

In a single week, Alishel's life on a perfect Earth is shattered by a series of revelations which make her a fugitive. Can she survive her new knowledge of the horror behind the beauty?

The Biome Sacrifices

By Heather McCloud

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THE
BIO ME
SACRIFICES

A NOVEL

HEATHER
MCLOUD

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Chapter 1

The sea pounded against a lumpy boulder, throwing up a heavy spray of water which still didn't look right to me. With a tongue click and a swipe of my brush, I bumped the red value two points in the nearest droplet and stepped back from the projector.

The holosculpt projected exactly what I had painted and perhaps that was the problem. A froth of white draped limply over the dark blues and grays of the ocean waves. The rock in the foreground just sat there. The clouds above appeared bored.

I flung my brush through the projection. The seascape wasn't made any worse by the smears of color left in the wake of the flying sensor tip.

A red light flickered at the edge of my peripheral vision. "Activate," I whispered, and flicked my eyes down and to the right to examine my dashboard. The glowing figures projected by my Monitor indicated six messages had come through since I shut the Monitor off, I was late for my coffee date, and my blood pressure was ten points higher than it should be.

First things first. I closed my eyes, took two deep breaths, and encouraged my racing heart to slow and the blood vessels in my extremities to relax. A pleasant vibration behind my right ear indicated my blood pressure had normalized.

I grabbed my bag as I muttered at the Monitor. "Tell me, are all the messages from Aoife?"

A green dot lit on my dashboard. "Okay," I said, walking to the front door. "Message Aoife and say I'll be there in fifteen." The dot flashed twice and went out.

I stepped outside, hoping dad would be in the front yard, and looked around the property. A screen of trees intermixed with bushes obscured the house from the bike path which was our only access to the podway. Between the trees and house, squares of waist-high grass interspersed with squares of flowerbeds.

No dad in sight. "Monitor off," I said in a normal tone.

A numeral three appeared on my dashboard and the Monitor disappeared from my peripheral vision. I began prowling the yard, hoping dad would be somewhere near and feeling more pressured to find him quickly than I knew was healthy.

My irritation grew when I didn't find him in front. I went around to the south side and searched the rows of apple trees in the orchard. Apples hung low from every branch. Although still a little green, they were growing nicely. A flock of red-winged blackbirds broke from the grass ahead of me and I startled, then whipped around at a tap on my shoulder.

Dad stood there, frowning down at me.

"Pattern recognition," he said.

"Yeah," I snapped back. "I know. I walked right past you and didn't see you and I should have. Look. I'm late for coffee, I'm irritated, and I'm pissed."

"Ooh," dad said, and took a step back. "Irritated and pissed?"

I laughed at my solid, muscular dad's imitation of cowering before me.

"So why the pissed off irritation, Alishel?"

"I destroyed my seascape just now." My statement triggered the emotion I had been holding at bay and tears came swimming into my vision.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because it was no good. It—it didn't do what I wanted it to. It just kind of...sat there. Even after the animation it just didn't—it wasn't alive."

"Alishel." Dad put one of his thick-fingered, calloused hands on my shoulder with feather-light weight. "You've got talent, my love. You're just young. You need more—"

"Right," I said. "I know. I'm young, I need practice, I need experience, I need, I need, I need. But what I want is good art now!" My voice rose and I noted the sudden silence of the birds around us even as my father's eyebrows went up. I scuffed a weed with my toe. "Sorry. I'm sorry. And I'm late, too. And we could have had this entire conversation while I was biking if you'd just get a damn Monitor like everyone else."

"Yes, right." Dad said. "Was that the source of the pissed off or of the irritation?"

His effort at humor paid off and I smiled at him. "Oh, now, let me think. I believe the seascape pissed me off and your intransigence was irritating."

"Very good language usage. Now get your bike and go."

I spun for the house, hesitated, spun back, and placed a quick peck on his cheek. "Love you dad."

I turned my Monitor back on as I peddled hell-bent down the path. "Call a pod to the intersection of home path and 34C." The Monitor flashed green at me and began a countdown clock to the pod's arrival. Good. I'd timed it perfectly.

I slammed the bike into the rack just as the pod wheeled up. The pod seat formed to my backside, and I caught my breath before we even turned onto the main podway and joined up with a train heading into town.

#

Aoife and Dembe were waiting for me under the awning of the coffee shop. Aoife frowned when she spotted me and

Dembe reached over and pressed his hand to her jiggling knee. Aoife's impatience rubbed against the raw spot on my psyche left by my artistic failure, and I sighed.

"Did you not even listen to my messages?" Aoife lifted a strand of her curly hair and shoved it toward my face. "We were supposed to match!"

I made a face at her. "It's platinum week? So sorry I didn't have time, but I was busy completely screwing up something important."

She pouted and dropped the curl. "Your holosculpt didn't turn out?"

"No."

Dembe removed his hand from Aoife's leg and put it on my arm, his elegant fingers putting gentle pressure on my bicep.

"What is it?" I asked.

