



TO SAVE A GIRL

A SHORT STORY FROM THE WORLD OF
THE ANUAN LEGACY

TRACI ISON SCHAFFER

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To my precious grandson,
Ison Rhys Schafer Morgan,
I leave you this legacy.

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1

Singing the words to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, I moved along the bank of the river and squatted down at a patch of earth that didn't have much overgrowth. "Sample fifty-four. Soil, zero depth. Mark coordinates." The moist soil stuck to my collection instrument and I had to rake it clean on the edge of the vial to get it into the container. While working to get every speck of the soil off the instrument, something caught my eye amongst the earthy colors of the woods—the unmistakable golden arches on a crumpled white bag, now dingy and deteriorated from weathering. "When will these Kians learn?" I picked up the decayed paper sack, put it in my satchel along with my latest sample, and started singing where I'd left off. If the Kians couldn't pick up after themselves, I guess I would.

"Tas!" Bakkus's voice blurted through my communication link. "You're giving us Michael Jackson overload up here!"

"I'm just trying to experience Earth as these Kians do and they love Michael Jackson. The songs from this album have been dominating their popular music charts this year."

"The rest of the team is already back on the ship. How much longer?" Bakkus never had much patience for allowing us to soak in the Earth experience and today was no exception.

I put a hand on my satchel—which already bulged with samples—and glanced around to analyze whether I had a fair representation from the area. "I want to get a sample from the river, but I suppose that'll be enough."

An explosive noise echoed from the bluff above me, followed by the squeal of tires fighting to hold the road. I instinctively dropped to the ground and covered my head. With a loud crash, river water sprayed over me. I raised my head as a car began to sink slowly under the water with people inside, still as death.

I scrambled to my feet and paused for a moment, considering the enormity of the rule I was about to break. But, my empathy for these people burned, like it would roast me alive from the inside out. I couldn't stand by and do nothing while they died in front of me. I threw my satchel off and ran for the water. "A car just came over the bluff. It's in the water. I'm going in."

“Tas, no!”

I ignored Bakkus and dove in. Water flowed into the car, slowly, but steadily. With the engine silent, the sound of the water filling the car was loud enough to give me a constant reminder—like a ticking clock—that I didn’t have much time before the car became completely submerged. Water was already up to the necks of the passengers—a man and a woman—in the front seat. The car had nose-dived over the bluff, so the rear of the car jutted higher out of the river. The girl in the backseat had more time before the water caused her a problem—but not much more. I clung to the side of the car and put my head through the open side window to check on the two in the front seat. They stared straight ahead. I felt their necks for pulses, just in case. “Dead. And dead. One more.”

“Tas. Get your ass out of that river.” Bakkus said through my link.

My actions ran counter to our directive where Earth, or any other fledgling civilization, was concerned, but I had to help. Or at least try. I reached through the window of the back seat and lifted the girl’s head. Her long, auburn hair fell back from her face. Her eyes were closed and blood covered her upper lip, underneath her nose. My fingers found her carotid artery. “Come on. Be there!” A weak flow pulsed under my fingers. “Alive! She’s alive.”

Water had reached the bottom of her collarbone and was creeping up faster now. Holding her head up with one hand, I plunged the other under the muddy water and groped for the seatbelt. When I found it, I gave it a hard yank and ripped it from the seat, freeing her. Just as I pulled her through the window, the car sank in an eerily quiet *whoosh*. I swam as hard and fast as I could to keep us from being sucked under the water with the car.

I made it to the edge of the river and laid her out on the bank. The water had washed the blood from her face, but more was leaking from her nose and the corner of her mouth. I scooped my satchel up and flung it over my head before picking her up. “Bakkus, two to transition.”

“Tas. You’re not bringing her—”

“Two! I’m not letting her go. So if you want me, you’re going to have to take her too.” I knew nothing about this girl, other than the fact that I couldn’t turn my back on her, and *wouldn’t*, no matter what the consequences.

“Fine. Toya, sync them both for transition, straight to sickbay. Mezni, standby in sickbay. The commander is going to have my ass for this, Tas, and I’m going to have yours!”

A gurgling increased with each breath the girl took and was now more gurgle than air flow. With Bakkus still screaming at me, Earth

blurred then disappeared altogether and sickbay came into focus. “Where do you want her, Mezni? She doesn’t sound good.”

Mezni shook his head with a what-the-hell-were-you-thinking look on his face and took her from my arms. “We’ll take it from here, Tas. I’d say you’d better report to the commander.”

With my arms empty and the adrenaline fading, I wondered for a brief moment what the hell I *had* been thinking, but knew I couldn’t have watched her die and done nothing to help her. The girl lay so lifeless while Mezni and the sickbay team flitted around her at a panicked pace. *Would my effort, or theirs, amount to anything?*

“Tas!” Bakkus squawked through my still-open communication link. “Get your butt to the commander’s office. Now!”

2

Still soaking wet, I stood outside the door of the commander's office, listening to Bakkus rant about insubordination and the like. He was right. Now I'd have to take my punishment.

"Tas requesting entry," I said, resigning myself to the fact that this meeting wouldn't be pleasant.

"Entry granted," the computer said and the door slid open.

Bakkus whirled around on his heels and gave me the death-scowl of a lifetime.

"I'll take it from here, Bakkus," Commander Riton said, dismissing Bakkus with the wave of his hand.

Bakkus gave me one last evil-eye on his way out the door. When he was gone, Commander Riton leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. If he'd wanted to let me stew in the anticipation of what my punishment would be, he'd accomplished his goal.

"I couldn't just watch her die," I blurted out, rattled by his silence.

The commander opened one eye and then the other and rubbed a hand over his white, neatly trimmed beard. "Mm-hm. But you know you're forbidden to interfere with the Kians on these scientific missions. Or any mission, for that matter. It's not our right to interfere with the destinies of any race, especially one still finding their way."

My resolve about what I'd done wilted like a daisy in a desert. "Yes, sir. I know that, sir."

"And, you defied a direct order from your mission lead in regard to this directive."

"That's a fair statement, yes."

Commander Riton nodded. "Well, then. You're removed from any further ground missions for the duration of this trip. And this incident *will* go on your record."

My goal of one day becoming mission commander slipped into the realm of dreams unrealized. "Understood, sir."

