

CLARE C. MARSHALL

The book cover features a central illustration of a young woman with short, wavy, blue-tinted hair. She has a serious expression and is wearing a dark, textured jacket. Her right hand is raised, showing a glowing blue lightning bolt emanating from her fingers. Her left hand is positioned lower, with a bright orange and yellow flame or fire effect around it. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with a row of houses in the distance. The title 'HUNGER IN HER BONES' is overlaid on the image. 'HUNGER' is in a large, bold, gold-colored font, 'IN HER' is in a smaller, white font, and 'BONES' is in a very large, bold, white font with a blue shadow effect. A white, ribbon-like graphic element curves across the title.

**HUNGER** IN HER  
**BONES**

BOOK THREE OF THE **SPARKSTONE** SAGA



# HUNGER IN HER BONES

CLARE C. MARSHALL

BOOK THREE  
THE SPARKSTONE SAGA

*Hunger In Her Bones*

Book Three of the Sparkstone Saga

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*The Violet Fox*

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***The Sparkstone Saga:***

*Stars In Her Eyes*

*Dreams In Her Head*

*Hunger In Her Bones*

*Darkness In Her Reach*

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# PART ONE



Music is a powerful weapon in the right hands.

—J.G.C., *Campbell's Multiple Verses*

# PROLOGUE



Sunni and I stroll across the quad towards the town of Sparkstone. It's approaching midnight, and the glittering Milky Way splashes across the sky. The air is thick and stuffy, with no fresh breeze to alleviate the heat. My arm moves lazily at my side, swimming through the air as I note the vivid green of the grass and the stark navy blue of the sky. The Milky Way stars appear cartoonishly yellow, as if we are walking beneath a painted curtain of sky, and the Northern Star, the moon, Venus, and the faint light of Mars are also absent.

"That's funny," I say, "I don't remember the news saying there would be no regular stars out tonight. Do you think that's why we're here?"

I expect the surroundings to fill in the gap in my memory. Sparkstone campus. The old buildings behind us that aren't really old, and the orderly suburb town before us was built for the servants of the Collective. A small university town to the naked eye, but within those white-and-grey shingled homes, people from another world, spying on us, waiting for our powers to emerge so they can ...

I'm tugged in that direction, but remain anchored by Sunni's firm grip on my arm. She gestures in the other direction, towards the isolated structure of Conrod Building.

A running figure moves swiftly toward us. I draw back instinctively. It doesn't look like any of my friends—it can't be Jia, she'd probably opt to travel invisibly even in the dark. The figure pants with effort, glancing over her shoulder every few seconds as she attempts to put more space between herself and whoever she thinks is chasing her. In the dim lighting, I strain to make out her features and move towards her. The more I focus on her face, the slower I move, as if the air has transmuted into molasses.

Her white sneakers snag something in the grass and she falls face-first to the ground. I run towards her to help but she takes no notice of me. She groans, struggling to climb to her elbows.

"Are you all right?" I ask, kneeling before her.

She fixes a fearful stare at me, squints, and then looks past my right shoulder. She sobs, and then clamps her mouth shut. Her wide cheekbones and olive green eyes remind me of a friend I had in elementary school. She had a similar haircut when we were young: a thick, messy bob and heavy bangs that covered her eyebrows.

And as I think of my old, forgotten friend, the girl's image wavers for a brief moment, twisting to accommodate my thoughts.

"Focus on the present," Sunni says.

Sunni's sharp voice rips the old memory from me as the true image of the girl comes back into focus. Her dark coffee-brown hair is short and curled in the autumn climate. Freckles dot the

bridge of her nose and her sharp chin juts upward as she peers at the sky. Her lips move; I think she's praying.

I look frantically around for help, but it's just me and Sunni here. Mostly just me, though. I don't think Sunni has the physical presence to help. I climb to my feet and offer a hand. "C'mon. You can come back to my dorm. I have friends that can protect you. You don't have to be afraid."

Again, she ignores me, but this time for a good reason. As if conjured by the darkness, two figures come soundlessly from either side of me and grab the girl under her arms. Whether from surprise or an unknown force, I am knocked backward onto the cold grass.

"Hey!" I shout at the strangers, scrambling to my feet. My butt should hurt from the fall, yet the grass is strangely pillowy.

The two humanoids hover over the girl. Heavy, navy robes hide their true form. Their moves are calculated and cold as one holds her against the grass, and the other fumbles with a leather pouch around his waist. Their hands look human, but I wouldn't be surprised if they are hafelglob, gross alien shapeshifters who take human form and make up the majority of the security here at Sparkstone. Their faces are obscured by darkness, the hoods, and my fear of seeing their features.

One man holds the girl down as the other injects a transparent liquid via a large syringe into the crook of her elbow. She kicks and screams, and calls for help. No one is here, but me and Sunni, and Sunni isn't really here at all.

As if I am captaining a dingy on a turbulent sea, I buck and swerve to maintain my balance in the face of hopelessness.

The Collective are so much stronger than us.

They're more advanced.

They can manipulate us, and bring harm to those we love if we resist them. I know because they've hurt my family before.

And yet...

This ocean is mine. I can still the waters.

I can change the rules because I have superpowers. I *can* fight this.

"You could," says Sunni, next to me. "Won't do much good, since you're not really here."

The first dose does little to subdue the girl. She is strong. The would-be captor deftly retrieves another vial of the bright liquid from his pouch and inserts it into the needle, tests it, and forcefully gives the girl another dose. She screams. Dull pain surges up my left arm, as if I am the victim and not the witness in this crime.

"But this is really happening, isn't it?" I push to my feet, aided by dream physics. The grass feels like nothing on my toes. Blankets surround me; they are the air. I am close to opening my eyes—my real eyes—and seeing my dorm room, feeling the dread that accompanies the morning.

"I'm going to wake up. I'm going to run outside and stop this."

"I used to think I could do that too," Sunni admits.

"I'm different. I'm special."

Sunni shrugs. "Maybe."

My Sunni wouldn't have said that. She told me that I was

meant to do something great here—that my coming heralded a change. Hopefully one for the better. Me and the Sparks, we were meant to lead our peers out of this sick experiment and destroy the Collective’s attempts to harvest our DNA in the name of progress. No, this Sunni is just a shadow, pieced together from my twenty-four hours of knowing her and watching her die.

