

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



Text and Cover Design/Illustration

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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 rumpled 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.

Space Biosphere Ventures began in the 1960s as a group inspired by space exploration and the potential for profit that space exploration promised. In an effort to see how people might survive in a closed system, the group began to build Biosphere 2 in 1987. With funds from Texas billionaire Ed Bass, the group completed their project in 1991, and in September of that year eight people were sealed inside the glass and metal structure and given no more food, water, or oxygen other than what they could provide for themselves from the diverse habitats—biomes—placed inside.

—Brandon Bishop, “From Prototype Mars Colony to Earth Science Laboratory: A Sketch of Biosphere 2,” *Field Notes and New Finds*, October 6, 2012*

I have begun a new era for technology and sociology. New Eden Township, my biodome city, will surpass all that science experienced and desired from the Biosphere 2 Project in the early 1990s. My dream is that a whole generation will be born and raised in this artificial world, using ideas and gaming methods from live action role-playing to create a new world within a world as an experiment that will test Isolation, Confinement, and Extreme (ICE) Environment Syndrome. Forget colonizing Mars and the moon just now—we still need to study the human psyche while it is disconnected from our home planet. It is time to colonize Earth once again. But instead of through military prowess and nationalism, it will be through the space age of sustainability and fantasy role-playing.

—Hanley Nichols, on *Atoms to Adams Daily Show*, August 15, 2030



Chapter Two

New Eden Township, Salton Sea, California
Tuesday, September 29, 2054

After hours of struggle, the weight in her chest gave way, and she slept, tormented and locked away in a tower of twilight-tinged nightmares. Now, a sound pulled her back, and her eyes flickered open in the pre-dawn moonlight, frantically blinking away the sleep. She inhaled deeply to steady her rapid breathing as her eyes strained to recognize the shape in the darkness. She shook away the nonsense of seeing a ghost, yet the voice and shape peering in through the opened door was reminiscent of her recently departed father.

Had it really been nearly three days since his death?

The identity of the form materialized as her eyes adjusted. She resisted the urge to turn toward the wall. Instead, she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep, wishing the form belonged to an apparition after all. He was the *last* person she wished to see just now.

Leaf, her brother, slowly crept into the shadowed room and shut the door, silencing the click with measured movements.

Familiar resentment toward her older sibling began to fester, an additional emotion she did not wish to feel this night. The cool dampness on her pillow was evidence that she had suffered enough tears and had none to spare for her brother's insensitivities. His sense of duty did not often consider or show compassion toward her grievances. He was allowed his mighty opinions, but she was accused of unladylike deportment for speaking her mind or displaying any emotion other than gentleness. Laurel, their eight-year-old sister, received Leaf's adoration and enjoyed a doting brother while she, the second-born, received only his dutiful attention and nothing more.

"Willow?"

Cold fingers touched her shoulder. Her skin startled in response, ruining her plan to feign sleep. With a resigned groan, she opened her eyes and looked up at the silhouette of her brother leaning over the bed.

"My name is Oaklee," she answered, preferring the nickname her father used.

Silence was interrupted by a sigh of frustration. "*Oaklee*," Leaf dramatically whispered, crouching on the floor next to her bed. "I need to show you something."

"Now?" Oaklee blurted. Leaf placed his finger on her lips as a reminder to be quiet. She shoved his hand away, and turned her head to the side, staring at the wall. "Leaf, have you lost your senses?"

Ignoring her, as usual, he whispered, "Father was not the only one burdened with a secret."

Oaklee sat up with this confession, and her fingers began habitually playing over her cord of braided hair, curling loose strands around her finger. One secret had already changed so much. Her father's last words opened the door to confusion in her previously happy and predictable life. Leaf's words billowed all those anxieties, and the flames of fear leapt before her eyes and drew her in as he whispered once more.

"As a lad the age of ten," her brother began, "I encountered a secret room beneath the biodome. I never understood what it was or what it

meant. All I could think of was Father's confession while I prepared his body for cremation, and I knew I needed to show you the room."

"Why are you sharing with me?"

The shadowed outline of her brother stood and lowered onto the bed. Her body swayed with the depression, and she bumped into his shoulder as the straw adjusted to his weight.

"I no longer know who I am able to trust, nor what my future is inside New Eden. If Father's secret proves true, then I have your and Laurel's futures to consider as well. Especially as the Second Phase will begin within the year."

"Leaf, that is madness," Oaklee hissed. "Nothing has to change. Father unfairly burdened us with knowledge that could very well destroy our happiness. How could he expect you to take on so much?" Tears brimmed as she thought of her father's other request, one that implied an unspoken danger. "Personally, I enjoy my life in New Eden, and I am ready to forget his confession. We do not even know if it is true. What if he lost his mind as he neared passing?"