"You'll be responsible for integrating this girl back to Earth, where she belongs. Keep me and the captain posted on her status and let us know when she's ready to be sent back."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then." He gave me the same wave of the hand that he'd

given Bakkus. “You’re dismissed.”

I couldn’t wait to get out of there and took long strides toward the door.

“Oh, and Tas?”

I froze and turned back toward Commander Riton. As detrimental as my punishment had been on my career, I knew I’d gotten off too easily “Yes, sir?”

“I’d have done the same thing,” he said, keeping the stern look on his face.

That coil that had wound tight inside me during our meeting, loosened. “Thank you, sir.” I bowed my head to him and hustled out the door.

3

Clean and dry now, I paced outside the main sickbay door, knowing I should leave well enough alone. Mezni could give me updates to forward to the commander and captain; I didn't need to be in there. Regardless, I couldn't leave. Something within me wouldn't let me walk away. I stepped up to the door and it slid open. The girl lay on the same bed they'd placed her on when I'd handed her over. A silver rejuvenation blanket covered her up to her chin. Hardly aware of the movement of my legs, I approached her bed and stopped next to her.

"Not in enough trouble already, Tas?"

Mezni stood nearby, reviewing some readouts projected onto the wall. I'd been so consumed with the girl that I hadn't noticed him.

"The commander told me to keep him and the captain updated on her status. How is she?"

"Not good." He shut the projection off and came over to the girl's bed. "We don't expect her to make it. She's pretty torn up on the inside. And both her legs are broken in several places. We fixed everything we could. The rest is up to her."

Those few hopeless words left my lungs feeling as if every molecule of air had been removed from the room. I finally gulped in a breath. "I see. Maybe I'll stay a while." Mezni pursed his lips and I amended my comment. "So I can give the commander a good report."

"Mm-hm," Mezni said. "Well, I'm going to take a break. I'll be back soon, but she's being monitored if you need to leave before I get back."

Mezni left and I commanded a chair to eject from the wall next to her bed. I sat without taking my eyes off her. I'd only seen Kians from afar. I thought that up this close, I might be able to distinguish some differences in features resulting from our evolving on different planets. I'd been told that—other than the metaphysical traits that fell from priority while trying to adjust to Earth—these Anuan descendants still looked just like us. That seemed to be true, down to the last detail.

The girl's auburn hair spread out on the bed beneath her. I touched it, stroking a piece of the soft locks. They'd cleaned her up, so it was no longer wet and covered in river muck. Faint freckles dotted the bridge of her nose and ran across the tops of her cheeks. Otherwise, her face

didn't have much color in it. I felt *her*, but tried to feel for some movement of emotion from her to let me know that more than just her meager existence moved inside her broken body. Nothing stirred. Not that I could detect, anyway. Had I disrupted her fate only to have her linger here and die anyway? If not, what kind of life did she have waiting back on Earth and did anybody miss her yet? What would she do without her parents? An emptiness settled on me. *Had I saved her to be all alone?*

The door slid open behind me with a soft swish. I assumed it was Mezni returning. After a moment he hadn't spoken, so I turned to see my best friend, Daigon, towering over me with a twisted look on his face.

"What's that look for?" I asked.

"What look?"

"That worried look on your face."

Daigon relaxed his expression, the wrinkles above his dark brows easing. "I guess I'll have to work on that." He ordered a chair and sat next to me. "So, what's this about?"

"It's about not wanting to idly stand by and watch people die."

He tilted his head at me. "I saw the way you were looking at her. She has to go back, you know."

"I know that. I've never seen a Kian this close. I'm curious—that's all." Even as I said the words, I questioned if curiosity really was the extent of my attraction to this girl. *Something* seemed to stir inside me for her, this stranger, whether I wanted to admit it or not.

"We've done some research. Her name is Rebecca, if you're wondering. Rebecca Conner. Nicknamed Bec."

"Bec," I repeated, letting the name soak in. "Do you know anything else?"

"She's in her second year of college, studying education. Her parents are—were—both educators. Bec and her only sibling were born late in their parents' lives. Her brother died of childhood leukemia when he was four. Bec was two at the time. Probably doesn't remember him. She has a couple of aunts living—both elderly—and a few cousins, none of whom live close to her. Hikers saw contents from the car floating downstream. It didn't take authorities long to find the car. Her parents were removed to the morgue then transported to a local funeral home. There's a massive search going on for Bec as we speak. They think she may have been washed down river so they're focusing the search to the south of the accident site."

"Where they'll find nothing," I said, still wondering if I'd done the right thing. "She'd surely be dead if I hadn't intervened. Maybe, I shouldn't have—" Her smooth, youthful face set my opinion back on

track. “No. I should have. She’s so young. Too young to die.”

Daigon put a hand on my shoulder. “Why don’t I have Sena come sit with her? We can go do something. Have you eaten?”

“No, I haven’t eaten. I’ll eat when I’m hungry. And she’s being monitored. She doesn’t need anybody to sit with her.”

“How about a game of nenon, then?” Daigon stood up and pointed his thumb toward the door. “Come on. I think it’s best if you keep some distance from this.”

Bec’s chest rose and fell so slightly under the rejuvenation blanket that I had to watch closely to see it. “She’s not a *this*. She’s a living, breathing human.”

“I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I meant this *situation*.”

“It’s a situation of my making, so I’m staying. I know I can’t keep her like some pet. She’s going back to Earth, hopefully alive. So stop worrying.” I glanced over my shoulder at Daigon and realized then that he was wearing his bridge flight suit. “Why are you here, anyway? Shouldn’t you be on the bridge, training?”

“I thought I’d let you know what we found out about the girl.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry to be defensive, but I plucked her from her life and I need to be here to fix that, whatever that might mean.”

“All right. I understand. Let me know if you need anything.”

The door had barely closed behind Daigon before I found myself staring at Bec again. I reached out and touched her cheek. Her skin was softer than any I’d ever felt. I jerked my hand back and ran after Daigon, deciding a game of nenon might not be a bad idea after all.

4

“Nothing like a distracted opponent. You haven’t beaten me once in the twelve days that Bec has been here.” Daigon ordered the gravity settings back to normal and we floated down to the floor of the nenon room in which we’d been playing.

“I’m not distracted.”

“Oh, really. You’re just a bad nenon player then?”

“Okay. I’m distracted.” I leaned against the wall outside our game room and slid down to the floor, barely noticing the sound of the other games going on in the rooms around us. “What if Bec never wakes up?”