The girl has quieted now. She lays limp in one of the attacker’s arms as he drags her across the grass toward Conrod Building. Beneath that building, there’s a secret launch bay where the Collective keeps its shuttles. They must not have the teleportation arm bands like the other hafelglob.

Maybe they didn’t take the precaution because they thought this would be easy.

Well. They shouldn’t have underestimated us humans.

Time to be a hero.

I launch into a run, yet once again, the air is as thick as molasses. The kidnappers move at a good clip as if a thicker atmosphere is normal for them—maybe it is. Damn dream physics.

“I can move faster than this,” I mumble. My lips are cracked and dry, and again, the world of sleep and wakefulness thins. But I can’t afford to leave yet. Dream or not, I won’t wake up in the dorm knowing that I failed to prevent yet another kidnapping of a Sparkstone student.

Sunni, in a blur of colour and light, dashes in front of me and blocks my way. She throws her head back and screams, and gripping my arm tightly, together we leap into the sky. I lean

away from her—I have to save the girl—but Sunni’s in control now.

We’re no longer outside: we’re in what feels like a cabin living room, if the cabin owners were into the occult. Several women sit around a Ouija board resting on a table near the far wall. Shelves filled with crystals and candles line the walls; a purple cloth banner displaying a pentagram hangs next to a beaded doorway. I squint, trying to peer through the obscured grey beyond, yet my unconscious tells me that I’m still in Sparkstone. The room is stuffy; my legs writhe in the sheets, and in the dream realm, I try to wriggle from Sunni’s strong grip. She holds me in place as a heavy mist descends upon the women. They’re chanting in unison, eyes closed, as they grip each other tightly.

“I’m going back to save that girl,” I tell Sunni.

Sunni’s grip tightens. The faces of the missing students—including Sunni’s own smiling visage—swirl in the mist. The women stare indifferently at them.

“Don’t you know who they are?” I ask them. “The Collective has taken them. We want justice. What do you know?”

A thick, warm gust of wind gathers the crisp cabin and occult colours and peels them away, revealing the vibrant quad once more. The shock of being outside in the cold, even if it’s still just a dream, hits me hard. The kidnappers and the girl are almost to Conrod Building. I could make it.

Sunni’s outstretched hand now presses firmly against my chest. Heat radiates from her in a way that I couldn’t feel from the kidnapped girl. She is more real in this moment than in any other.

Her eyes glow faintly as she utters her usual request.

“Open...”

“The door. I know. But I don’t know which—” My words are sluggish. I can taste the sleep in my mouth. In the distance, the attackers and the girl are fading black dots as they approach the hidden shuttle bay. “I can’t do this now.”

“This is more important than just one girl,” she says insistently. Her fingertips dig into my skin as her other hand moves up to my neck. The hand is cold, scaled, and familiar.

“You’re not Sunni. You never are.”

“Trying...” For a moment, it really does look like she’s trying to resist possession. Her hand stiffens, yet the dream doesn’t allow me to back away. My body is lead and trapped on the hard mattress in real life, preventing me from escaping her grasp.

Sunni loses the battle. Her green eyes darken and transform, possessed by my memory of the alien Professor Jadore, when she threatened our lives. I gulp in air as she clamps her grip around me. While one hand chokes, the other whips out a knife from behind her back. She stabs me in the chest. It’s a dull, muted pain, made more intense as she twists the blade clockwise, as if trying to turn a sound dial on a radio.

This is the part where I can usually force myself to wake up.

Fog rolls in from my peripheral vision, though it could be me slowly dying. I choke out a plea for Sunni-Jadore to stop, but with each wasted utterance, she becomes more and more like Jadore. Green-skinned, black eyes, and taller. Even if I wanted

to comply with their request, there's no door to be seen. My eyes roll upward. Just let the dream be over already.

The Sunni-Jadore form dissipates and becomes one with the fog, and for a moment, my dream mind wonders if she was really there in the first place. Only my hands hold the knife stuck in my chest. It doesn't hurt anymore. There's no blood, only the sense of something foreign stuck inside me. I slide the blade out, and breathe a little easier.

In the sky, misty cloud nebulas swirl at a stand-still pace into a black hole. I'm still on Earth, and still at Sparkstone, yet the fog has devoured it all: the campus, the never-ending stretch of prairie, and Canadian Rockies.

The further away an object, the slower it appears to move. Standing alone on the barren planet as white mist rises and envelops me, I don't know what's worse: passing the event horizon and stretching forever into a place where light cannot escape, or waiting here, alone in the mist, undying as the universe marches on.

# CHAPTER 1



“And there’s nothing else? That’s all that happened?”

I nod at Jia’s question, stroking my long piano fingers as I lean back against the faux leather couch. The skin on my hands peels from the dry climate. I try not to pick at it. I’ll have to make do without hand lotion—the stuff I brought with me in September ran out a few days ago. Since anything I buy in this alien-controlled town could be infused with strange, DNA-altering chemicals, I don’t want to take the risk.

“The girl sounds like Kendra. She lives on the floor below us. Always seemed nice,” Jia says thoughtfully. “Maybe Sunni is showing you her fate to help us.”

Misty fidgets in her seat next to Jia. Dreaming about Sunni—whether she’s actually communicating with me from beyond the grave, or whether I’m conjuring her from my subconscious—is a contentious subject. Why Sunni chose to communicate with me, a person she barely knew for twenty-four hours in real life, rather than Misty, a close friend she knew before coming to Sparkstone, is still a mystery.

Normally we’d have these meetings outside, where there’s

less chance of us being observed, but this autumn has been unforgiving with its shrill winds. I could probably stand it, but Wil and Misty aren't as accustomed to bearing the cold as Jia and me. I don't blame them. Sitting on comfy couches in a private, climate-controlled study room in Rogers Hall is far more preferable, especially with our albeit crude methods of circumventing the Collective's monitoring methods.

"Another one, gone," I say.

"So we'll add Kendra to the list. Does Kendra have a last name?" Misty asks. She can't meet my apologetic gaze. These dream-recounting sessions are hard for her. Drudging up Sunni every day doesn't help us move on from her violent death at Jadore's hands weeks ago. "That's, what, three students gone in the last couple of weeks?"