"I was apparently wrong. There is no one I am able to trust." Leaf stood, a bit unsteady on his feet. He placed a hand over his chest as he cleared his throat, trying to mask the sorrow.

This had shifted into something more personal between them, and Oaklee groaned as she grabbed his sleeve, pulling him back onto the bed. "That is unfair. You know you can trust me, but that does not mean I have to agree with what I believe you are suggesting. You honestly believe we should leave New Eden?"

"Please, just come and see with your own eyes, and then decide what to believe."

"What is the present hour?"

"Two o'clock morning time."

"Do we leave Laurel here alone?"

"Yes, she shall be fine."

Oaklee pulled her knees up to her chest, luxuriating in the warmth as her chemise draped over her toes. Tree limbs cast shadowed fingers through the window into her room, scraping across her brother's forehead. Her pulse quickened as her mind groped for a decision. The forest was calling them, beckoning with each bio-breeze.

She released the wisps of hair spun onto her fingers. "I shall accompany you. What may I bring?"

In an uncommon moment of affection, Leaf pulled her into a hug and kissed the hair atop her head. Oaklee startled and pushed him off as she came to a full stand. "I did not realize it meant that much to you."

"Yes, it really does," he replied, and rose from her bed. "I brought candles to light upon reaching the hatch." Leaf placed a taper and a small wrought iron holder in her hands.

"A hatch?"

"Yes, a well-concealed one. Wear a garment you find appropriate for climbing, bring your cloak, and then meet me by the entry door."

In the dimness, Oaklee noted that her brother wore his work clothes. The linen breeches reached his lower calves rather than down to the ankle, an adjustment she had made to keep the hem clean and from fraying. She would don her older work garments as well, keeping her full-length linen day dress clean for the morrow.

A short time later, she tiptoed down the hallway. She chewed on her bottom lip as hesitation slowed her steps. Oaklee examined her brother as he leaned against the wooden entry door, head turned toward their parent's empty bedroom with a look that made her still. The muscles in his jaw were visibly tense. His arms, toned from years of hard labor, were folded rigidly across his chest. In all her fifteen years, she had never witnessed her brother appear so distressed. His nature always radiated a steadfast calm even in the most stressful of situations.

Leaf's green eyes, appearing pale in the silvered light and shadows, moved in her direction as she wrapped her braid into a coil at the base of her neck, tying it off with a piece of mohair yarn. She ignored his in-

quisitive look and peeked into their sister's room. Soft sounds of restful breathing greeted her ears. Laurel's long braid poked out of the blanket, which was pulled up to her chin.

Satisfied, Oaklee continued toward her brother who opened the wooden entry door as she approached. With a slight bow Leaf walked onto the deck and glanced in every direction, slowing his motion as a breeze fluttered against his cloak. Her hands rested on either side of the door frame, eyes wide with growing trepidation as she listened to the rustling leaves of the temperate forest whisper their warnings.

No words needed to be spoken. Oaklee knew that venturing out in the night was against the edict from *The Elements*, which only heightened her fear. Her feet anchored to the wooden floor as her mind contemplated the risks of a public trial to explain their late-night activity. But her brother's confession tugged at her heart and pulled her forward. He would never request that she take such a risk unless it was dire.

Last year, a young man and woman from the village were caught dipping their toes into the creek during the dead of night. They stood trial before the community, and then married as demanded by the young woman's father. Following the trial, Oaklee's father warned both her and Leaf never to sneak out at night, as the young couple was fortunate that banishment was not issued. "Trust is paramount inside our forming world," her father had stressed. "If we cannot depend on our community, then we have lost the heart and soul behind rebuilding what has been lost to the Outside world." She had not fully understood what he had meant, but had responded dutifully. "Yes, Father."

Breath formed in ghost-like vapors as Oaklee crossed her home's threshold and closed the door. The gentle bio-breeze made the hood of her cloak ripple across her face, her view of the landscape narrowing and expanding with each flutter.

Dread viciously knotted each nerve, taunting her need for predictability. Secrets proved to have that powerful effect. She still sought emotional relief from the last revelation. How does one ever return to

normal after the loss of a parent, let alone both parents? Would Leaf's secret add to her distress?

Barefoot, she and Leaf nimbly descended the wooden staircase from their second-story stone-and-cob apartment home. The Tudor-style building rose farther above them with each step toward the biodome floor, and the white walls with timber frames and stone-capped entries and windows glowed in the reflected moonlight.