He leaned forward, his platinum hair contrasting oddly with his brown-black irises. "Not here," he whispered.

"Are you crying?" Aoife asked.

"Not here," he repeated, and swiped at his eyes.

Aoife jumped to her feet, bumping the table in her rush to go. My hand darted out to steady the table. She glared at me, then turned to Dembe.

"If not here, where?"

"Let's walk to the park," he said, and unfolded his lanky frame, as always making me feel short despite my greater-than-average height.

Aoife swung her compact frame into motion, driven, as usual, by great internal energy. Dembe and I followed, our longer strides making up for her head start.

A block from the park, Aoife could no longer handle the silence of my brooding and Dembe's apparent stress.

"So what?" She asked. "What's the big deal?"

"I found something," Dembe said. "I was hacking and I, uh, I guess I hacked into the wrong place."

"Oh my god," Aoife breathed. "Did you get caught this time?"

Dembe waved his hand. "I doubt it. I'm too good for that. Besides, I'd already know if I had, wouldn't I?"

"So, what'd you find?" I asked. "Flash it to us."

He shook his head, looking miserable. "I can't flash it. I won't." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't even trust our Monitors with this one."

Aoife and I stopped walking.

"What?" She screeched. "You don't—"

Dembe clamped a hand over her mouth. "Hush. No, just..just hush."

He left his hand in place until Aoife nodded. She started talking again as soon as he dropped his hand. "So how are you going to show us if you can't flash it?"

He swung his satchel off his shoulder, looked around to spot the nearest camera, and turned his back to it. Aoife and I crowded his shoulders to look at the actual piece of paper he pulled out.

Aoife saw it first, gasped, and stumbled back a step. At first, I couldn't make out what the still shot portrayed. I saw bits and pieces, flashes of green and splashes of red. Whatever it was, it made my heart go still and my limbs freeze. After a moment, I realized my eyes had drifted away from the paper to the ground. I forced them back and saw the paper shaking—no, Dembe's hands were shaking. If he could look, I could, too.

I studied the image this time with an artist's eye. The shot was framed by a riot of greens—the interlacing vegetation of jungle. Thick, white smoke rose from grass huts. Closer to the foreground, villagers lay in heaps on the ground. Women sprawled in bloody clumps, their limbs at strange angles. Black pools soaked their

crumpled skirts. The tiny limbs of babies and young children poked out from beneath the women.

In the foreground three men hung by their feet from poles, their long black hair brushing the ground. The men's faces...their faces...I whirled around and vomited into a bush.

When I straightened up and turned back to my friends, Dembe was shoving the paper back into his satchel as a pair of men walked toward our group.

One of them stopped as he neared us. "Are you okay?" He asked me.

I nodded. I could feel how wide my eyes were.

"She's just got a stomach virus," Aoife said.

I wondered how she could recover so quickly from the brutality we had just witnessed.

"Get her to a House Doctor," he said. "No need to suffer."

"We were just on our way home to do that," she replied with a bright smile. "Thanks!"

My Monitor alarms were going off. I checked them automatically and saw a scroll of alerts had triggered. "Blood pressure spike, sympathetic reaction, cortisol levels elevated..." It advised me to perform immediate biofeedback and asked if it needed to contact emergency services for physical threat.

I assured Monitor there was no threat, closed my eyes, and began a calming breathing sequence. Problem was, with my eyes closed, all I saw was a pile of carnage.

Dembe's hand touched the back of my hand. "Sorry, Allie. Sorry. Are you alright?"

I jerked my chin down once and opened my eyes. "Let's walk."

We turned into the park and took the meandering path which passed huge oaks and planters full of flowers. Tall

grass, shelter for many varieties of North American wildlife, brushed against my thighs as I stumbled along.

Aoife broke the silence. "Why on this Green Earth would you show us such a thing? Where did you find it? What the hell, Dembe?"

"It was archived on the Public Services site. Under a service I've never heard of."

"But..." Aoife trailed off.

I picked up for her. "But we know all the services. There's Environment, Health, Education, Technology, Security, Agriculture—"

"Yes. And there's also a hidden menu for Biome," Dembe said.

"Biome?" Aoife repeated.

Dembe remained silent as we both processed this information.

"Those weren't humans then," I said slowly.

"They were Nosies," Aoife said. I looked at her and saw her face had relaxed.

Her declaration infuriated me. "Don't call them that. They're Biome Natives," I said. "Just because they live on a different planet and have big noses doesn't mean they're not people."

Aoife clicked her tongue. "Ooh. Touchy much?"

"My dad says—"

"My dad says," Aoife mimicked in a sing-song.

Dembe cleared his throat. The sound broke our glaring contest.

"Yes?" I asked, turning to him.

"The point is...when was the last time you saw something about the war on Biome?"

"That was a long time ago," Aoife said.

"Yeah," I continued for her. "It was vicious, but why bring it up now? And why would some mysterious department keep stills of the horrible thing?"

"The time stamp is August 23, 2345. And there's lots more like this."