Wil, sitting to my left on the leather couch, has already made the calculation with his light-speed, telepathic brain of his, but he obliges me as I do a quick mental tally.

The first was Daniel Chomber, an astrobiology and chemical engineering major in his final year. One day, he was on the verge of making an important breakthrough studying how the reactions between water, rocks, and low temperatures shape planet habitability. The next, his dorm and his lab desk had been cleaned out. The cover-up was too clean, too much like how they treated Sunni's death to not catch our attention.

The second, barely four days later: Fahima Osmond, a third-year student who had skipped a grade in high school because of her impressive grasp of mathematics, which led her to study cryptology and physics. According to her friends, she had been falling behind on her projects, and had obsessively spent more

and more time in her dorm room. Just like Daniel Chomber, one day she was there, and the next, she was “gone.” Sent home to “think about her future” was the official story, though to our knowledge, no one leaves Sparkstone University alive.

The Collective became more restrained, because it was nearly two weeks before the next disappearance. Avery Trites, second-year student, studying ballet and kinesiology. Avery travelled with a few other dancers to and from Sparkstone for competitions and shows—under heavy supervision from two professors. Even though Avery was reported to have returned to campus from the latest outing, others reported that the professors had kept him late at a bar in Edmonton to celebrate his latest win. Same thing the next day: empty dorm, emptied out locker. Official story: transferred to a special dance academy somewhere in the States.

Now, less than three days later, Kendra. Unknown last name. Unknown major. Gone, like the rest of them.

“Kendra makes for the fourth one in three weeks.”

*We only have five minutes left on the jammer*, Wil reminds us with his unblockable telepathic voice.

Textbooks and binder notes are scattered across the coffee table, and Wil balances a black notebook on his lap. It’s filled with advanced calculus, though that’s for the benefit of the tiny camera inserted into the ceiling—although Wil does enjoy solving calculus equations in his spare time. He fiddles absently with the silver band wrapped permanently around his wrist. The same band is around all our wrists. He’s still unable to get them off, despite trying everything he can think of. And if the telepathic genius who has a silver tongue when it comes

to technology can't get rid of it, I don't know who can.

The Collective monitors almost every room in every building on campus. Most of the devices are installed in the ceiling, beside or within lights. Thanks to Wil's genius, we've figured out how to modify our alien wristbands to interfere with the audio signal for up to fifteen minutes. Wil's telepathic powers help extend this time limit sometimes, but we don't want to raise suspicion by relying on him too much. It's one thing for him to be good with technology. It's another to have them realize that his genius is driven by his superpowers.

"And the stuff about you opening a door?"

It's impossible to lie, but it's easy to hold back. Wil doesn't push me, but I feel his patient stare. Even thinking about him thinking about my thoughts is enough to drudge up memories and feelings that I don't want him to see. Like Ethan and I in the music room, creating music together. And how he almost died in my arms, just weeks ago, because of whatever experiments the Collective are doing on him. He could be next. He could be—

"Hey!" Misty says, clapping suddenly. Her icy glare turns to Wil. "She alive in there or what?"

"I've told you before, okay? She says that every time. You knew her. Don't you know what it means?"

Misty slumps back in the couch and puts her boots up on the coffee table. Flecks of dirt shake from the soles onto a sheet of orderly calculus problems. "She's trying to communicate with us."

Jia lets out a calculated breath and discretely checks her cell

phone. “We know from Shannon across the hall from me that Kendra wasn’t in tutorial today, and she heard that her room was vacated.”

“That’s what happened with Sunni,” Misty said, her voice unsteady.

Jia nods. I don’t need Wil’s powers to relive the moment of her death. The crackle of Jadore’s hand lightning. The thump as she fell to the floor on the mother ship. Her body, transported away. There was no time to say goodbye. When we returned to Earth, me in a whirlwind of newfound teleportation powers, to find her room had been emptied—and readied for *me*—it was like she’d never been there at all. None of us know if me staying in Sunni’s room has given me access to her bizarre psychic dreamscape, or if Sunni is communicating from beyond the grave, but the dreams are unlike anything I’ve had before, and with Sunni’s absence hanging over us so thickly, we cannot afford to dismiss anything.

“It matches what happened to the others. It’s...safe to assume the worst,” Jia continued quietly.

“If she was really abducted—” Wil begins.

“She was,” I say curtly, in a certainty that frightens me. “We—I—saw it. I saw the others too—but this is the clearest dream yet.”

Wil nods patiently. “What I’m saying is there is no other information confirming that that’s how the girl was abducted. Her absence—and the absence of the others—doesn’t make the abduction theory more plausible.” He adjusts the small, round frames on his nose, and leans forward, unable to relax, and then tells us telepathically, *Maybe a minute now, probably less.*

The urgency cuts through Jia's voice. "And we're no closer to discovering what kind of alien this might be? Was it hafelglob?"

"Don't think so, but I can't be sure." We haven't ever seen hafelglob wear anything other than maintenance overalls, or security guard attire. Despite several night missions surveying Conrod Building—Wil has access because his lab is in there—we haven't seen any unusual activity.

"We don't know how many aliens belong to the Collective. There's too friggin' many. All that matters is they're not human." Misty mutters.

"Maybe," I say, trying to recall the details of the dream. Sunni's dreams don't slip away as easily as regular vivid dreams. "There was a part where I was in a room filled with occult imagery. People were sitting around a table, and this strange cloud hovered above them. And...the faces of the kidnapped were in the cloud. The room was boiling hot." I blush again, but I'm determined to tell them every aspect of the dream, no matter how silly or trivial.

Misty lights up. "There's an occult shop in town."

"There is?"

*Time's up*, Wil says telepathically. "So, Ingrid, does that statistics explanation help at all?"

"I hope I was able to clear up the cognitive behavioural issue question you had. It's tricky, but you'll get it," Jia chimes in, right on cue.

I smile weakly. Misty's words remain. I have to get to that occult shop.