Having reached the bottom of the stairs, Leaf darted to a nearby birch tree. He motioned for Oaklee to follow, but she dithered over his request while staring at the white, peeling bark, eerily glowing from the soft illumination of the uppermost biodome panes. Since her sleep was disturbed, her imagination had been visited by visions of the departed, as if her father and mother were guiding their steps. The leaves crunched beneath Oaklee's bare feet, and she cringed with each step. She cast a panicked expression toward Leaf and placed flattened hands on her stomach, spooked by the various hauntings.

"Do not fret, Willow," Leaf said in a quiet voice.

She inclined her head and gave her brother a look of patient perseverance for using her given name. Leaf dragged his fingers through his brown curly hair and closed his eyes while his head fell back a few beats, the tension in his jaw returning.

He straightened and then whispered in a tight voice, "I brought you shoes," handing over the leather slippers.

She snatched them from his hands and turned her back, willing her mind to relax. Fingers caressed the soft leather made from goat hides. She glanced over her shoulder at Leaf who offered a kind smile of encouragement. With a slow, labored breath, she placed one foot into a shoe and then the other as Leaf did the same, quickly lacing the leather strings. When finished, Leaf took her hand and led her through the brush of the deciduous forest, avoiding the main trail.

Upon reaching The Orchard, morbid curiosity tugged on the sleeves of her mind, and Oaklee shifted her attention to the left. The rich earth

of The Rows was freshly turned with compost in preparation for where her father would be laid to rest on the morrow. Tears threatened to form as a fresh pain gripped her tattered heart.

Seeding would begin two days hence for the Third Ceremony. She had spent the evening prior with Leaf and Laurel, deciding what would be grown in the rows that would represent their father's body, soul and spirit. All three agreed upon purple kale as a choice, their father's favorite. He loved the vibrant purple and blue colors, a reminder of their mother who was a woman "full of life and surprises," as he often shared. Therefore, it would be sown in the row representing the soul who had finally reunited with his mate. Were her mother's ashes still a part of the soil?

Consumed by such inconsolable thoughts, Oaklee did not immediately notice that they approached the path leading to the rainforest biome. She tightened her hold on Leaf's hand and emotionally prepared to leave the main biodome for the ancillary enclosure with vastly different ecological controls. Leaf had conveniently left this portion out of his request, knowing she did not have a fondness for the jungle.

They sprinted through the South Cave, a narrow stone tunnel connecting the domes. Leaf opened a hewn wooden door and pulled Oaklee behind nearby banana plants. The large leaves dripped with condensation, and Oaklee scrunched up her face as the water hit her forehead. As irritating as the droplets became, she was nonetheless grateful to be sheltered from any eyes that may have spotted their forms creeping along the path.

Leaf gained her attention, then lifted a finger to his lips, moving his head to the left with two sharp nods. With swift movements, he became a shadow among the tropical plants until she could no longer see him. Every muscle stiffened, and her breathing labored against the sweltering air. She had lost him, his movements indiscernible and inaudible. The rainforest was thick and dark, and the lush vegetation appeared black against the filtered moonlight.

Cold slime brushed against her neck. A tongue flicked the air near her ear. She tried to steady her breath and remain calm. Closing her eyes, she focused on the surrounding nature rather than the reptile inching its way onto her shoulder. She knew her fear was irrational. There were no poisonous or dangerous snakes in the biodome. But a snake was still a snake.

A small cry escaped her lips. She pressed her fingers against her mouth as a flock of blue-gray tanagers in a nearby tree took flight, their discernable calls squawking in protest. In a moment of panic, she grabbed the snake and threw it into the bushes at her side. In the same moment, the foliage in front of her quivered. She shrieked when a shadow leapt out, pulling her into an embrace.

“Are you injured? Experiencing any pain?”

“You left me!” She pounded Leaf’s chest with her fists. “I had to endure the company of a snake on my neck because of you!”

She shuddered again with the memory. The fury left her limbs, and she dropped her hands as tears finally fell, making her swollen eyes sting in discomfort.

Leaf pulled away gently with relief, and watched as his sister placed trembling fingers over her mouth as sobs broke loose. Guilt pricked at his conscience. She was entirely his responsibility now.

It was not too late to turn around. He could ask Coal, but he knew that Willow was the best recipient of this information. Her agile mind and natural curiosity were a perfect combination to process the numerous unknowns they would encounter. Still, her temperament might be their undoing, especially as she was sleep-deprived and heartbroken.

Bringing her along was the right decision. He would rather they face any repercussions together than become separated after losing both parents, particularly in light of their father’s last words. Willow may not feel the same, and would probably be happier without him, but he needed

her. It was difficult for him to express this sentiment as their relationship was built on tolerance. Leaf knew she would outright reject his brotherly affection, or his desire to protect her.

Did she wonder why their father had to die and not him?