"That's last month!" Aoife screeched the last word.

"That's last month," Dembe repeated.

"I don't get it," I said. "Why...what..." The varied stresses of my day overflowed into anger. "This doesn't have anything to do with me—with us. Why show us some horrible picture of something that may or may not have happened last month on Biome when it has no bearing on anything? It's like—it's like pornography or something. It's gratuitous."

Dembe stepped back. At his movement I found I had leaned into his personal space and maybe my voice was raised, too. With a sigh, I let my shoulders drop. As soon as I relaxed, Dembe laid a hand on arm.

"No bearing?" He asked. "You've seen the conspiracy worm bots just like the rest of us. Don't you think it might be important to know if our entire government is lying to us?"

Some ideas are so new and awful that it is hard to think about them. I heard Dembe's words. I recalled the last worm bot which had briefly blinked on my Monitor as I connected to the web. It had a border which flashed red and yellow and had screamed "Secret War On Biome Ramps Up!" As always, I had dismissed it with a flick of my eyes. Pressure built up in my head.

"That's ridiculous. UE wouldn't allow those worm bots if—"

"Are you hearing yourself?" Dembe asked. Now his voice was rising. "You just suggested UE should control everything we see on the web! You just suggested..." he broke off, his eyes wide.

Aoife stepped to stand beside me. "Maybe this is all bullshit," she said. "Maybe we're just a bunch of kids who have no business poking our noses into secret government files."

My brain scrambled with the words of the conversation. "Secret government files" rubbed up against "conspiracy" which became entangled with the entire government lying to us. The pressure in my head ramped up again and the blood pressure warning started blinking urgently on my dash.

"My Monitor's screeching at me," I said. "I'm going home to meditate. Do something calm. Take a long, hot bath. Something."

"Great," Aoife said. "Run home to daddy."

I spun on her, my body moving too fast, my eyes narrowing. She flung her hands up.

"Stop! I'm sorry," she yelled.

I saw her fear and it broke me a little.

"No, Aoife, I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry I lost my temper."

In one of her flash changes of mood, her face lit up even as her bottom lip trembled. She threw her arms around me and held me tightly, rocking a little back and forth. When she finally let go, we stood close, foreheads together.

"I've been mean today," she said. "It's my time to bleed. I just get so wound up."

"You do," I said. "You get really wound up, and I have a temper, and Dembe here pokes his nose where it definitely doesn't belong." I laughed a little and stroked her cheek while reaching blindly for Dembe's hand. He took mine and squeezed a little. "But we still love each other, right?"

"Right," they said in unison.

Aoife linked her arm with mine and turned us toward the podway. "Let's send you home, Allie."

Chapter 2

As soon as I stepped inside, I smelled onions sautéing. The scent, normally a favorite of mine, just made me notice my still-churning stomach.

Dad's broad back hid the stove from view, but I took a guess at dinner.

"Omelets?"

The spatula landed in the frying pan with a clank as dad crouched and spun to face me, our good butcher knife in his right hand. I froze at the look on his face and then he relaxed and straightened up, setting the knife on the counter.

"Dad? Are you alright?"

"Fine. You startled me."

"Sorry," I said, and started crying.

"Whoa," dad said. "Whoa there, little girl. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry."

He walked around the table just as I sank into a chair and put my face in my hands. I could sense him standing next to me, indecisive.

"It's not that," I said. "It's Dembe."

"What did the young man do now?"

"He was hacking again." I looked up just as dad snapped his fingers and cocked his head at me.

I swore. "Monitor off."

He gave me a crooked smile.

"He hacked into Public Services," I said.

Dad's face paled. I looked down, feeling guilty for reasons I didn't understand, and saw his knuckles whitening where he gripped the table edge.

"Tell me the whole thing," he commanded.

"There's a hidden menu for Biome," I said. "And I guess some archives? But he printed out this still shot..." I trailed off. Even the thought of describing it made my mouth feel filthy. But dad stood silent next to me, waiting, and he could certainly outwait me. The pressure of needing to talk warred with the pressure of not wanting to describe the still. Dad's quiet presence tipped the balance. I took a deep breath.

"It was a village. The huts were on fire. Everyone was dead. Women. And, and children. And there were men. They were hanging by their feet and—"

Dad clamped his hand over my mouth just as I was wondering if I could go on. "Enough," he said. "My god, enough."

I nodded and he dropped his hand and sat across from me. I stared at the table, unable to focus.

"The men were hanging by their feet," he said. "And they had been disemboweled."

"I couldn't see their faces," I said. "It was just all...just all guts hanging there."

"Yes," dad said.

We sat in silence until dad thought to turn off the burner on the stove. He turned to face me again.

"Alishel."

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"This is very important. I need you to look me in the eye while I explain something."

I looked up reluctantly, afraid of what he would say.

"Good girl," dad said. "Now, listen carefully. You never saw that still."

"But—"

Dad raised his hand to stop my words. I needed to talk to him. I had so many questions. My questions burned in my brain and moved my lips.