Daigon sat down beside me. “What’s Mezni say about it?”

“He’s still doing energy and cell infusions and rejuvenation treatments. There’s improvement, but it’s slow. She’s not to the point where earth medical means could take over yet. Maybe soon, though. But we’re well overdue to return to Anu. I know the captain has to be getting tired of waiting.”

“She understands. But, she also can’t keep the ship here forever. We must have a sample of everything that exists on Earth by now.” Daigon laughed, but quickly stifled it. “Do you have a plan on how to get her back to Earth?”

“Yes. I have a plan. I’ve already discussed it with the commander. Once she’s recovered to the point that earth means can manage her situation, I’ll pretend to be an emergency medical technician transferring her from one hospital to another. I’ll choose a hectic time when the hospital I’m leaving her in won’t have the luxury of time to ask a lot of questions. I’ll leave enough records for them to properly treat her, but the location of where she’s been will, obviously, not be among the documents. She should still be unconscious, so she won’t know anything about where she’s actually been all this time.” As I told Daigon my plan, I wondered how I would be able to leave her some place and walk away, never to see her again. But I’d *have* to do it. For her sake. She belonged on Earth.

Daigon nodded. “Could work.”

“But if we take her back now, she’d see no progress with the Kians. If we can get her a little further along here, she’ll have a chance

of not only surviving, but getting back to normal functions.”

Daigon opened his mouth to speak, but Mezni’s voice vibrated in my eardrum.

I held a hand up to stop Daigon from speaking so I could hear through the communication link. “Come again, Mezni. I didn’t catch that.”

“Get to sickbay!”

I didn’t ask for specifics, just got off the floor and ran out of the neon arena with Daigon right behind me asking where the hell I was going.

When I ran through the sickbay door, with Daigon keeping pace, Mezni and two other medicals stood around Bec. My heart dropped. “What’s going on? Is she all right?”

“She’s better than all right. She’s waking up,” Mezni said.

“What? She can’t wake up here!” I said. “I didn’t think she was near waking yet!”

“Neither did we. But apparently she has a different thought about the matter.”

Bec’s eyes moved beneath her lids. She wasn’t awake yet, but she existed in this world again. I nudged one of the medicals out of the way. “Let me break things to her.”

Mezni nodded to the medicals. “You all find something to do outside sickbay. I’ll be right behind you.”

Mezni stayed next to me until they were gone. “This isn’t going to be easy news for her to hear. Any of it. She’s still being monitored. She’s doing fine right now, but if she should become stressed, I’ll be back. Otherwise, I’ll give you some time. It will be better for her that way. She doesn’t need to wake with an audience staring at her. Being here will be strange enough.”

“Thank you.” I had Bec’s hand in mine before Mezni cleared the door. Considering the way I felt for her, physical contact was dangerous territory, but I wanted to be there for her. I *needed* to be there for her.

“Tas, maybe you should let Mezni explain things to her.” Daigon had been standing back, apparently waiting for the team to clear out and give him some room. He stood next to Bec’s bed now with his eyes on our hands—hers in mine.

“I . . .” Understanding what Daigon meant, I eased my grip on Bec’s hand and realized just how truly attached I’d become to her. I felt my whole world slipping from my grip and tightened my hold on her hand. “Daigon, just go.”

Bec’s eyes fluttered.

“Tas—,” Daigon started.

“Daigon, go! I’ll talk to you later.”

Daigon took a few hesitant steps backward and then left. Bec’s eyes opened and I sank into the rich amber pools staring back at me. Trapped, I knew, with no good options for escape.

5

Bec's eyes traced the outline of sickbay, then fixed on mine. "Where am I?" The words were weak and raspy, but still the sweetest words I'd ever heard.

"You're in sick—a hospital, like a hospital."

"What happened?"

"There was an accident."

"Where are my parents?"

"They're . . . they didn't . . ." I'd practiced what to say to attendants when I dropped her off at a hospital, still comatose, but I hadn't thought about what I'd tell *her* if she actually woke up *here*.

"Where are my parents?" She rose up on her elbows, wincing, with tears pooling in her eyes.

Letting go of her hand, I reached out to help her until the head of the bed caught up and supported her. "Please be careful. Your injuries —"

"Are they here somewhere? A waiting room, maybe? Get them, please. I want to see them."

"I can't. Like I said, there was an accident." I could feel her emotions, now—as strong as I felt my own—break into a million pieces. She knew. "I'm so sorry."

Her emotions rippled between shock, disbelief, and helplessness. She knew the truth, but wasn't ready to accept it. "No, that can't be. We were just together, getting ready to go for a ride. The leaves, they're beautiful this time of year. It has to be a mistake. Maybe they're in another hospital. Please check."

I didn't move, and couldn't find words. All I had was the image of her parents with their lifeless eyes staring off into the distance.

"Please, check!"

"They're not at another hospital. I saw them myself. They're gone. I pulled you from the car. But they were already . . . it was too late for them."

Her chin quivered and the tears broke free from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

I didn't know what to do. "I'm so sorry," I said, putting my arms around her.

She sobbed into my chest until I thought she'd run empty of tears, but they kept flowing, and so did her energy. I soaked it in and let her do the same with mine. I couldn't have stopped it if I'd tried. But I didn't try. Eventually her head lolled gently down. Asleep, I hoped. I eased her back onto the bed, brushed her hair from her face, and gently wiped the wetness from her cheeks with my thumbs.

"I'll take it from here," Mezni said, approaching the bed with his medical scanner.

"How long have you been there?"

"Just a few minutes." He ran the scanner over her. "Her medical values were fluctuating. She's fine now, though. This was tough news to take."

"So, she's just asleep?"

"Yes. She'll probably sleep for a while. We'll keep an eye on her."

"I'll stay."

Mezni placed the scanner into the wall next to Bec's bed. "You've been here quite a lot, Tas—"

"So I'll be here a little more. I need to think. We'd planned on sending her back comatose. I've got to figure out how to explain all this to her." We'd now be leaving her with an extra burden: keeping us and this place a secret when we sent her back. Could she keep such a secret? But an even better question was, could I send her back? I thought I knew the answer, but didn't know the solution.

6

I'd updated the captain and commander about Bec's condition via link so I didn't have to leave her. After several hours, she opened her eyelids. She said nothing at first, but moisture gathered in her eyes.

"So it wasn't a dream."

"No, it wasn't."