His mood had turned black. Leaf needed to remain calm and steady for Willow's sake. Despite her beliefs, he loved her and cared deeply for her future—even when he felt exasperated by her whirlwind of drama.

"I am glad my company is preferred over a snake," he said with a lopsided grin.

"It is debatable." Willow wiped away a tear. "Please do not leave me behind again."

"I promise, cross my heart and hope to die." He traced a criss-crossing pattern over his chest.

"Good."

Leaf pushed aside the offense he felt at her response. There was no time for taking offense. He felt buried beneath the remains of their prior life, the ashes coating every part of who he thought he was in this community. It was time to move forward and toward their new future.

"Let us continue, Oaklee."

The trembling in Willow's hand increased as Leaf guided her through the tropics of this enclosure. She startled every so often, and he knew she was, in vain, trying not to think of other snakes slithering around in the branches and bushes. Occasionally, a vine would brush against their bare skin, pushing their hoods back and eliciting a whimper from his sister. Warm moist air collected on his face and exposed hair. The droplets slid into his eyes. Leaf wiped away the condensation with his free hand, thankful that their living quarters surrounded the agriculture and temperate forests.

As a small child, his sister found the rainforest a magical land filled with exotic beauty. The stories of her adventures entertained him as he apprenticed with their father to learn the flora and fauna of their enclosed world. She considered various occupations within the commu-

nity, a requirement of all Noble children. For a short period, she explored the possibility of becoming a naturopath or apothecary, working the rainforest to gather medicinals for the clinic. Later that same year she babbled on endlessly about processing the spices for the Great Hall.

The birds, reptiles, amphibians, and insects are necessary for natural pollination, germination, and for pest control. Too many insects can present a problem; too many birds, too. The snakes prey upon the insects and birds; the birds, frogs, and salamanders feast on the insects. If the birds become too populated, the cooks gather the eggs.

Yet his sister was never able to get over the snakes, as much as she tried, and as much as she knew their necessity in the ecosystem. A few months later she instead became an apprentice to a village spinner and weaver.

All the while, Leaf was pushed through a gauntlet of education with each of The Elements and the village barrister, a system open to each of the Noble children. Father had touted that Leaf's education, as the Son of Earth, was of utmost importance and his priority above all else. Hours and days were dedicated to ensure that Leaf was familiar with every aspect and expectation of that defined status. The only other Noble child who endured such a rigorous upbringing was Skylar, Son of Wind, just one year Leaf's junior. Skylar was his dear friend, and Leaf was happy to spend his education competing against him.

Leaf slowed his pace before a pond covered in water lilies and duck weed. He guided Willow along the perimeter until they reached the carved stone Dragon Bridge. Mist enveloped the bridge, courtesy of a large roaring waterfall. He smiled as Willow tarried with a familiar look of awe. He placed a thankful hand upon the Dragon Bridge, and studied his sister as she found a moment of respite from their troubles.

The stream bubbled beneath the bridge and through the tropics biome on a merry path back to Step-Stone Pond, named for the water lilies that painted a dotted journey toward the crashing water. He surveyed the twin stone dragons, flying in opposite directions over the stream. Each

end of the bridge sported a head and tail of the mythical beast. Crossing the bridge felt akin to entering another world, a feeling he knew Willow shared as she rested her hands reverently upon the scaled, arched back of a stone dragon before they continued their journey.

Night-blooming bromeliads framed the right of the path, circling the pond and stream. He imagined his sister's thoughts turning the colorful flowers into rainforest faeries, bursting into the night while bent upon mischief. She often thought and spoke as an illustrated story, amusing him some moments and, in others, threatening his patience.

Leaf dropped Willow's hand as they slowed before a small boulder, wiping the perspiration on his breeches. He exhaled loudly, then placed a knee onto the wet jungle substrate, pushing against the rock that was several hands high and wide. The boulder would not budge. Normally this would be an easy feat for him, but he had to give in to his exhaustion.

"I need your assistance," he confessed.

She knelt beside him, groaning against the pressure she applied on the rock. Finally giving way, the rock rolled toward the water's edge, revealing a hatch. Small tingles worked their way down his arms, leaving behind small bumps as the hair on the back of his head defied gravity.

"Are you sure it is safe?" she asked. "There were such extremes to cover the opening."

"I am not sure. But Willow, this is important."

"It is *Oaklee*, and exactly how did you roll that rock as a lad of ten?"

"I did not move the rock. Father did."

Leaf watched the white of Willow's eyes grow wide.

"He brought you here?"

"I followed him and hid out of sight, even below the hatchway. Although I did not understand what the room held, I feared returning, not wishing to risk our family's banishment for my curiosity. Father never mentioned this room as I grew older, and so I concluded it was not for me to know. Yet I cannot escape the feeling that this room is important and necessary for my future."