But just like that, the dream conversation is over. Who knows

what the alien listening in on us thinks about our suspicious meetings. Jia's major is child psychology, and has little intersection with Wil's math and computer engineering work. At least me taking pointers from Wil makes sense, with me *supposedly* studying psychology and interdimensional theories. And Misty—well, I wouldn't be surprised if they stopped trying to play the mind gymnastics it takes to justify her presence in our math and science conversations. Her linguistics major and mastery of languages would be little help in the joint study scenario we're selling here. Sparkstone did sell its freshmen on interdisciplinary study. Strange major combinations are not only common, but encouraged. It's a thin, but somewhat comforting blanket.

“So...um...” Jia and I exchange awkward smiles. It's always like this after the jammer gives out. We have to go back to considering each word before speaking. “If we're done, should we go for a walk? Get some exercise before going back at it? I... could use a stretch.”

Wil stands to his full height—an impressive six foot one—and gathers his misconstrued papers. “Can't. Have to get back to the lab. My project is due in a week.”

“Keener,” Misty mutters, but she jumps to her feet. “I'm down for a walk.”

“Don't you have a deadline to meet?” I ask.

“So do you. I think yours is a little more urgent, no?”

It's true that Jadore hasn't let up on me. Ever since I announced my connection to Joseph G. Campbell, I've lived with regret. But I need to know why I feel so strongly about him. Why I feel like I know him.

Why I can conjure him into our world with my music.

We gather our papers and tidy the study room for the next study group. We take our time. Hurrying would be suspicious. I yawn. Being constantly aware of my body, and how it reacts, is exhausting. It doesn't help that Jia, Misty, and I have been sharing a room for the past week. Jia snores, and Misty rolls in her sleep, and has terrible nightmares that make her sweat something fierce. But it's the best way to keep an eye on each other—and makes it harder for the Collective to snatch us during the night.

I clutch my binders close to my chest. I shouldn't be so mean with Misty. She does make it easy with her defensive attitude. As Wil finishes gathering his math problems and Jia eagerly helps, I lean against the door. Misty texts absently on her phone. Weeks ago, she confided in me that she writes text messages to herself in a language that she and Sunni made up: part of her grieving process.

“So what's the new project you've got?” I ask her.

“Hmm?” She peers at me over her device. “Oh. Just dumb documents that I have to translate.”

“What is it this time? Japanese or German?” Jia asks. She barely takes her gaze from Wil as he stuffs his messy, note-stuffed binder into his shoulder bag.

“Arabic,” Misty replies, finally stuffing her phone in her back pocket.

Finally we head out into the hallway. Jia first, then Misty, then me, and then Wil. *No professors heading our way, just some students. Jadore's in her office. We're clear.*

Jia continues our innocent conversation from the study room. “I could use a refresher on my Mandarin,” Jia says as we saunter down the long, red-carpeted hallway within Rogers Hall. Dorms for guests and newly arrived students line both sides. I stayed here for a day when I arrived, before I moved into Sunni’s old room. “It’s been a long time since I’ve spoken it.”

“Your parents don’t speak it?” Wil asks.

Jia laughs. “No. I mean, I guess they learned a bit with me when I was younger, and they sent me to a Mandarin-only school when I was six, but it was pretty expensive and in Calgary, far away, so they had to stop. So, Misty, would you be up for some private tutoring?”

Misty shrugs, but I see in her eyes that she’s trying to hide her interest. “Sure, I guess. Mandarin’s not one of my best languages.”

“You’re being modest. Every language is your best language.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. You don’t need to butter me up, I’ll help.”

“Are there any languages you *don’t* know?” I ask her.

“Finnish is hard. Swedish I can get by all right in. Gaelic, I have no clue. Not that many speak that one anyway.”

“*Is mise Ingrid, ciamar a tha thu?*” I say. “That’s pretty much all I know.”

Misty runs her teeth harshly over her bottom lip and looks pensive. “*I’m Ingrid, how are you? That right?*”

“Yeah. You just picked that up now?”

She shrugs again and waves her hands. “Throwin’ fire and ice ain’t all I can do.”

I hold my breath. Wil shoots her a dirty look. Jia tenses beside me.

*Do you want to get us killed?* Wil asks.

“It’s fine,” Misty says, brushing us off. She stuffs her hands in her sweater pockets, and quickly checks the hallway for cameras. There’s one at the end of the hall above the entrance, but we’re still pretty far. It’s possible it didn’t hear. Still, she lowers her voice. “If they don’t know that’s what I’m about by now by the number of blobs I’ve hurt, then they’re dumber than rocks and we should have no problem getting those students back. If there’s anyone left to rescue. What I meant was, *unfortunately* my languages skills don’t come in as handy.”

Wil is a hard one to read; he remains stoic at the best of times. Perhaps he’s gotten used to forgiving Misty for her easy dismissals. *It saved us while we were on the mother ship, you quickly figuring out syntax and guessing words. I wouldn’t discount your talent that quickly.*

“Okay, that’s enough praise from y’all today.” But she’s trying to hide her smile. She really is proud of this. I can’t say I’m not impressed and a little bit jealous. My teleportation power has shown itself in times of need but I’m a long way from saying that I have it as an innate talent. “We should get back to Rita House.”

“I’m heading towards Conrod Building,” Wil says.

“Sight unseen?” Jia asks.

He shakes his head. “We have to appear consistent.”

“Yeah. Right.” Jia’s disappointment at Wil rejecting her offer to provide invisibility isn’t hard to miss. To bring all of us under

her genetically produced shield, she has to touch us, or we have to touch someone she is touching. Any excuse to hold Wil's hand is a good one to her, I suppose.

The camera planted above the threshold between the hallway and the second-floor landing above the entrance to Rogers Hall watches our every move. To the lazy observer, we four aren't an interesting sight. I hope. I hold my breath as we pass through. It reminds me of the childhood game we'd play when driving in a car. If you drove past a graveyard, you had to hold your breath. It didn't matter how long the graveyard lasted. If you gave up because you ran out of breath or because of a long traffic light, you lost. Chills run through me now, even as I squint against the light of the entrance just a few feet below us, on the main landing. All we have to do is go down a flight of wide, open stairs—the same stairs I met Sunni on over a month ago—and out the doors to the left.