"I need to—"

Dad pressed his lips together and shook his head. "No. You need to tell me you understand what I just said."

"I never saw the still," I repeated. He waited so I elaborated. "My friends and I met, and we talked about our plans for after we graduate. Aoife teased me for not coloring my hair. We took a walk. At no point did anyone show anyone else a still shot."

"Excellent," he said.

He drew breath to say something else, but questions rose to the top of my brain and spilled over.

"There are secrets, aren't there?" I asked. "Dembe was right?"

"Depends on what he said," dad replied. "But here's what it comes down to. You know enough about history to know that governments do things."

"Do things," I repeated.

"Even the best governments," he said.

"Yes, but—"

"No buts, Alishel. It isn't any of our business, right? And it never happened, no matter who asks."

With reluctance, I nodded my understanding.

"Now let's talk about what didn't happen this afternoon," he said. "What is bothering you most?"

I looked inside at the mess of my emotions and picked at one of them. "I couldn't," I started. "I mean I didn't...when I looked at the still..."

Dad offered no help, just sat completely still, hands relaxed on the table, and waited.

"I couldn't see it right," I said. "It was like, like my eyes kept sliding off the image. Or it was blurry or something, I don't know. I didn't even...I couldn't really look at it."

"You're wondering why not?"

"I guess. No. No, that doesn't feel like it's what's bothering me. What's bothering me is that those people went through that. And I couldn't even look at it."

Dad smiled. "Have I mentioned recently how proud I am that you're my daughter?"

"Yes," I snapped. "It's generally your way of avoiding the topic."

He laughed and I smiled.

"You had psychology last year. You came home all upset about that old experiment..." he trailed off, waiting for me to catch up.

"Which one?"

"If a child spends her first year in an environment where she can see no horizontal lines then she never develops the ability to see horizontal lines, right?"

"So, I live in a peaceful society, and I can't comprehend violence?" I asked.

"That's right," dad said. "And maybe there's nothing wrong with that."

"Okay," I said. "I don't have to feel guilty?"

"No, Alishel. You don't. Do you want some supper now?"

"I'm really tired," I said, getting up. "I think I'll just go to bed early."

My cluttered bedroom looked strange to me as I pulled off my clothes. I noticed the holo projectors, the lamps crafted to look like nineteenth-century lanterns, even the simple throw rug, and wondered how much of it had been made on Biome.

Dad had built our simple house by hand, including the furniture. Outside my bedroom, the rest of the house was minimalist. For years I had considered my bedroom to be a haven of normality. Now I wondered. Was it ethical to live "normally?" Even if it meant having all these things made on Biome? My thoughts tangled with my emotional fatigue. The fatigue won.

#

I woke slowly and muttered "time" to my Monitor. When nothing happened, I swore and sat up. "Monitor on." It vibrated my jawbone pleasantly and my dashboard popped up. "Time stats." I swore again when I saw my time off indicator in the red. We'd have a Monitor surcharge again this month.

Still not fully awake, I stumbled to the kitchen for a cup of coffee and swayed, blinking, before the empty pot. Weird. Dad always got up before me and made coffee. But the pot was empty. Something else bothered me, too. I drew a deep breath and my skin tingled. I didn't want to turn around. I couldn't handle this much strange so early. Not before coffee.

I turned. There, lining the back wall of the kitchen, were bushels and bushels of apples.

"What on Earth?" I asked the apples.

We had been planning to harvest in two weeks. These apples weren't even fully ripe. And we always picked apples together. Apple harvest was our fall ritual and I already felt robbed of the warm sun, the feel of the fruit under my hand, the rough surface of the wooden ladder. Disappointment and confusion combined into a deep sense something was wrong.

"No coffee. That's what's wrong." I turned my back on the suspicious apples and brewed a pot.

The only hint of modernity in the living room was our hololink. I curled up on the couch across from it, steaming mug in hand, and sorted through my questions from yesterday. My memory of the day seemed disjointed as though someone had scrambled it during the night. I thought of that image on Dembe's horrible still and the beautiful things in my bedroom. What was the connection?

"Monitor, teach me about Biome economics," I said.

The hololink lit up with a blue dot, the dot expanded into a blue line. The blue line turned sideways and opened into a box. The start-up routine soothed me with its familiarity.

A picture of a Nosie—"Native," I corrected myself—appeared, the first of a montage of illustrations.

"Most Biome Natives," a cultured woman's voice narrated, "live at subsistence level. Their beautiful, traditional lifestyle consists of villages working together as a single economic unit..."

The hololink displayed a Native village. The difference between this village and the one in Dembe's still shot yesterday was the villagers. On the hololink, they looked at ease and happy.

"...hunting and gathering, and trade of specialty crafts to other villages."

The drone view pulled away, replaced by a series of images of more modern industry. A plantation of sugarcane, one of coffee, another of peaches, a factory filled with clean, smiling Natives assembling...something...

"More commonly, Natives work for farming, mining, or industrial concerns. United Earth has aided these Natives in maintaining their ancient traditions while enjoying a higher standard of living..."