“I see,” she said, placing hands upon hips. “I shall never understand how you keep such information inside of you without bursting.”

With furrowed brows, Willow reached into her pocket and pulled out the candle and its holder. She held them out to him, declaring in one look that she would not climb down the ladder in the dark. The snake had escalated her fears. Perhaps the snake was an omen, a warning to resist temptation. In New Eden there were not many temptations, but this hatch smelled sweetly of forbidden fruit.

He vaguely remembered what was below and knew that whatever they found would open their eyes and reveal critical information about The Elements—exactly the information he needed before making further decisions regarding his future and family.

Leaf placed a hand gently upon his sister’s forearm. “We shall light the candles below.”

“Leaf, I fear I am unable to do this.”

“I shall go first, and, once below, shall light my candle to guide you.”

With a heavy sigh of reluctant compliance, Willow gave him the candle in her hand. “Two lit candles would be better than one, please.”

Leaf squeezed her hand, and then swung open the door. A strange smell came through the opening. It was not an earthy scent he recognized. He thought on what he could compare it to, but failed to find a connection. Shaking off the odor, he crouched on the ground and crawled backwards until his feet found the ladder.

Oaklee watched her brother disappear into the abyss. The jungle sounds instantly amplified and drowned out her wildly beating heart as she looked into the blackened rainforest. She seemed to hear every insect flying, every bird roosting, every snake slithering. Should her brother become injured, she would have to brave her way back to the apartments alone. And in the dark. She paced a few steps, and then stood above the

opening, wringing her hands and darting her eyes between the hatchway and the jungle.

Far too much time had passed and there still was no sound from her brother. She was about to say something to the black hole when she glimpsed a spark, followed by more sparks, until a small flame appeared. He had ignited the fire nest. Soon two small flames of light appeared from the candles, and Leaf stomped out the nest when both wicks were lit.

Oaklee knew it was time. She did not want to think too hard or too much, having committed herself to see this great secret. Following Leaf's example, she crouched on the wet ground, forcing herself to ignore what created the substrate that squished between her fingers as she began crawling backwards. Her feet groped awkwardly for the ladder, and she rolled her eyes in irritation. Target found, feet in place, the only option was to climb back out or to continue down, and down she went, looking up at the ceiling of the dome with a prayer on her lips as she lost sight of the jungle.

Yes, the residents will be cut off from the outside world, but by choice not by force. This is a city within the United States after all, not a war camp. There is a communications room housing satellite technology, known as Messenger Pigeon, open to all community members so they may re-connect with loved ones or find out news and current history. Anyone may leave at any time and receive advanced medical attention outside instead of in-house naturopathy. That being said, the idea is that children will grow up never knowing or understanding technology the same way we do. Instead, we hope they become fully absorbed by their environment from infancy, leaning on rocks, trees, and flowers as companions rather than electronics. We are building an Earth-like Mars colony and must know what happens should technology fail. Will the residents thrive? Communication from space is a real concern when planning enclosed terraformed societies. If humans are cut off from Earth, what will happen psychologically? Therefore, we will encourage limited communication to observe what unfolds in a worst-case scenario situation.

—Hanley Nichols, on *Atoms to Adams Daily Show*, August 15, 2030



Chapter Three

Leaf watched the varied emotions play across his sister's face. A storm visibly brewed inside her head as they both stared at the unknown. She took a deep breath, a sure sign she was ready to release her temper.

"Oaklee," Leaf said, hoping the use of her requested name would distract the storm from gaining strength. It worked.

"What are these?"

"I am not sure. What do you think?"

Willow approached a long and narrow table made of shiny metal, what Leaf imagined their tools must have looked like once upon a time. Occasionally, when work was slow, the town blacksmith, Connor, or his son Coal, would buffer their tools until a dull shine returned.

The table backed up against an earthen wall similar to their cob apartment home. The dirt floor was smooth and compacted, reflecting a flat gleam from his candle while the table gave a sharp glare under the light in his peripheral vision. It was a contrast he did not enjoy, making his eyes squint. The room was very clean, not even a cobweb in sight, nor an errant beetle.

Leaf tilted his head as he stared at two wide and curiously flat rectangular objects resting upon the table. They were remarkably thin, and

unlike anything he had ever seen before, easily six hands across and four hands tall. What were they? The dark ominous surface of each item gave muted reflections. A chill flushed across his skin. Was it safe to stare at one's own image inside the unknown? Beneath the table sat two tall, narrow structures. Were they crates of some sort? What did they contain?