She sniffed. "Are you my doctor? You don't look like one."

My dark blue game suit, with its sleek fit and flex-joints at my elbows and knees, was the furthest thing from the look of a Kian doctor. "You're right, I'm not a doctor. My name is Tas. I'm the one who pulled you from the car."

"Can I talk to the doctor? I need to get out of here. I have to find out what to do for my parents."

"I'm sorry. You've been here a long time. They're already . . . that's already been taken care of."

Tears streamed down her face. "They're gone? I mean really gone? I'll never be able to see them again? I can't tell them goodbye?" She gulped air, fighting not to break down.

"I'm sorry. They've already been buried."

She bowed her head, allowing her long tawny locks to block my view of her face. But I could see the tears falling like rain.

I'd never felt so helpless in my life. I touched her arm and tried to send her as much calm energy as I could. "Is there anything . . . can I do anything, to help?"

She looked at my hand on her arm then stared at me. I pulled my hand back and she rubbed the spot where I'd touched. She'd felt it. She'd felt *me*. But she didn't know where to place the feeling amongst her other mixed-up emotions. She took a long breath, as if to gather herself. "How long? How long have I been here?"

"Almost two weeks."

She swallowed and nodded. "Do you know what my status is?"

"All I know is that you had a lot of internal damage. And your legs were broken. The doctor, Mezni, can tell you the details of your injuries when he comes back."

She raised her chin, almost defiant. "All right, then. When the doctor gets back, we'll sort all this out." She looked around the room

for a moment, craning her neck now and then as if in thought about what she was seeing. The glassy, white material of the sleek walls and ceiling wouldn't be what she was used to, but it might not be strange enough to concern her. "What hospital am I in?"

"You were taken some distance from your location. The medical expertise is better here." I thought I'd give her a little time to digest the news about her parents before telling her she was in an alien spaceship.

"Is anyone here for me?"

I didn't want to say no, that she was all alone, because she wasn't. "I am. I'm here for you."

With tears still welled in her eyes, and emotions that continued to fight each other, she reached out and touched my face. "Thank you."

I entered sickbay, nervous about talking to Bec. I'd only told her part of her story the day before. Now it was time for the rest.

"Hello, Tas," she said when I walked in. "Mezni won't tell me *exactly* where I am. He said you'd tell me."

I sat down next to her and nodded at Mezni to go. He quickly obliged. "Yes. I wanted to be the one to tell you. I owe you that much after plucking you from your world."

She wrinkled her nose. "That's a weird way to describe rescuing me."

"You'll understand after I tell you."

She strained to sit up. I put my hand around her shoulders to support her until the bed adjusted to her movement. She felt so warm and soft against my chest. I didn't want to take my arm away. *Stop making this worse, Tas.* But I knew it was already too late.

She gazed into my eyes, like she recognized an old friend. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said, as I slowly and reluctantly pulled my arm away.

"So, where specifically is this hospital, besides far from my home? And I get that it's far away from my family, but why hasn't anybody at least called me?"

"It's . . . You're in . . . Damn it!" I decided there was no easy way to break the news to her. "You're not on Earth anymore."

"I'm what?" She scrunched her face, forming a crease across the bridge of her nose. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"No, not a joke." I picked her up, being careful not to jostle her still healing legs too much.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to show you."

She rested her head on my shoulder while I carried her to the wall of sickbay.

"Outside view," I said.

The wall went transparent, showing the normally concealed window of sickbay. The view of space included the blue and green planet she'd recognize as Earth.

“Oh my God. You’re *not* joking. But how? Why?”

“We’re from another planet and you’re on our ship, Mission Earth. I was collecting samples from Earth to study when your family’s car went off the cliff into the river. I knew you couldn’t be saved with any Earth means, so I brought you back to the ship with me. That’s why your family isn’t here. They don’t know what happened to you. I was going to get you back to an Earth hospital—where they could find you—before you woke up, but you woke before we expected.”

She looked from me to Earth to me again. “I can’t believe this.”

“We’re not supposed to interfere with Kians—Earthlings, but I couldn’t watch you die. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry? For saving my life?”

“For complicating your life.”

She was silent for a moment and then laid her head on my shoulder. “Don’t be sorry.”

8

Bec sat on the edge of her bed, her legs hanging over the side, doing the movement exercises Mezni had assigned. Her bones were knitting much more quickly here than they would have on Earth, but she still had work to do. I'd convinced the captain to allow Bec some time before we took her back. "To get stronger," I'd said. And to help her with a cover story about where she'd been. There was more to it than that—I wasn't ready to say goodbye. Whether the captain realized that or not, she'd given permission, after clearing the request with The Council. She'd insisted it was only a temporary reprieve. Bec *would* go back. I figured the best I could do was stall as long as I could, despite the fact that Bec grew stronger every day.

"Tas? What are you thinking?"

"Oh," I said, not realizing I'd drifted off in thought. "Thinking about you, I guess. And how fast you're recovering."

"I just wish I had the strength to walk on my own."

"You can stand now. That's an improvement. And you've only been awake a week."

"I suppose." Bec watched her legs as she swung them in little circles. "Movement is easier, too."

"I have an idea!" I got up and went to the large-item constructing cell in the wall. "Let's go for a walk. I mean a ride." I ordered the cell to construct a rider and opened the door.

"What is that? A wheelchair?"

"It's like a wheelchair, but no wheels. It floats." I commanded the rider to exit the cell. When it did, it rose almost to the ceiling.

"That's going to be a big jump. I'm not sure I'm up to that yet." She laughed. The first I'd heard from her since she'd been on the ship.

"I forgot to tell it to adjust to Earth gravity. It's used to pulling against a stronger force." I gave it those instructions and told it to go to Bec. It sank to just above the surface of the floor and approached her.

"Your planet doesn't have the same gravity?"

"No," I said, helping her into the seat of the rider. "The entire ship is at Earth gravity right now, though. The captain decided to do an exercise with the extra . . ."

"Extra time she's stuck here dealing with me?"

“That’s not what I was going to say. She’s fine with you being here. So is The Council.”

“She does seem to be a very nice woman.” With my help, Bec sat down in the rider and wiggled to get settled. “I haven’t met The Council yet. Will I?”

“You might.”

“Who *are* they?”

