knees weakened. He was unsure if he could light his father's body afire. Nevertheless, on shaking legs, he approached the burning torch representing North, the cardinal direction signifying the Earth Element. He extended his arm and watched as a flame sparked to life, light and shadows entangled in a dance once more. Slowly, he lowered the torch until the flame connected with the juniper branches. Twigs and branches crackled into flame, veiling the pyre in thick smoke.

He dropped the torch into the sudden wall of fire and took a step back. His knees finally gave way and he knelt before his father's burning corpse. Leaf pressed his forehead to a verdant patch of earth as fresh sorrow convulsed through his entire body. His heart writhed with the finality of this moment. Still, the tears did not come.

Still, he knew not what to do.

His father's voice reverberated throughout the corners of his mind to leave and abandon the community, while Leaf's gut shouted to remain and uphold his new position. Both were terrifying situations, most especially in light of the card in his pocket.

He lifted his head from the earth and studied Willow, who stared at the fire in a trance, her face a perfect storm of grief. Focusing on her, and not the pyre, his pulse began to calm, quieting his raging thoughts. It was then, in the dark stillness of his mind, with the hot wind searing his face, that a plan formed bright and sure. His sister turned her head and met his waiting gaze, the flames of the funeral pyre flickering in her eyes.



Jesikah Sundin is a sci-fi/fantasy writer mom of three nerdlets and devoted wife to a gamer geek. In addition to her family, she shares her home in Monroe, Washington with a red-footed tortoise and a collection of seatbelt purses. She is addicted to coffee, laughing, Doc Martens shoes... Oh, and the forest is her happy place.

Discover the worlds and characters
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