Leaf turned his attention back to Willow as she too studied the strange objects on the tabletop more closely, her initial hesitation giving way to curiosity. Her fingers examined the smooth surface with tentative touches, pulling back quickly to ensure she did not lose them. When nothing happened, she placed her whole hand on the front and caressed the surface, then traced the outline of her face.

Willow spared him a fleeting glance. "They appear similar to a looking glass, but give only a dull reflection. Are these perhaps portals to the Outside?"

"I think you believe too many stories."

"This is no time to mock me, My Lord. You asked me what I think. I answer, and then you turn my words on me."

The storm began brewing once more. Leaf blew the hair out of his eyes, feeling daft. One stupid misstep and hurricane Willow had gained strength all over again.

"Willow—I mean *Oaklee*." This gained him a small smile. "My apologies. I did not mean to cause offense. I was simply pointing out that portals are not real, they are imagined. I do like your observation, though. They do resemble a looking glass without clear reflections."

"How do you know portals are not real? We are an experimental Mars colony after all."

"If portals are real, then civilization has advanced beyond our humble home and the space technology that houses us. I cannot fathom that our community's mission is necessary if man has devised a way to transport their bodies through space and time literally."

Willow nodded, accepting his explanation. She then knelt beneath the table to explore the other strange structures. Tapping one, she leaned

against the object and listened carefully to the hollow sound while her fingers explored the even and grooved areas.

“I believe this may be a rock from the Outside. I am unsure of what else to consider. It has a texture and sound that I am unfamiliar with. Listen.”

She tapped on the surface as he drew nearer.

Willow quirked her brows in question. “What is the purpose? Why place rectangular rocks in rows beneath a table?”

Her fingers continued to explore the rock when an unexpected blue light shone from what appeared to be a crystal. Willow jumped back and held her hands tight against her chest, almost bumping into him.

“Leaf, this rock is living.”

He leaned over her shoulder and frowned. Perhaps his sister was correct and they were indeed staring at portals to the Outside world.

She pointed at the blue light with widened eyes. “And it is singing.”

The blue light cast an eerie glow on Willow’s face as they listened to the strange whine vibrating from the rock. Leaf knelt next to his sister and began to inspect the object.

“What gives this rock life?” Willow’s frightened voice nearly matched the whine. “Is it magic?”

Leaf let out a slow breath, and then climbed beneath the table to look behind the object and found vines unlike any he had seen before. They were mainly black; two were tan. His hands followed the vines up behind the table to the object that resembled a looking glass, and from there to the mud wall, where a strange root was embedded. He pulled the root, and the blue light and whining sound came to an abrupt end. Leaf brought his candle closer, inspecting the root and touched the cool metal in wonder. The root easily fit back into the wall, and he stared, completely baffled, when the blue light turned on, and the sound resumed as before.

“I am not sure what this is, or where these vines came from. Somehow the looking glass is connected.” Leaf turned around and faced his

sister, giving her a shrug. “Father’s last words were to ‘activate the Scroll.’ This does not appear like a scroll. However, we have clearly activated something. Is there a crystal on the looking glass?”

Willow accepted his hand and stood up. She gave immediate attention to the blackened rectangular shapes on the table, touching the smooth surface once more. Finding an unlit crystal, she pushed it. Instantly, they were greeted with a bright light. Leaf became entranced, and his pulse quickened in reply.

“What was Father doing in here?” she asked. Each limb and muscle froze as if she were under a spell cast by the ethereal light.

An image shone through the light in a bright color, asking for a “password” in thick letters. Willow inhaled sharply. Leaf was unable to reason by what magic the glass did this, equally bothered by how to interact with its request.

Without turning toward her, Leaf knew Willow was beginning to brew again. But this time he would not hold her back. Somewhere deep inside of him he wanted to run, scream, and demand answers. He wanted to turn back time and have his father speak to him not on a deathbed, but as a father to his son, preparing him for a necessary future with Outsider ways.

“I thought portals were imagined, but this is real,” he said, calm and controlled despite his rapid heart rate. He used a handkerchief to wipe the sweat beading on his forehead, and then neatly folded the cloth back into the pocket of his breeches.

The blue light unexpectedly turned black. Willow grabbed his arm, and her fingernails dug into his skin. The pain seared, but he dared not move. The light returned, blinding them. Instinctively, they put up their hands as shields against the unanticipated flash, reminiscent of when Skylar had lifted a hand-held looking glass up to the light, and turned it their direction. Skylar had laughed, but Leaf remembered how his eyes hurt, just as they did now.

When he recovered from the portal's flash, Leaf watched with growing horror as a face flickered onto the glass. The man appeared to look back at them while leaning forward, creasing dark eyebrows, and then his eyes widened as his mouth slackened.