Bec glided beside me in the rider as I walked out of sickbay. The smooth walls of the corridor glowed, lighting our way. “They’re very metaphysical beings, the most highly developed among us. Very empathic, very intuitive. More so than the rest of us. They can even see visions of things that have happened and things that *will* happen. The rest of us don’t have that particular skill.”

“*Really?*” Her eyes grew wide. “*You* have the other skills too, though, just not as highly developed?”

We turned a corner. “I do.”

“Wait, wait. Stop.” The rider stopped. “*Empathic*. That means you know how I feel?”

“Well, yes, I guess it does. To an extent.”

“Do you know how I feel about . . . you, for example?”

“I think you’re fond of me.”

“You rescued me, so I should be a bit fond of you. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, perhaps. But, I think it’s more.”

She grinned and lowered her eyes. “Well then, you have an advantage over me, don’t you?”

“I’m pretty fond of you too. And more,” I added, evoking a blush that spread across Bec’s cheeks.

I finished showing Bec around the ship—the observation deck, the bridge, the game arena, where Council Hall was located, and every place I could think of just to spend more time with her. During that day, I felt the mourning and the guilt she’d felt over her attraction to me lessen, and her feelings for me grow. All the while, I wondered how to talk the captain into more time when she’d clearly said Bec *had* to go back as soon as she was able.

Bec held on to my arm as we walked from one side of sickbay to the other, reaching the opposite wall without stopping this time. She'd been awake for a couple weeks now and had worked hard to get her full strength back. During every day that passed while I helped her recover, I could feel our connection growing.

"I made it! Well, with your help, of course. Mezni said it shouldn't be much longer until I can walk on my own."

"You're doing really well."

"I want to try it right now."

I stiffened. "To walk on your own?" I wasn't qualified to know if walking on her own might do any damage, and Mezni conveniently disappeared every time I showed up in sickbay.

She turned from the wall back toward the middle of the room and let go of my arm. "Yes. I want to try walking on my own."

"I don't know if you should do that. We'll ask Menzi when he gets back."

Before I could finish my sentence, she took a step then stood very still.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, just resting." She took another step.

I held my arms around her. Not touching, but ready to grab her if she should falter.

"One more, I think." And she took another step.

Her legs wobbled a little too much for my comfort level and I scooped her up.

"Well, only taking two steps isn't bad," she said, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Not bad at all," I agreed.

"Thank you, by the way. For rescuing me. And for being here." She kissed me on the cheek and smiled. A full-blown, genuine smile. I was seeing more of those as her time with me went by. She was recovering both physically and emotionally. And I was getting more attached by the day.

10

Daigon and I sat against the wall outside our nenon room to catch our breath before exiting the arena.

“So what’s your plan now that Bec’s awake and recovering quickly?” Daigon asked. “I know you’ve been putting off taking her back in order for her to get stronger. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

I wiped the sweat from my brow. “She’s been through a lot. I thought allowing her more time to heal was the least I could give her. The captain’s okay with it and so is The Council. As far as a plan, I can’t say that I really have one. Bec knows she can’t tell people about us, but we haven’t discussed the specifics.”

He gave me a sideways look. “Why are you putting that off?”

“We’ve been busy with her physical recovery,” I said.

Daigon narrowed his eyes at me. “You’re attached to her, aren’t you?”

Daigon tipped his head at a couple of our friends who had just arrived for a game. I waited until they passed to answer.

“I’m not attached to her. I’m just helping her. That’s all.”

“You’re not a very good liar, Tas. She’s a sweet girl. Everyone who’s met her thinks so, including me and Sena. But there’s something more to it when the two of you are together.”

Trying to lie to Daigon was like trying to lie to myself, which I’d been doing in abundance lately. “All right, I *am* attached. I’m more than attached. I can’t stand the thought of sending her back. I know she feels the same—I can feel it—and I have no idea what to do.”

“When you disobey orders, you really do it big, don’t you?”

Daigon stood up and offered me a hand. “Come on. Let’s walk.”

Daigon and I walked the corridors for a while before either of us spoke. During that time, I tried to come up with some solution that made sense because anything that involved Bec and me parting was unimaginable.

“I don’t care about orders or reprimands. I’ll do anything to be with her. I know we have to undo what I’ve done and put her back into her life—or as close to it as we can—as if I’d never interfered. But I can’t fathom it. I want to go with her.”

“Tas, you’d better think this through. Are you *sure* she even feels

the same? She's Kian. She might not be capable of recognizing a bond the way we do. And, maybe you have some rescuer feelings jumbled into this."

"Rescuer feelings? What the hell are those?"

"I don't know," Daigon said. "I'm reaching. But you going back with her could alter the Kians' course just as much as plucking one of them off their planet. Getting permission for that might take a miracle."

It was almost time for my usual visit with Bec—she'd be waiting for me—so I turned toward sickbay, with a lot to think about. "I want to check on Bec."

"Fine, check on her. But you need to make sure she feels the same way, fast. If she doesn't, you're setting yourself up for a lot of pain for nothing." He shook his head. "And if she does feel the same, you may have set yourself up for even more."

11

I walked into sickbay after my discussion with Daigon. He was right. I had to be sure where things stood between me and Bec. We'd hinted that we had feelings for each other, but we needed to discuss them—out loud. Maybe the Kian factor *did* skew what I felt between us. I had to know, for certain.

Bec was standing on the far side of the room. "Stay right there." She held her hands in front of her, motioning for me to stop. "I have a surprise for you. Mezni said it was okay."

She took a step, then another. Slowly, surely, she made her way across sickbay, pausing now and then, but never stopping. Her face beamed brighter the closer she got to me until she stood right in front of me. "I did it!" She put her arms around me, tighter than I imagined she could.

I lifted her up and spun her around. "Yes, you did!"

When I put her down, she grabbed my face and kissed me, so deep and long it made me dizzy. When she pulled back, her smile had faded. I understood why. She was better, *completely* better. It was time for her to go.

"No. This isn't a good thing." She touched my lips with her fingertip. "It means I'll have to leave you. I can't. I can't leave you. Tas, I love you."

She clung to me and I clung to her. "I love you, too."

So, it had been said—out loud. Kian or not, we *couldn't* be separated.

"I'll go with you. If Mezni knows you're capable of this, the captain and commander may already know, too. Now. We'll go now. I could very well be denied permission to leave, so I'm not asking."

"You're sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

Bec wore a casual Anuan outfit. It looked close enough to medical clothing not to be too noticeable on Earth. My game suit might not blend in as well, but I didn't have time to worry about that.