Escape from the building doesn't mean escaping the Collective. They're everywhere on campus. On the main landing, lazily on the job behind a service desk, is a security guard. Definitely *hafelglob*. He sits upright in his chair, watching the ginormous TV placed on the right-hand corner of the desk. It's the only item on the freshly sanded maple wood. He's watching CBC News with the volume turned up to deafening levels. There's a reporter at a crime scene in Halifax, Nova Scotia, announcing the arrest of an alleged serial killer who happened to be running for political office.

The four of us head down the stairs. I try to focus on the exit, but I can't help but study the alien in human form as we descend. I'm not sure if it's my budding superpowers, or a

built-in survival instinct, but something primal in my gut *knows* that the security guard doesn't belong here. That he's out of place. A wolf among us sheep. The hafelglob in their natural state are gelatinous creatures, yet their sharp teeth and large mouths could easily take down a herd animal. I wonder how they evolved to be that way, if the Collective scooped them up from their home world and helped their evolution on to suit their needs, or whether they are natural, gross predators.

Like many animals, the hafelglob in disguise knows when it's being watched. He glares at me, annoyed that my attention is taking him away from his show. I look away quickly and nearly trip as I hurry down the rest of the stairs toward the door. No doubt he knows who we are, and would love an excuse to bust us all.

My body slams against the push-bar, and the door opens. The cold bites my face, refreshing after several hours in the stale environment. It's late afternoon in Sparkstone, Alberta. The end of October looms, and the Canadian Rockies weather begins to show her true colours with rich autumn reds and orange dominating the curated trees planted on campus and along Sparkstone Boulevard. The sky is a traditional cloudless blue, and the grass, while giving way to hints of autumn brown, is kept green by the diligent maintenance staff milling about in the distance. Also hafelglob.

Now that we're outside in the open, we can talk more freely. There are most certainly cameras on the buildings, but with the wide distance between the buildings, it's doubtful the audio would pick up clear conversations. At least, that's our theory. And my personal hope.

“It’s colder than I thought out here.” I glance back at Misty and Jia. “You’re sure you’re up for a walk?”

Misty sneers good-naturedly. “Just ‘cause I’m American doesn’t mean—”

“It’s supposed to go down to minus ten tonight,” Jia says, whipping out her cell phone to confirm.

Wil and Misty crack jokes about the winter, especially when I tell them to consider buying heavier coats. They have no idea what minus thirty Celsius feels like. Then again, as Misty is quick to point out, she’s lived in more places than all of us combined, and that I shouldn’t be so hasty to judge what her body knows about cold. Especially when she can blast ice from her fingers. I’m pretty sure she’s just being defensive, though.

“Minus ten,” Misty mutters, shaking her head. “Just a quick walk around the quad, or down that trail behind the houses where you like to run. I’m not suggesting another late-night mission.”

We’ve had a couple of those in the past two weeks. Neither of them yielded encouraging results. Just the four of us, wandering invisible around campus in the dark like chameleon vigilantes, waiting for the Collective to make its move. And what did it get us? A scolding from Jadore for being late to tutorial, and tons of arguments brought on by lack of sleep.

“I wonder how the Collective will fair through the winter,” Wil muses as we saunter across the quad. “Roads are not good during the winter. I guess they could fly things in, but heavy machinery, even the old Curtiss-Wright C-46 planes in the Yukon might have trouble starting if we really get hit by the cold.”

“The Collective have been here for a few years now though, haven’t they?” Misty says, joining in on our musings—a rare occurrence. “They’ve probably got it all figured out.”

“That’s what they’d like us to think,” I say. “Maybe their supply of Substance 454 will dry up.” Substance 454 is what the Collective puts in its food to pacify the students.

“And our food supply too. Fresh food will be hard to come by. Thank goodness Mum and Dad’s shipment arrived yesterday. I hope they’re getting along with the harvest fine.”

“It’ll be okay,” I say, squeezing her shoulder. It’s an empty promise, and Jia smiles thinly, but repeating those three words has become a personal mantra, especially when it comes to family.

A car screeches down Sparkstone Boulevard and whips by us.

Jia instinctively leaps backward, tugging me with her. She grew up more rural than the rest of us: she’s not used to cars whipping by. The car seems to realize the speed limit isn’t above thirty as Sparkstone Boulevard turns into a pedestrian-dominated walkway. Tires screeching, it grinds to a halt. Several studying students turn their attentions away from their conversations and notebooks to gawk at the nerve of this obvious outsider.

“Hey...wait...” Misty whispers. “I know that car . . .”

It’s an older make, definitely eighties, maybe seventies. It has seen its fair share of battles, with a bent-up passenger’s side door and windshield fractures—a common sight down in Calgary, but these look like the windshield has driven through a fierce hailstorm. The front driver’s side door is painted a fading

orange, while the rest of the vehicle is a rusty light blue. The gas exhaust interrupts our fresh autumn air rudely. Cars rarely come through Sparkstone—not this late in the semester. In fact, it’s pretty rare that anyone here drives, despite the perfect suburban garages on the houses in town.

“I’ll catch up with—” Wil starts to head away from us, across the road in the direction of Conrod Building when he stops short. His gaze dances between the car and Misty. “No way...”

“What?” I ask.

The car reverses, more carefully now, and backs into the Rogers Hall parking lot. The engine abruptly ceases. A woman pushes the car door open brashly and tumbles out, and marches towards MacLeod Hall.

“C’mon,” Misty hisses.

MacLeod Hall is behind Rita House and dozens of feet away, closer to the roundabout that borders the actual town of Sparkstone and the campus. The woman seems to know where she’s going as she follows the well-trodden foot path made by many hard-working students. When I first arrived, I didn’t know where anything was. As we approach MacLeod Hall, we see her entering the building. I wait for some alarm to go off, for her to jump back, startled, as the door takes her DNA, but it seems to let her in without incident. Perhaps she is from the Collective. We maneuver around a couple of students coming out of tutorials as the four of us rush inside. She marches down the rightmost hallway off the entrance, leading to the professors’ offices, and finally I’m able to get a clear view of her.

The woman is short and stout, but moves with the speed of a hunting cheetah. Blond-white curls frame her ashen face.

While her skin has seen better days, her eyes are deep pools of sorrow. Human or alien, this woman has seen death.

We hang back from her—especially me, as I don't know who she is—and watch as she storms down the hallway. She doesn't appear concerned that the four of us are clambering after her in plain sight. Her gaze does not waver from its target: Jadore's office.