Leaf grabbed the candleholder from Willow. He maneuvered his body in front of his sister as protection, hearing the rustle of fabric as she lifted the hood of her cloak to further hide in the shadows. The visitor looked expectantly at him, as if still trying to decide if he were real. Leaf questioned at that moment if the man was real as well.

"Greetings. We come in peace," Leaf said, extending his hand in a welcoming gesture.

It seemed the natural thing to say and do, he reasoned, when meeting an Outsider for the first time. The man in the glass angled his head, and creased his brows once again. After a moment, he burst into laughter, falling back against a large chair that appeared like a throne compared to the humble wooden variety found in their homes. Leaf glanced over his shoulder casually and exchanged a worried look with Willow. He returned his attention back to the portal and gasped when the image cleared and he realized the manner of person with whom he was interacting.

Chin-length black hair swept forward across the man's face, decorated by a single bright blue streak on one side. One eye peered at him inquisitively while the other eye remained hidden by the black and blue hair. Two metal rings protruded from his bottom lip, a primal look emulating how Leaf envisioned savages of eras past.

The mysterious man wore a tight black tunic with shortened sleeves, exposing a tattoo on his right bicep of a tree in flames, bearing red fruit. Another tattoo circled in a ring around his upper left arm in what appeared to be Celtic knots. Leaf thought of the linden tree tattoo on his father's back. The community used henna during certain celebrations, but only the first generation possessed permanent tattoos, received prior to Moving Day. Why was this man's tree on fire?

He met the man's exposed eye, an otherworldly shade of silvery blue intensified by a darkly drawn border. Leaf stood up straight, squared his shoulders, and returned the silent challenge in the man's hard stare.

"Who are *you*?" the man in the portal demanded.

Oaklee closed her eyes and cringed, clutching Leaf's cloak as she buried her face to hide. Leaf had plucked the candle from her grasp as he maneuvered in front of her, and she was grateful, feeling lightheaded as the fear swirled around in a dizzying speed. She closed her eyes to listen to the sounds of nature, her usual way to find peace. But she could not hear the jungle. Only the Outsider's voice echoed in her mind. This man's speech was strange to her ears. His tone was soft yet unmistakably cold—and he pronounced his words in a very odd way.

Her brother began again in an uncharacteristically loud voice and she jumped. "Forgive me for not being forthcoming, but I do not believe we should share this information with a stranger."

She peered over Leaf's shoulder and held her breath. The Outsider personified the complete opposite of everything earthy. The outright defiance to nature moved a small part of her heart, an area that festered against her father's death, her mother's death, and the cycle of life.

"Well played," said the man in the portal. A smug look hardened his features. "However, you are in the communication room, and I'm your salvation. So, how can I save you today?"

"We do not need your... salvation."

"We?" He leaned in and looked around, and Oaklee ducked. "Oh, god. You're mental. Shit. Is everyone in the dome your brand of crazy? Or just you?"

Oaklee sucked in an angry breath and could bridle her tongue no longer. "How dare you mock your office and our possible needs, sir." She stepped out from behind Leaf, a hand clenched at her side while grabbing the candle back. "Where are your manners and compassion?"

The man sat back against a throne, somehow spinning without standing, casually placing a fist in front of his mouth. A black glove covered the hand up to where his fingers began. Oaklee found his partial glove curious as it stretched up his forearm, and only on one hand, she noticed. Fingerless gloves were common during the colder months in New Eden, but who wore a single glove? And one so tall upon the arm? His eyes narrowed slightly as he returned the appraisal. She lowered her head while maintaining a view of the man in her peripheral vision, thankful for the hood darkening her features.

“Forgive me, fair Maiden.”

The man gave a slight bow, and looked up into her shadowed eyes with a self-assured smile on his pierced lips. His voice was again gentle and fluid like the wind, yet bearing a rocky edge of contempt. Oaklee drew her brows together, perplexed by the Outsider’s manner of speaking.

She was unsure of the proper protocol. Did she reply to the apology? How does one shake hands and seal forgiveness through such technology? Did she want to touch his hand? No, she decided resolutely. Anxiety overshadowed her sudden burst of confidence.

With head still lowered, she glanced up and further studied the peculiar man. His dark-rimmed eyes frightened her a little. It was as if he had rubbed ash around them—a strange action, most especially for a man. His hands moved back to the table, and she noticed a black ring on his thumb. But most alarming were the black fingernails that tapped the tabletop. Were they diseased? His smile changed, and he stared at her openly, a mischievous glint in the curve of his lips as he enjoyed her inspection of him.

Oaklee snapped out of the trance and her indignation took flight.

“You, sir, are trash!” Oaklee turned and walked toward the ladder.