I grasped her hand. "Come on, we have to leave. Now."

She nodded. "I'm ready."

I picked her up and ran with her through the corridors toward

external transition. People took notice, but it didn't matter. By the time anyone figured out what was happening, we'd be gone. I just had to think of something to tell Toya to get her to transition us. When we burst into X-tran, Daigon stood at the controller.

"Daigon, what are you doing here?"

"Hi, Bec," Daigon said.

"Hi, Daigon." Bec looked at me and I shrugged.

"I said, what are you doing here, Daigon?"

Daigon leaned against the wall. "I ran into Mezni in the corridor. Congratulations, Bec. Sounds like you're at the end of your recovery process."

"Daigon, get out my way!" I said, putting Bec down.

"I can't do that, Tas." He pulled away from the wall and positioned himself between me and the controller.

"I'm leaving, Daigon. Now you can get out of my way on your own, or I'll put you out of the way."

"Tas, no." Bec clutched at my arm. "He's your best friend. You can't leave like this."

"They'll send you back and I'm not letting you go without me. Daigon, I'm not telling you again! Move!"

Daigon didn't budge, so I pushed him. He lost his footing, but recovered before I could reach the controller. I reared my arm back to give him a right hook to the jaw, but felt a sting in my side before I could deliver it. I dropped to the floor like a rock.

"You stunned me!" I said when I could move my lips again.

"You left me no choice." Daigon's eyes scanned X-tran. "Where's Bec?"

"What?" I got up—still trying to get my legs to cooperate—but Bec was nowhere to be seen.

12

Daigon and I searched the corridors outside X-tran. Bec had recovered, but not enough to go very far yet.

“Maybe she went back to sickbay,” Daigon said after we’d been through all the nearby corridors.

“Link to Mezni,” I said, rushing toward sickbay.

“Go ahead, Tas,” Mezni answered.

“Are you in sickbay? Is Bec there?”

“I’m not in sickbay, but I can locate her from her monitors.”

“Tas.” Commander Riton’s voice vibrated through my communication device. “Report to Council Hall.”

I stumbled. I couldn’t recall anyone ever being summoned to Council Hall. “But, Commander—”

“Now, Tas!”

I stopped in the middle of the corridor.

“What’s wrong?” Daigon asked.

“I’m supposed to report to Council Hall.”

“Council Hall? Go! I’ll keep looking for Bec. Mezni should let us know where she is soon.”

I walked into Council Hall. It opened up larger than any other meeting room on the ship but had the same sleek walls and smooth transitions as the rest of Mission Earth. Nothing special or majestic, except for the semicircle of a half-dozen, gold-suited Council members looking down on me from their thickly padded chairs. The captain, commander, and Bec sat in front of them with their backs to me—an empty chair next to Bec.

Fohit, Head of the Ship’s Council, stood. “Tas, welcome. Please sit.” He indicated the empty chair next to Bec. The Council consisted of four women and two men of varying ages from about forty on up. Fohit was the oldest and looked it with his long, gray-streaked hair, neatly tied in the back.

I sat next to Bec, trying to commit every inch of her tortured face to memory, fearing that soon, memory was all I’d have of her.

“This lovely girl, Rebecca, has made a request of The Council.

Have you not?" Fohit looked toward Bec.

"Yes, sir. I have." Bec turned to me. "I'm sorry, Tas. I couldn't come between you and the people you love."

"But, Bec—"

"Tas!" Commander Riton snapped and I shut up.

"As I was saying . . ." Fohit sat and placed his hands on the arms of his chair. "Rebecca has made a request of The Council. It seems she has grown attached to you. It is not surprising. She has lost those so dear to her. Yet you belong here and she belongs on Earth. This you knew when you brought her here, Tas."

I had known. Knowing it didn't make my stomach feel any less queasy when he said it, though. I couldn't let them send her back alone, but I had no idea how to stop it now.

"Please, Councilor Fohit, Your Eminence—"

"Silence, Tas!" The Commander gave me a look like daggers might fly out of his eyes and I silenced myself.

Fohit continued. "You will not leave this ship—"

"I must!" I rose from my seat. "I will not be separated from her!"

"Tas, please, don't get into any more trouble over me." Bec slid her arms around my waist, pulling me back to my seat. "Please, just listen. I'm trying to fix this."

I put my arms around her and remained standing. If they were to separate us, I'd at least have these last moments with her.

The commander gave me another dagger-look, mirrored by the captain.

"His reaction is understandable. Let him be," Fohit said. "Rebecca saw how you were torn, whether you saw it yourself or not. A characteristic of a true connection. She has not asked for you to leave with her. She could not ask that sacrifice of you. Another characteristic of a true connection."

"But, Bec." I cupped her cheek in my hand. "I want to go. I want to be with you."

"Just listen to what they have to say," she whispered. "And pray that we'll be together."

"So, Tas," Councilor Fohit continued. "Rebecca has requested you stay here with your loved ones."

"Bec, why?" I said.

"She has requested that you stay," Fohit repeated, "and that she be permitted to stay as well."

"She stay? *Here?*" The pieces started coming together, but broke apart just as quickly. No Kian had ever been brought from Earth to stay with us. We were not to interfere with their existences or their destinies. "But no Kian has ever—"

“No Kian has ever requested,” Fohit said.

I looked to Bec. “You’re sure?”

“This is her request, of her own free will, from deep within,” Fohit said. “A request she is sure of. We can feel that.”

I scanned the rest of The Council, searching their faces and their emotions for clues to their positions about this unprecedented situation. Nothing existed on the surface or within them that had been left exposed enough for me to reach.

“Granting this request would do no harm to others,” Fohit began. “Those closest to her on Earth are gone. Considering all this, The Council shall grant her request. Rebecca, you may stay and live among us, as one of us. With you, Tas, if that is the choice of your souls.”

The tension eased from Bec’s shoulders. “Thank you, Councilors, for your gracious ruling.”

I couldn’t believe it. I would have never expected they’d allow her to stay. But they *had*. I embraced Bec. “Thank you,” I whispered in her ear.

“Thank you,” she responded. “For everything.” Her body sagged and I held her up. “Tas. I’m exhausted.”

“Thank you, Council. Permission to be dismissed?”

“Granted,” Fohit said. “*All* are dismissed.”

I picked Bec up and carried her to sickbay, where Mezni cleared her to leave. She’d need to report back daily for therapy, but was otherwise free to go wherever she wanted.