I followed a hyperlink to a corporate site which boasted of all the company did for its Natives including providing housing and schools.

Fifteen minutes of research and I had not heard a word about war. I clicked my tongue and a question mark floated in my vision.

"Teach me about Native Biome culture." Perhaps they were very war-like?

An exquisite, high-res still popped into existence before me, again from a drone shot. The camera hovered

above a mound of earth breaking free of the surrounding jungle. The sides of the mound, covered in grass and small bushes, sloped steeply up to form a plateau. As the drone drew away from the close shot, I raised my eyebrows at the sheer scope of the thing. It must have been hundreds of meters long. Finally, the shot grew wide enough to display the entire plateau and I gasped. The mound had been raised in the shape of a Native lying on the ground, as though a giant had fallen in the jungle and been covered with dirt and stone.

A broken pattern of dark gray stone on the plateau created accents that looked like facial features, fingernails, and a loincloth of sorts over the groin.

Transfixed by the image, I forgot to listen to the narration.

"Show print narration."

The text scrolled up as my eyes flicked across the screen, obediently keeping up with my every pause and rush forward through the words.

The mound was where Natives buried their dead. Thousands were interred there with room for more. The mound in the drone shot had been abandoned and the jungle was in the process of taking it back.

"Why was this mound abandoned?" I asked Monitor.

"Tribal conflict," answered Monitor.

"Elaborate."

Monitor compiled another lesson for me. Names of dictators, political movements, tribes, revolutionary fronts, and geographical boundaries rained down on me. My eyes grew tired. I looked down at my stiff hands and found them wrapped around a cold cup of coffee.

When I looked up again, I saw a worm bot blinking and gyrating at the edge of the lesson, trying to grab my attention. Unsanctioned sites put out worm bots. The bots scan for users who are interested in a particular

subject and then try to draw traffic to their site. It's annoying, but UE allows it because in a free society, even fringe groups get to advertise their thinking.

"Alright," I said, and looked directly at the bot. It stopped blinking and dancing and scrolled a simple message.

"UE sends secret troops to Biome, conspires to conceal truth," it proclaimed.

I sighed. Everyone had heard that one before. Conspiracy theories were bullshit. UE couldn't put together an environmental report without it leaking to the press, much less hide troop movements through space to Biome.

A low, angry murmur filtered through the house just as I moved to delete the bot's message. I froze. The only thing moving in the house were the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. I eased up from my seat and hefted a lamp stand.

Dad shouted, "No, stop," followed by a string of unintelligible syllables.

I dropped the lamp stand and sprinted for the bedroom.

For the first time in my life, the sight of my father brought fear instead of a sense of security. He sat bolt upright at the head of the bed. He didn't turn or look when I opened the door, just sat there, eyes wide, tousled hair dripping with sweat.

"Dad?"

He didn't respond to my voice.

I hesitated to go in but decided this was not the time to worry about privacy, needing to figure out what was wrong and fix it. As I neared the head of the bed, dad's head snapped around to follow my movement. His eyes widened even further.

"Get down," he hissed at me.

I stopped and stared, shocked beyond understanding. This close, I could see his eyes were glassy and bloodshot.

I saw his next movement coming, of course. I always do. But it was fast and so unexpected that I couldn't have reacted even if I had known what I wanted to do.

He grabbed my arm, threw me to the bed, and crouched over me, arms wrapped around my head, his chest above my chest. His armpit pushed firmly into my nose. He stank of sweat and sickness. His skin was very hot.

"Dad," I began, my voice loud with alarm. "What's—" He clapped a hand over my mouth.

"Be quiet," he whispered. "They're here."

Left with very little choice in the matter, feeling terrified and confused, I quit trying to talk and lay there, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. In the stillness, I finally noticed the biometric alarms on my dashboard. I triggered a few meditative breaths as I tried to figure out what was happening. Nothing in the house was out of place. The best I could figure, dad was sick and delirious.

The episode ended as bizarrely as it began. The tension in dad's shoulders drained away. The muscles of his forearm relaxed, and he collapsed sideways with a sigh.

I rolled off the bed and went to pace in the living room. I couldn't remember dad ever being this sick. Even that time we had a stomach virus he still carried on as though nothing was wrong, just going into the bathroom to throw up from time to time and then getting on with his day.

I paced into the kitchen, looked at the horrid apples in their baskets. Some part of me screeched like a wounded animal. I whirled back to the bedroom. The fever had to come down. I couldn't tell how high it was without using the House Doctor. Yes. It would tell me what to do.

Dad had always refused to use the House Doctor, though. He had some weird horror of the "contraption" as he called it. Just like his other quirks, he refused to explain himself. Today this wasn't a little quirk, though. This might be life or death.

I fished the House Doctor out of the hall closet. Before entering dad's room, I paused to take a deep, calming breath to combat the fear that I would go in and dad would be out of his mind.