"I know who that is," Misty says quietly, and takes off after her.

"Misty!" I hiss. I roll my eyes and gesture to Jia and Wil.

The four of us follow the determined woman to Jadore's office, if only to warn her that now is not the time to anger the terrifying reptilian alien beast within. She must hear us, for the hallway is otherwise empty and quiet, but she appears not to care. Jadore's office is at the end of the hallway. Without ceremony, she twists the doorknob and bursts into the room.

From the hallway, I can see Jadore. She rises abruptly from her desk and reaches for her lethal cane. "Who is there?"

Professor Jadore wears dark sunglasses to cover her even darker eyes. Her story is that she's blind, but in reality, she's an alien whose human disguise is unable to give her human-looking eyes. She seems to have a sensitivity to light but this makes her no less deadly. Holding onto the desk for support, she walks slowly around it to face the strange intruder, and us.

The woman appears unafraid of Jadore. She draws in a deep breath and balls her hands into fists. "You don't remember me? I'll tell you who I am. My name is Svanhild Harris, and I want to know what in blazes you've done with my daughter."

# CHAPTER 2



“Hildie,” Misty says in a hurried breath.

The woman—Sunni’s mother, I can barely believe it—seems to realize we’re behind her, and spins around. “Misty...” Her voice is a pained whisper. “I am so...so glad to see you.”

She takes Misty into her arms as if the lanky, dark-clothed girl were Sunni herself. Misty hugs her fiercely. She is Sunni’s only living relative that I know of. Sunni told me that her father had left and presumably died at sea a long time ago and that her mother had never been the same since.

Jadore’s lips struggle not to snarl. “Svanhild—”

She releases Misty from her hug and pulls her around, pressing her into her right side. “We are not that familiar, Professor.”

Jadore curls her long, spindly fingers around her cane. “I see. Ms. Harris.”

“*Mrs.* Harris. Just because my husband’s gone don’t mean he ain’t out there, alive.”

Although I cannot see her gaze, I feel Jadore sweeping her eyes over the rest of us, awkwardly cramped in the hallway, completely visible. Blocking Jadore’s escape. Her grip on her cane tightens, and although I’m frightened of Jadore’s power,

a smug amusement warms my chest. Sunni's *mother* is here. Which can only mean one thing.

"You mind tellin' me where my daughter is, Professor?"

Jadore slowly returns to her chair. "You did not receive our letter?"

"Oh I got a letter all right. And that courtesy call from someone in the registrar's office. Transferred. You think you have the right to ship my daughter off to some backwater country on the other side of the world without so much as a goodbye to her mother?"

"Perhaps we can discuss this privately, Mrs. Harris."

"Anythin' you say to me you can say in front of Misty. And..." She glances around her shoulder at Wil, Jia, and me. "These friends of yours, Misty?"

"Yes," Misty replies, her voice somewhat strained from prolonged physical contact.

"Then they stay too. C'mon in here then."

We pile into Jadore's now-cramped office and Wil shuts the door. We were only in here once, when we were trying to hack into the main security mainframe weeks ago to track down Sunni's location.

"I'm waitin' for an explanation, Professor. It was your name on the letter. You authorized this transfer, you and this president of yours. And I've been tryin' for weeks now to get an appointment with him but he seems to be busy."

"Mr. Dean is currently out of the province at a conference. I am handling his affairs," Jadore replies with a voice as smooth as silk.

I shiver. Wil is pretty sure that Mr. Dean is human, but the Collective seems to have a pretty tight leash on him.

“Yes, that’s what the woman on the phone kept tellin’ me. He always seems to be away when I need to speak with him. What kind of university are you running here? I haven’t heard from my *daughter* in *weeks*.” She scowls and looks at Misty, who is still firmly in Mrs. Harris’s grasp. “You know anything about this?”

*We can’t get involved in this, Wil’s telepathic voice booms in our heads. Jadore could fry us all to a crisp now that we’re conveniently trapped in this room.*

Misty glares at him over her shoulder, and then mutters, “Haven’t heard from her since the transfer.”

“No emails, no phone calls?”

“No.”

“And the rest of you?” Mrs. Harris asks us.

The three of us shake our heads slowly.

“That’s real somethin’. I’ve been gettin’ emails like clockwork every week. Short, one sentence emails that don’t sound like the good daughter I raised, all by myself, mind you. She obviously has internet, but she can’t afford to pick up the phone? That’s real rich, considerin’ I’m still payin’ her tuition. I’m not thick. Batomisk School of Science and Technology? Spent almost a hundred dollars in long distance fees trying to contact them. Oh sure, they have a Sunni Harris enrolled, but they couldn’t put her on the phone. Not in the morning, not in the afternoon, not in the evening. My daughter wouldn’t abandon me like that. First I thought, they’re holdin’ her

hostage. Then I did some more diggin'. Paid some computer person at the local university real good money to map out the area that the school's supposed to be in. Based it on the area code of the phone number, some technical mumbo-jumbo. Batomisk School, if it ain't a warehouse out in the country, no more than a call centre! Something ain't right here. And I'm not leavin' until you tell me what kind of scam you're runnin' here."

I purse my lips.

"This is certainly an *interesting*...story," Jadore says slowly. "I can assure you that our sister school in the Philippines is not a call centre. If you flew there now, you would find a campus not unlike this one, with bright minds hard at work. Your daughter's degree does require her to spend long days in the wilderness."

"With the money I'm payin' you right now, I *could* fly out there myself. Spent the last of my savings coming up here. Left my sittin' chair too. With the way the fates have treated me, my husband might walk through my front door while I'm here, and decide that I've abandoned him. Well. That's certainly not the case." Realizing she's gone on a tangent, she clears her throat and gets back on track. "You listen here. If you don't bring my daughter back here, to me, I'm filing a missing person report. And I may not be a woman with limitless resources, but my *friends* down in Wimberley and even in Austin, who miss Sunni somethin' fierce, they ain't shy. They'll bombard every media source and internet forum until we have justice."