Leaf caught her by the arm and held her in place. Hurricane Willow was now blowing, a family nickname she earned from the moments when her anger charged the atmosphere in a furious whirlwind whenever

she felt the need to address an injustice. He tightened his grip on her arm as he turned to speak to the man in the portal.

“I do not know exactly how you are a means of salvation—or even if it is true—but grant us one favor if you do possess such power. Please do not share with the Outside world that we communicated. It was an accident. We did not mean to activate the portal and summon you.”

Oaklee glanced in her brother’s direction as he let go of her arm, saddened by the pronounced dark circles under his eyes. Straight posture and a level gaze, Leaf made the picture of authority in steady command of this surreal experience, despite the grief marking his features. She timidly glanced over her shoulder for the Outsider’s reaction.

The man relaxed his posture and blinked at her slowly, and she felt her heart nervously pound in her chest. “I’ll keep your secret, but only if the Maiden says she is sorry.”

“I will not.” Oaklee glared over her shoulder as she burned with humiliation. The man lifted his eyebrow at her clipped words. “I am a Noble woman and will not fall to the whim of Outsider fancies.”

“What about me will you fall to?”

Disgusted by his ego, Oaklee faced the man, narrowing her eyes. “Rest assured, there is nothing about you I would *ever* fall over.”

“Pity,” he said, taunting her with another humored smile.

Oaklee groaned in frustration and placed a hand on her hip, fiercely gripping the candleholder with the other. These games of power vexed her, and she was appalled that a man would treat a young woman so cheaply. She lifted her chin and looked away toward the wall, listening to Leaf sigh heavily as he shifted on his feet.

After several moments, she gave a sideways glance, astonished to find the man’s face lit with satisfaction. He had enjoyed her insult? Did he not realize she was serious? Oaklee decided *he* was the one who was not sane, partially mad with some Outsider illness, hence the black fingernails. Most men would feel their pride wounded.

The man fixed his gaze on her as he leaned back against his throne with a posture of indifference, running a hand through his hair as if bored and unimpressed. She almost believed he was serious but the corner of his mouth tilted up slightly in a near indiscernible grin. “How can you sleep at night, using a word like ‘trash’?” he threw out. “That’s like a four-letter word to you hippies. God, I bet your mouth feels so dirty.”

“You, sir, may not treat—” Leaf began to protect her honor, but she silenced him by placing a hand upon his chest, and gently shook her head. Her brother drew his brows together as he searched her eyes.

Oaklee turned back toward the portal and lowered her head in a bow—quickly, before she changed her mind. She could not shake his hand per their custom, but she could still exhibit the humility it represented. She took a deep breath to settle her nerves, and then said, “I am most sorry for insulting you, sir.”

To ensure he received the tone of her message, she maintained a downcast posture in a long pause, and then lowered to a curtsy as an act of honor. She would rather slap the smug expression on his face. Instead, she closed her eyes and willed compassion to surface, returning his stunned gaze with one of empathy as she nearly knelt on the floor.

The man’s self-important smile faded. He dropped his head toward his chest, allowing long black hair to cover his face. Oaklee stared at the bright blue streak curiously. Had no one ever apologized to him before? His shoulders rose and fell, the smooth lines of his tunic taut against his frame. The Outsider nonchalantly returned to an aloof posture and moved the hair out of his eyes with a quick jerk of his head, tucking strands behind an ear with timid movements.

The man in the portal pushed a button on a small black cube.

“This conversation is now private,” he said.

She released a shaky breath. Leaf offered his hand to help her rise with a disapproving look. She had bestowed a high honor to the Outsider and had asserted authority over that of her brother’s.

The Outsider met her eyes for several heartbeats and then softly asked, “Are you in trouble?”

He shifted forward on his throne, all traces of haughtiness replaced with one meaningful look. What happened to all the ridicule? Oaklee weighed his question. Leaf watched her closely, anger working his jaw, though he remained silent.

“We are not sure,” Oaklee replied when her brother did not. “Do you know how to activate a Scroll?”

“You’re not sure if you’re in trouble?”

Leaf dropped his gaze, and she followed his example. They remained quiet and still, and Oaklee nibbled the inside of her lip as the tension silently increased.

With a sigh tinged with obvious annoyance, the man fell back against his throne with a dramatic thud and lifted his eyes to the ceiling with what looked like a plea before continuing.

“I’m Fillion, the nighttime master of the electronic dungeon at New Eden Enterprises.” Oaklee jerked her head up with a shocked glance toward her brother. The man in the portal leveled his gaze at her, increasing the heartbeat echoing in her ears. “I’m pretty sure maidens don’t take leisurely strolls at 2 a.m. and ask about technology without due cause. So, what are you planning here? A prison break?”



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.

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