He lay stretched out in his pajamas, flat on his back. He was so deeply asleep—or unconscious—that I had to wrestle with his heavy arm before I could get the sampler on right. The heat of his body made some instinctive part of my brain gibber with alarm as I worked. I pulled the diagnostic tent over his head and initiated the sequence.

The House Doctor thanked me and requested I step into the next room while it worked. It began to play bland, instrumental music as it had no idea what dad liked to listen to.

As it worked, I lay on the living room floor and breathed in and out, in and out. Everything would be okay, I told myself. I was doing what needed to be done.

The House Doctor dinged when it finished. I unhooked it from dad first as I dreaded the idea of him waking up and finding it hooked to him. Then I folded back the screen to read the diagnostic results.

I glanced at the macroscopic review, not expecting to see much. A full tissue scan shouldn't have anything to do with fever symptoms after all. The results displayed as a hologram enabling the reader to look down through the body into all the various structures and tissues scanned. Problem areas are highlighted and color coded.

Instead of a bland holo of dad's tissues, though, the scan results made me sway back. Blue lines snaked through his soft tissues. The lines were complimented by

scattered blue splotches. Blue lines bisected a couple of his ribs, both left forearm bones, two places on the right leg, and a spot on his skull.

Black dots scattered throughout much of his soft tissue and one knee was black.

I looked at the key. Blue was the symbol for healed injury. Black was the symbol for foreign matter.

When I focused on that black knee, the holo obediently enlarged the area to show the artificial joint.

A written summary followed the holo. It stated that at some point dad had been shot, stabbed, beaten, burned, and shocked. The summary went on to state he was just fine now.

"Okay," I muttered, trying to breathe evenly. "That doesn't explain why he's so sick."

I looked into the microscopic findings, past the vital statistics and blood chemistry and down to the diagnosis page which had only one thing listed: Biome Merchant Disease.

I read the explanation.

"Biome Merchant Disease is the result of viral infection. The Merchant virus is native to Biome where most Natives have natural immunity to it. The viral illness was first identified in the years after contact with Biome. Earthers who visit Biome acquire the disease by living in close proximity with Natives. The virus inserts itself into the DNA, lies dormant for up to thirty years (longest-noted case of latency, no theoretical data available)..."

I scanned down some more, looking for the punch line.

"...it attacks the central nervous system producing high fever and symptoms resembling dementia. The central nervous system deteriorates until death ensues. There is no known cure."

The House Doctor announced a prescription was on its way by courier.

I went back to the holo of dad's body with the brightly lit lines and blotches twining through it and stared. My last coherent thought was how amazing it was that he shows so little scarring.

My vision began to collapse inward. Dark spots swam before my eyes like evil fishes and my chest tightened until I was gasping for breath. My dashboard lit up and started urging me to calm down.

"Monitor off," I said.

I picked up my coffee mug and studied it blankly. Like a red wave, rage crashed through me.

"No cure," I screamed, and flung the mug at the far wall.

Every other item in the living room that wasn't nailed down followed the mug as I screamed out my betrayal.

About the time I ran out of things to throw, the med drone arrived. I ripped the package open, pulled out a patch, and marched to dad's bedroom. He didn't stir when I stuck it on his neck and marched out again. I didn't look left to the pile of broken things on the floor. Instead, I went to the kitchen and started canning apples.

"I think," I said to myself in a reasoned tone, "if I add enough sugar these will turn out okay." My voice sounded scratchy after all the screaming.

Hours into peeling, chopping, boiling, straining, and canning the apples, a slight scuff at the threshold alerted me to dad's presence.

I turned, thinking of his delirious behavior earlier and of words like "soldier" and "dementia."

He leaned against the wall, watching me. He looked gray and wrinkled, like he had aged twenty years since the night before, but his eyes had lost that dangerous glaze.

"Dad?"

He smiled at me, only a very small motion of the lips.

"I seem to have missed something," he said. "Why is the House Doctor in my room and where did these apples come from?"

"You sound dehydrated," I said. "Sit down and drink this water. We need to talk."

He opened his mouth to say something, and I raised my hand. "Before you ask, my Monitor is off."

I told dad about his strange behavior and about his diagnosis. He winced and looked away when I said "Biome Merchant Disease" but otherwise stayed still and quiet.

"You told me you retired from government service," I said. "But you were actually a soldier on Biome, weren't you?"

Dad nodded, looking sad.

"The House Doctor," he said, "will report its findings to Health Services. Someone will come to talk to you."

"Me?"

He looked away, gaze fixed on a can of applesauce. I waited until he sighed and looked back. "There are things United Earth doesn't want you to know. They will be asking questions."

A hint of my earlier rage welled up and I held it and squeezed it until it crystalized into a hard, sharp-edged thing. I grinned at dad, and he sat up a bit straighter.

"I've got to get that damn House Doctor serviced," I said in a tone inspired by Aoife. "When I used it the other day for dad's little fever it gave me some weird reading about a disease I'd never heard of." I fluttered my eyelashes and cocked my head at dad. "I can't imagine why it would go off its little binary rocker like that, but we've just got to get it fixed or replaced or something. It's dangerous not to have your House Doc be dependable!" I batted my eyelashes again and practiced looking distressed and confused.