Mezni scanned in her stats before we left. “Okay, that’ll be it. We’ll see you back here tomorrow.”

With droopy eyelids, Bec gave me a tired smile. “Looks like I’m all yours.”

I picked her up and carried her to my quarters. She hadn’t recovered enough from her accident for the kind of day she’d had and by the time we’d reached my place, she’d drifted off. I watched her sleep, lying on my bed, a slight smile on her face. In all the days I’d cared for her, I hadn’t seen her sleep so deeply or peacefully. She’d miss her parents for as long as she lived, but she had a home with *me* now.

Always and forever.

From the Author

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§

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Thank you!

Preview

THE ANUAN LEGACY

TRACI ISON SCHAFFER



CHAPTER 1 – GAIGE

“Gaige, you’ll be entering Earth’s atmosphere in ten seconds,” Nav said over the open mission channel.

“Got it, Nav.” I scanned the cockpit readouts to verify that all of the diagnostics still checked out. They did.

“Five seconds.”

I braced for the change in velocity.

“Prepare for entry in three, two, one . . .”

Just as I hit the thick atmosphere from the vacuum of space, cockpit warnings blared and diagnostic projections flashed by as the auto-systems tried to pinpoint the problem.

“Nav, something’s wrong with the shuttle!” I shouted.

“We know. We think an unexpectedly strong solar burst knocked out your Lexon system. We’re working it from here.”

The diagnostic projections continued to scroll through the air in front of me, still searching for the problem.

“There’s no time,” I said. “I’ll have to land it mentally.” Telekinesis was nothing new to an Anuan, but controlling something that large would be more than a challenge. It would be a miracle.

“Our readings show the electromagnetic interference on Earth’s atmosphere caused by the burst won’t settle down for another few Earth minutes. Be careful what you’re opening yourself up to, Gaige.”

“I don’t have a choice.” The shuttle was going down one way or another. I could take control or die. “Override!”

The warnings fell silent and the cockpit diagnostics faded. The remaining displays dimmed. The shuttle was all mine. I reached forward and touched the control panel. My hands trembled with surging adrenaline until I pressed them so firmly against the panel they couldn’t budge. I wouldn’t be able to land the craft and maintain a cloaking shield at the same time, but I’d have to worry about being detected later.

The shuttle vibrated under the stress of friction with Earth’s atmosphere. Opening my mind, I directed my mental willpower into the shuttle. *Slow to entry speed!* Still, the vibrations rocked the shuttle. If I didn’t get the shuttle’s speed down, it would break apart under the continued force of entry. I focused everything I could pull from within myself at the shuttle. It slowed—not quite to a normal entry speed—but

close enough to ease some of the stress on the craft.

Trying to manage the shuttle was depleting me, not just mentally, but physically, too. The unstable electromagnetic energy in Earth's atmosphere from the solar burst wasn't helping. I couldn't maintain control of the shuttle much longer. Dusk had already started to settle over the area, but the night vision filter of the windshield allowed me to easily see Earth's barren winter trees—lots of them. My eyes scanned for a clearing among all the trees. In the far distance, toward the northwest, I found one. *You can make that.*

I leaned my body and my mind toward the clearing and willed the shuttle in that direction. The craft glided above the treetops.

Slow to hover. The shuttle paused and hung suspended in the air over the open stretch of land.

Landing mode and down. Drained, I struggled to keep control. My energy level wavered. The craft shuddered then crashed to the ground with a hard jolt that slammed me forward in my restraint.

I laid my head back against the seat, exhausted. Stretching each arm and leg, wiggling fingers and toes, I seemed to be in one piece. But every part of me ached—especially my brain. It felt like an icepick had been driven through my temples.

Dusk offered some visual cover, but I could have easily been detected on radars since I hadn't been able to maintain a cloak during the landing. A stream of sweat ran down the side of my face. I didn't have enough energy to wipe it away, let alone hide a shuttle.

"Gauge? Ship to Gauge."

I heard the static-riddled communications coming from my crippled shuttle, *barely*, but couldn't gather enough energy to answer.

"Ship to Gauge. Respond!"

"Yeah." With some effort, I got the sigh of a word out.

"We're evaluating your medical values now—," Nav said.

"Gauge," another voice interrupted. "This is Mission Commander. I'm sending Conner down with a rescue team as soon as the burst energy subsides. Shouldn't be more than another five Earth minutes."

His words sent a small surge of adrenaline through my body, giving me enough energy to protest. "Tas, no! I mean, Commander, permission to—"

"You can't stay down there like that," Tas said. "I'm sending a team to get you."

"Please, Commander . . ." I couldn't let my situation affect the mission. I drew in a deep breath, trying to hold on to the quickly fading adrenaline. "I request some time to recover the situation on my own." I took another breath. "One of us in this area is enough, maybe too much already. Remember, we can't overwhelm her."

There was silence and then, finally, Tas answered. "Request granted. But I'll have Conner and the rescue team on standby. If we don't receive a positive report from you in fifteen Earth minutes, I'm sending them. Understood?"

I couldn't respond. Our short exchange had taken what little energy I'd regained. I knew I had to fix the shuttle, get it cloaked, and move it somewhere away from the current site. But I could barely stay conscious.

"Gaige? This is Tas. Are you still with us?"

Yeah, I'm with you.

"Gaige?"

No energy left . . . to stay . . . awake . . .

CHAPTER 2 – TORI

“So, Tori, within the range plotted on this graph you can tell . . .”

I tried to pay attention to my mentor’s lesson, but a weariness had settled on me, heavy and sudden. With it came a feeling that something was terribly wrong. My eyes darted from one high-tech gadget to another within the disheveled test lab of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base’s world of classified research.

The cheap government setting reduced the technologies’ awe-factor, burying it amongst furniture and equipment spread across several decades. Like a time machine had crash-landed here and spewed its contents from a long journey across Air Force history. Everything seemed to be in its not-so-orderly place, but I couldn’t stop searching out the reason for my unease.

“Tori? You in there?” Brian waved his hand in front of my face.

My attention refocused across the table on my mentor. *Yeah, I’m with you*, I thought, though I truly wasn’t. Something else had me and wouldn’t let go. Heat flushed through my body and a trickle of sweat ran down the side of my face. I couldn’t decide if the reaction had been caused by embarrassment or the lingering worry over whatever *feeling* had grabbed hold of me.