For the briefest of moments, something flickers across Jadore's face that I have not seen before. Fear. She adjusts her sunglasses, sliding them further up her nose, and sets her lips

in a hard, cold line. “I sympathize with your situation, Mrs. Harris. Here is what I will do for you. If you truly believe your daughter has gone missing halfway around the world, we will launch an investigation and do our best to find her. We will reach out to our sister school to determine her whereabouts regardless.”

Mrs. Harris stabs Jadore’s desk with a meaty finger. “I want you to bring her home.”

“I can’t guarantee that she will return here. After all, she is an adult in the middle of her degree, and her major project is due next month. But...perhaps if we could arrange a video chat, that would satisfy you?”

My gaze slides to Wil. He speaks to my unspoken worry. *I have no doubt they could manufacture Sunni’s likeness and stage some sort of reunion on the computer. Whether or not it will satisfy Mrs. Harris, I don’t know.*

“I want to speak to my daughter. *Really* speak to her.” Mrs. Harris falters for a moment, and her long nails dig into Misty’s shoulder. “One week. If I don’t get proof that she’s alive, I will make good on my promise to talk to the press.”

“That will not be necessary,” Jadore says quickly. “We will do what we can to show you that your daughter is all right. In the meantime, I imagine you are exhausted from your journey. I can show you the way to our registrar’s office. Ms. Agailya will set you up in our finest temporary residence.” Jadore climbs from her seat, feels her way around the desk, and holds up her cane. “The rest of you, I believe you have projects that need completing? Misty, have you finished your translation? I believe I was clear when I said the deadline was yesterday.”

Misty scowls and an insult is on the tip of her tongue, but it's Mrs. Harris who comes to her defense. "You mustn't be so hard on the child. She worked extremely hard to get to where she is today. I'm sure she has a good excuse, like bein' worried sick about Sunni."

"I am well aware of Misty's...*history*. That does not excuse lack of responsibility, not here at Sparkstone. Expelled students do not fare well outside these walls."

Neither do the ones that actually graduate. Or so we've assumed. The Collective harvests the DNA of any students who appear to have superpowers. Every student at Sparkstone has the potential in their genetic code to have powers, and the Collective feeds us a drug via the food that helps to activate the gene responsible. Some like Misty, Jia, and Wil came to Sparkstone with already active genes and have had to hide their talents to avoid being killed. We stay away from the cafeteria food and several of the other restaurants and cafes so that the drug does not enhance our powers and make us more noticeable.

Crossing her arms, Misty scowls at Jadore. Misty has always been tight-lipped about her past. With her suicide attempt last month and the old scars on her wrists, my imagination goes wild with scenarios.

Jadore weaves her way between Wil and Jia and feels for the doorknob. "Ms. Agailya will tend to your needs, Mrs. Harris. I will make the call to Batomisk in a few hours, when the time difference is favourable."

"I want to be there when you make the call," Mrs. Harris insists.

“Very well. Follow me. I will show you the way to Ms. Agailya’s office.” Jadore opens the door.

We can’t let Jadore take Mrs. Harris. She’ll probably kill her for inquiring about Sunni before they even reach Ms. Agailya, and then cover it up. I can’t let that happen, not after all that Sunni has done for the Sparks, not after her dream-self has aided me while I sleep—not after she allowed herself to die to keep the Sparks and everyone else safe.

“I can take Mrs. Harris to Ms. Agailya,” I say firmly. “I was returning to my room anyway, to work on my project.”

Jadore twists her lips. She appears to consider the prospect, but hardens once more. “Just because I am blind, Ingrid, does not mean I cannot do my job.”

*I’m trying to get her to change her mind, but ... her brain is odd. It’s resisting my inception attempts, Wil says. We can follow her in Jia’s world to make sure Mrs. Harris is safely delivered. If she tries anything, we’ll be ready.*

Misty nods discreetly. “I’ll see you after I finish my work, Hildie.”

“All right, Misty. That’s a good girl. Off you go now. When it’s supper time, you come find me and then we can talk.”

Jia and Wil slip into the hallway with curt nods to Mrs. Harris, and Misty endures a wet kiss on the cheek before Mrs. Harris lets her go. I smile wanly at Sunni’s mother, and she returns the sincerity of my gesture threefold.

Before I step across the threshold, Jadore plants a firm hand on my shoulder and sinks her nails through my shirt. I whimper quietly as she holds me in place.

“By the way, Ingrid,” Jadore says casually. “How is your father doing?”

My breath hitches. The Collective nearly killed him and kept him a near-death coma a few weeks ago when I tried to escape. “He’s a lot better now, *thanks*.”

“I’m glad to hear that. And the rest of you? Family is all well?” she calls down the hall.

Misty, Wil, and Jia stop in their tracks and turn to look at the alien professor. Wil looks unfettered by Jadore’s blackmailing attempt, Misty just sneers, but Jia nearly breaks. She has always been afraid of the Collective targeting her family, especially her sister, who is nearing university age.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Quiet mice, they can be sometimes,” she says after they don’t reply. Jadore releases my shoulder. “I hope they continue to have such good health.”

For your sakes, is what she’s not saying. A quiet warning, to the quiet mice. Tell Sunni’s mother anything about the Collective and the fate of the students here, and I’ll hurt everyone you care about.



Surrounded by the comfort of Jia’s invisibility, we wait outside MacLeod Hall for Jadore and Mrs. Harris. It doesn’t take long before Mrs. Harris marches from the building with Jadore at her heels, slapping her cane on the concrete slab walkway outside the door and then the grass as they make their way across the quad, towards Sparkstone Boulevard.

Mrs. Harris throws tepid glances at the blind professor as they reach the road. A supply truck rolls along—and it shows no sign of stopping. Jadore’s lips twitch as she steps onto the road anyway. Alarmed, Mrs. Harris grabs the alien’s arm and pulls her back as the truck screeches to a halt. Though Jadore’s body stiffens at Mrs. Harris’s attempt to save her life, her hidden smile becomes a grin. A test.

“Jadore’s leading her to her death,” Misty whispers angrily. Her fiery grip is burning my hand. I nudge her and she turns down her heat, slightly.

“Be quiet,” Jia hisses. Her invisibility doesn’t cover sound.

After safely crossing the road, Jadore stops, exchanges some words with Mrs. Harris, and then points across the road, towards Rita House. Mrs. Harris looks mildly annoyed that Jadore doesn’t know the right way, but does not dare to contradict the blind woman leading her around campus. We make our way slowly towards Rita House.