Dad barked out a short laugh. I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Alright, Alishel, alright. Now what about dinner?"

#

The next few days were mostly okay. A couple of times dad forgot something basic like where we keep the sugar. It hurt but I decided to not mind. Dad had a lifetime of being strong behind him. Now it was my turn.

A couple of days later over dinner he started talking about harvesting the apples.

"You—uh, you picked all the apples already, dad."

I looked closely at him, saw a flush creeping up his neck.

"If we don't pick them soon, Alishel, they'll start dropping," he said sternly.

"I could feel my nostrils flaring and took a deep breath before trying again. "Look, you picked the apples. I made them into applesauce."

"I don't remember that. Why are you telling me things I know aren't true?"

I jumped up from the table and went to the storage cabinets, blinking away tears. I opened all the cabinet doors, turned, and gestured at the rows of applesauce. "See, dad? Fresh applesauce. From the apples you picked."

He stared for too long but finally sighed. His shoulders sagged. "I see. I remember."

I went to him and laid the back of my hand on his face. "You're hot. Let's get a patch on you."

After I got him medicated and off to sleep, I sat in the living room and wondered what in hell to do now. I pulled up my seascape holosculpt and looked at it from every angle. I felt nothing as I looked at it. The technical

execution was not too bad. But it lacked anything else to recommend it.

I erased the file for good, pulled up a blank box, and stared blankly back at it. I had no ideas.

A gentle knock at the door startled me. I jumped and ended up standing in the middle of the room in a slight crouch. Damn, I'd be as jumpy as dad if this went on much longer.

I opened the door and eyed the two men standing there in dark, formal suits. One stood behind and slightly to the left of the other.

"Yes?" I asked, hoping my expression conveyed confusion instead of the fear I felt.

"May we have a word with you?" The first man asked. He was a little taller than me and around dad's age although he lacked the sun-darkened skin dad sported.

"I'm afraid that would be a waste of your time," I said. "We're confirmed Non-Believers. Didn't the last missionaries tell you?"

He looked confused for a moment, then opened his mouth to try again. "We're from Health Services," he said. "May we come in?"

I gaped at him. "Ooooh. I'm sorry. You're not missionaries? I mean, that's good but—wait, did you come about the broken House Doctor?"

Again, I saw a flash of confusion or maybe annoyance cross his face. His expression calmed me a little. It meant maybe I was pulling this ruse off.

"Your House Doctor is broken?" he asked.

"Yes, something's definitely wrong with it." I pattered on. "Dad came down with the flu and I hooked him up to get treatment and the damn machine said he had some Biome thing." I tittered. "That's how I know it's broken. Dad's never been off the continent, much less all the way across space to Biome!"

The man nodded and smiled as though his lips were glued together.

Sensing I had the advantage, I leaned toward the men. The silent one who stood back moved his right shoulder a little down and toward me. Interesting. For the first time I noticed his height and burly shoulders.

"So are you two going to come in and fix it?" I asked. Out of curiosity, I waved my hand in a too-grand gesture into the house. Sure enough, the second man's left hand jerked up, then down in response to my sudden movement.

"No," the first man said regretfully. "We're just canvassing the neighborhood to assess the extent of the malfunction."

I wished them a good evening and watched them as they weaved between the planters back to the bike path.

I leaned on the door after closing it. My eyes squeezed shut with the force of my need to talk to dad. I missed him even though he was just in the other room. If only he could have seen me to tell me if I did alright.

I cracked the door to his bedroom to check on him. He lay still, sleeping the sleep of post-fever exhaustion. I watched him, reassured by the deep, even rise and fall of his chest. He lay flat on his back, his arms resting by his sides with fingers curved gently upward.

I imagined the scar tissue running all through him beneath his tough, unmarked skin. With the suddenness of a match flaring to life, something clicked into place in my imagination. I took one last look and turned to work on my next holosculpt.

My hands and brain formed a single unit as I worked to sketch out my idea. I lost track of time until I leaned back with a sigh and a feeling there was no more to be done on the preliminary work. As I rubbed my tired neck muscles, I studied my new work of art. The top layer

would have to be reworked in oils on canvas to provide depth. And I would use charcoal shading and linework for the layer beneath that...But even as a preliminary sketch it had power. I stood well back and looked at the entire thing.

A Native burial mound in all its abandoned and overgrown glory appeared first. Then, as the eye refocused deeper, the shadowy lines and planes of my father's figure lay gigantic and still within the mound. I had used an old sketch of him to get the muscle definition right but he was lying within the mound in the same position he had been on the bed earlier. The mound surrounded and covered him like some bizarre second skin.

The holo followed the movements of my eye and once I had taken in the second layer it threw up a flash of color still deeper and invited my eye to the next level. My eyes plunged inward and there was the representation of what the House Doctor showed me earlier in the week. Lines and dots of color snaked through the shadowy outlines of dad's body. They looked like mystical runes drawn by an ancient sorcerer.