Brian waited patiently, leaning forward just a bit as if he were hopeful and ready to snatch my words and move forward as soon as I’d recovered. His eyes, hazel-brown and murky, peered at me over the reading glasses perched on his nose. Those glasses and the gray beginning to show at his temples gave his otherwise youthful, fit appearance an authoritative edge, reminding me whose time I was wasting—the nation’s top civilian stealth scientist. I was living up to the honor of being selected for the U.S. government’s most prestigious college internship program by daydreaming. I had to pull it together and grasped for anything to get myself back on track. The colored graph in Brian’s hand brought a few words to mind—frequency, signal ranges. *What about them?* “Uh, the frequency range . . . the signal . . . um, is within the infrared—no, the ultraviolet . . .” I couldn’t put the bits and pieces together. “I’m sorry, Dr.—” Calling somebody so important by their first name had been hard to get used to, but Brian gave me his familiar “I’m-not-my-father look,” so I started over. “I’m sorry, Brian. I guess I didn’t hear you.” I swallowed and wiped the

stream of sweat off the side of my face with my hand.

Brian smiled and tossed his graph on the table. "This is a lot to take in. You've been a sponge, Tori, but even sponges have their saturation points." He looked down at his watch. "It's almost time for you to go anyway. Why don't we call it a day?"

"Really?" I held my breath, wishing I'd just thanked him and gotten out of there.

"Yes, really. These graphs will still be here in the morning," Brian tipped his head toward the door. "Go enjoy your evening."

Even though I'd left work a few minutes ahead of time, darkness overtook the days early during the winter months, so it still felt late. I drove slowly through the family neighborhood that led to our brick, cookie-cutter apartment complex. As I scanned from side to side, watching for any shadow of a small form that might dart out in front of me, I thought back to what had happened in the lab. I'd felt certain something was wrong. The feeling still clung to me like plastic wrap.

An emptiness that longed to be filled had so far refused anything I'd offered. I'd thought following in my dead father's footsteps would satisfy the void, but it hadn't. My soul screamed for me to take my life in *some* direction. More and more, I realized, this wasn't it. My current path didn't fill the lost, yearning spot within me. And being closed up in that classified government lab with its windowless concrete walls felt like wearing a coat two sizes too small—suffocating and uncomfortable. It just didn't fit. My soul needed something else, something more. Perhaps sitting in that environment today had finally brought the realization to a head. It was the best explanation I could come up with, anyway, for the feeling I'd had.

I swiped my keycard at the main door of our apartment building, climbed the stairs to the second floor, and walked down the hallway, counting apartments as I went. It was easy to lose track of which identical red door belonged to me and my roommate. When I reached the seventh one, I placed my key in the doorknob. That's when I heard them—the moans, the sighs, the heavy breathing. I removed my key and pounded on the door instead. "Kristen, you home? I forgot my key."

After a quick gasp and some shuffling, the door lock clicked and a disheveled Kristen stood in the doorway with Justin right behind her, still pulling on his T-shirt. His matching blond hair, though different in

length, lay equally askew.

“Hey, Tor,” she said. “We’re on our way out to Justin’s. We’ll catch you later.” She grabbed Justin by the hand and pulled him out the door.

Justin threw a quick glance over his shoulder. “Yeah, catch you later, Tori.”

“Have fun,” I said, though I knew that bit of advice wasn’t needed. How the two hadn’t become fused together, I didn’t know. Their grades had to suck. Still, the idea of having someone I cared enough about to forget everything else, even grades, made me envy what they shared.

Once the residual racket of their quick getaway settled down, the apartment grew quiet and dead still. Perfect for thinking. I dropped my purse on the floor next to the door and absently picked up the open potato chip bag Kristen and Justin had left on the coffee table. After digging around in the kitchen junk drawer for a few seconds, I found a chip clip, snapped it on the bag, and tossed the bag of chips into the cabinet. Not before stuffing a few barbequed morsels into my mouth, though. That was all the appetite I had. Food could wait. Sorting out what bothered me could not.

Cutting back through the living room, I noticed bright red crumbs against the cream upholstery of the couch and paused to brush them into my hand. Though I’d managed to capture a few crumbs, I’d also left a decent smudge, but I’d deal with that later. I stepped into the bathroom and dusted the crumbs into the shell-shaped monstrosity of a sink. The design blemish stood out in the granite countertop of an otherwise nicely updated bathroom.

I crossed the hall of our square apartment and entered our one and only bedroom. In a haze of thought that I was anxious to sort through, I changed into the warmest flannel pajamas I owned—pink with white snowmen—and lay down on my bed. Bunching the pillow tightly under my head, I faced the opposite side of the room where Kristen’s empty bed sat covered with a yellow, lacy bedspread, rumpled but made. The bed probably wouldn’t be occupied that night, like most others. Practically living alone was fine sometimes, but other times, the emptiness in the apartment made me miss my family back home in Florida all the more. I even missed my real parents who’d been gone for so long.

My eyes tingled at the thought and I swiped away a tear. Barely four when they were killed, I didn’t remember much about my real parents or our home near Las Vegas, but somehow their scents had stayed with me. Mom’s soft floral perfume would waft into a room seconds before she did, followed by her bubbly, energetic presence. And Dad—his musky scent emanated a strength that always made me

feel safe. Like he could lift me into his arms, wrap me up, and keep all the monsters away. I inhaled a long breath through my nose and could almost smell them right there in the room with me.

Though my aunt and uncle had done a wonderful job as surrogates, the loss of my parents left a hole in me that had never been filled. Why did the hole seem to be more apparent now? Why were new holes opening up? Holes and uncertainties. Lots of uncertainties. Why didn't I know what path I needed to walk? And why had it all struck me with such a panic at the lab today? *If* that was truly what had overcome me. I was eighteen now, eighteen and one day. Maybe that was what becoming an adult entailed: figuring out all the grown-up things like where you fit into this world and how you want—no, *need*—to live your life.

Perhaps my aunt and uncle coming up for my birthday had made things worse. Stuck here in the cold, gray Ohio winter, did I simply miss my family and the Florida sunshine? Of course, I did.

Maybe I just need to go back home, I thought, as I sank deeper into my comforter.

No energy left . . . to stay . . . awake . . .

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I hope you enjoyed this preview of  
The Anuan Legacy.

The full book is available now in  
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§

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