Finally, the whole thing snapped into focus at once—mound, dad, and runes together—and I gasped, even knowing what to expect.

I sat down to make production notes. Dad began snoring, something I had never heard him do before he got sick. I knew if I went and asked him to roll over, he would quit. But it was okay. I didn't mind at all.

#

I woke up late and in a panic. The edge of some dark dream followed me and for a moment I lay there, convinced dad had died. I threw on my robe and yanked my door open. The smell of fresh coffee met my nose and I sighed.

He sat in the kitchen, blue mug in hand, looking tired but well.

"Morning, Alishel. May I get you some coffee?"

"Please," I said. "And thank you."

Over coffee I told him about last night's visitors.

"...I told them we were Non-Believers and we didn't want any more missionary visits," I giggled.

Dad frowned at me. "These guys are not stupid. And they're not people to play with," he said.

"That's unfair," I replied. "What was I supposed to do, yell 'Oh my god it's you!' and slam the door shut?"

That made him grin. "Good point. Tell me exactly what they said."

I did my best to remember the entire conversation for him. Then he wanted precise physical descriptions of the men, how they stood, how they moved. I remembered the way the silent man in back had shifted when I moved and asked dad about it.

"Ah." Dad went silent and then sighed as he met my eyes. "The second man was the bodyguard. He was preparing for you to attack the man in front. Now...tell me again about the first man's facial structure?"\

"He had cheekbones like—"I broke off, staring at my hands. They had been moving through the air as I talked. "I'll be right back."

I returned with sketchbook and pencil and in a few minutes, I had good sketches of both the men. I turned the sketchbook around and propped it up. Dad took one look and went pale.

"Kura," he whispered. He swayed a little and his eyes looked bleak.

"Dad?" I got up and went around the table. He flinched when I put a hand on his shoulder. I shook him a little and he looked up at me.

"That's a very good likeness, Alishel."

"What? Why are you acting like that? What's going on?"

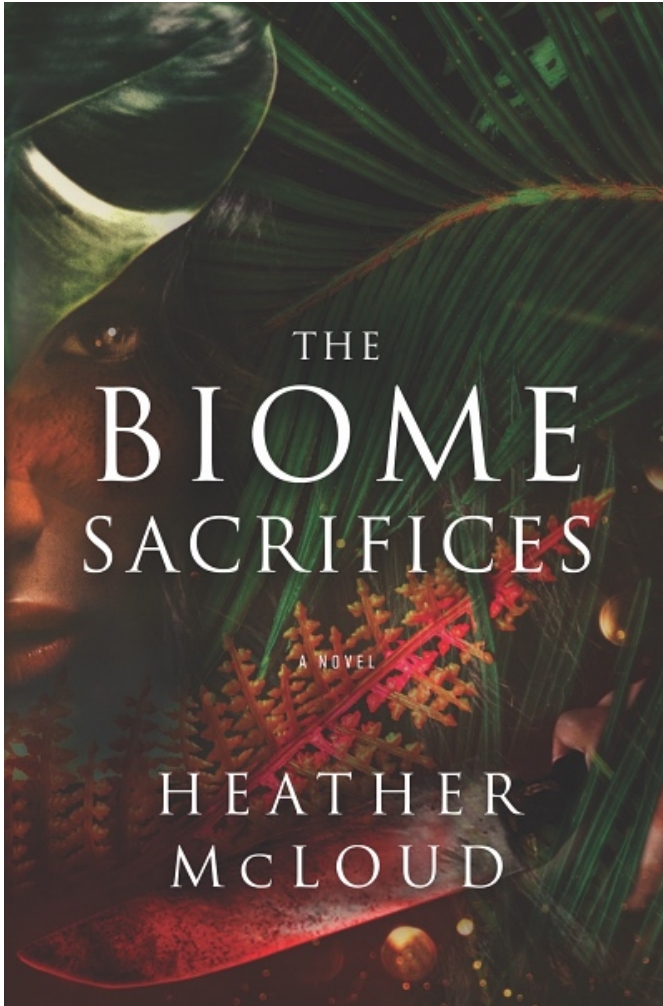
"If you ever see them again," he said, "just try to get out of the situation as fast as possible."

"Okay, but why?"

"It's difficult," he said. "There are so many secrets." He wouldn't look at me and he only waved me away when I tried to ask a third time.

About the Author

Heather McLoud is a writer, nurse, mother, wife, pet cosseter, and occasional plant waterer. In addition to this novel, she is the author of "Sage Courage," a novel of horror and suspense. McLoud believes that although it may be love that makes the world go around, and music may be the universal language, stories about trauma and the ways people deal with it make best and most riveting reading. Aside from this common theme, McLoud's writing varies greatly in genre. More novels, in startlingly different worlds, are yet to come.



In a single week, Alishel's life on a perfect Earth is shattered by a series of revelations which make her a fugitive. Can she survive her new knowledge of the horror behind the beauty?

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