*We can’t get too close. Jadore will suspect something is up, Wil warns us. We’ll stay outside the buildings and I’ll track the two with my mind. If they suddenly disappear, we’ll know they’ve teleported and we’ll find a way to the mother ship.*

The three of them slide their gazes to me. Teleportation is my power. Just one problem: I haven’t mastered it yet. I’ve only successfully teleported twice since I arrived last month. First time, I was on the mother ship and part of it was about to explode. Second time, hafelglob surrounded me and Joseph G. Campbell had just materialized out of nowhere, calling to me. It seems like I can only call upon the power in times of distress ... and when I’m thinking of Ethan.

“I’ll try to teleport us if I have to,” I whisper.

Misty’s eyes narrow. “You better do more than that.”

I can’t disagree. For once, I wish my superpower was less onerous.

“Ms. Agailya and Mrs. Harris are going upstairs,” Wil says. “Jadore is... coming this way.”

Jadore exits Rita House and stomps on the grass to the well-trodden path. She walks confidently, using the cane as an accessory more than a crutch. Even with the students scattered across the quad, intermittently watching the emboldened professor, she doesn’t seem to care. A sly smile rides her dark lips. To her, this land is hers, and there isn’t anything we can do to discredit her without significant loss.

She halts just a few feet in front of us, and draws a deep breath. Her nostrils widen into large, dark holes, distractingly large against her thin nose that looks like it’s been under the knife more than once. I have a sinking feeling she knows we’re there, if not through smell alone. Smirking, she tightens her grip on her cane and makes her way towards MacLeod Hall.

Once she’s out of earshot, I ask, “Do you think Sunni’s mother will be safe with Ms. Agailya?”

“She’s not safe with any alien here,” Misty mutters.

Wil closes his eyes and concentrates. “Agailya is leading Mrs. Harris to the third floor. It would be a risky place to kill her, since there are twelve other students there now.”

“I thought the temporary residences were in Rogers Hall.”

He furrows his brows. *Most of those rooms are occupied. The Collective is aggressively recruiting students late in the semester.*

“That’s not good.”

“It’s never good. The Collective must be planning a large-scale harvest sometime soon.”

My stomach twists. We can never catch a break. No one here can.

Wil shakes his head and blinks furiously, as if disconnecting from his mental link with Ms. Agailya and Sunni’s mother. “She’ll be safe for now, especially if the three of you are going up there. I really should get to the lab.”

“You can’t leave now,” Misty hisses. “We have to talk about what we’re going to *do*.”

“Right now, we can do nothing. She’s here to stay. I don’t think Jadore would have turned her over to Ms. Agailya and put her in Rita House if she intended to kill her within the next few hours,” Wil argues.

“Misty’s right—we need to figure out what we’re going to do,” I say. “Unless you want the three of us to come up with a plan without you, and you can fetch it from our minds when it’s convenient.”

“Ingrid,” Jia says admonishingly.

“What?” I ask. “Sunni’s mother being here changes things. It means the Collective isn’t covering all their bases. They’ve made a mistake. We have to take advantage of that before it’s too late.”

“Not in the next few hours,” Wil says testily. “I need to get some work done. Just like the rest of you do.”

“Eff work!” Misty exclaims. “We’re in the end times now. We plan a strike. Now.”

No, Wil's telepathic voice booms. He wrenches himself from Jia's iron grip, and pulls away from mine, and surfaces from Jia's invisible, watery world like a whale coming up for air. *Jadore already knows who we are, and possibly what our powers are. We are this close—he holds up his thumb and forefinger a centimetre apart—to being abducted ourselves. If we keep doing and handing in our projects, we will keep under their radar until we can plan an effective strike.*

"That's just a theory," Misty sneers. "If our sneaking around in the past few weeks hasn't set them off, nothing will. Today is the perfect time to strike while they run around like chickens with their heads chopped off, trying to deal with Hildie showin' up!"

*We're the chickens, Wil replies. You're the one running your mouth off right now.*

Misty's eyes flash with anger. "You don't care about Sunni! You're the one who's running!"

She wrenches from my grip, and she too becomes visible. Frustrated, Jia's concentration wavers. My nerves jolt. If this keeps up, we'll be visible before long.

"Believe me," Wil says darkly, staring down at Misty. "I do care. If you cared about Sunni, and our future wellbeing, you wouldn't protest."

"What's that supposed to mean? What are you even doing in Conrod Building?"

Wil sneers. "Nothing comprehensible to you, that's for certain."

"Oh shut the eff up, Too-Good-For-Harvard, and cut the—"

"Stop arguing," I exclaim. "If we can't find common

ground, we'll never get an edge on the Collective, no matter what we do."

Jia's concentration wavers with the rising tempers of our two friends. Remaining invisible depends on her ability to remain calm. Jia draws a deep breath and I'm aware of that familiar, gentle feeling of entering the visible world. It's like coming up for a breath of fresh air after being underwater, without feeling like your lungs are starving.

Appearing from nowhere seems to be the least of our concerns. If I can't keep this group together, we'll never defeat the Collective.

"Sorry," Jia says slowly. Being invisible with the four of us takes its toll on her. "I haven't meditated in three days."

Misty says nothing, and neither does Wil, though he looks mildly guilty for breaking Jia's concentration.

I seize the silence. "If we work in our own rooms, we can show the Collective that we're not suddenly planning an attack because Sunni's mother is here." I sigh. "Now more than ever, we'll have to watch our backs. They're going to be extra vigilant."

After a moment, Wil seems to concede. "Perhaps, if the meeting was *brief*, we could—"

From behind us, a familiar voice draws my attention. "Hey! Ingrid!"

I turn to see Ethan almost tripping over himself as he races across Sparkstone Boulevard towards us. He must be coming from Morris House, his residence, which is almost diagonally across from Rita House. Despite its liberal stance on education,

Sparkstone University has strictly conservative dorm rules: boys live in Morris House and Hynes House, and girls stay in Rita House and Raylene House. The four residences are clustered, forming an *L*-shape around Rogers Hall.

Ethan grins, excited beyond belief to see me. I hope he ignores the bags under my eyes. Who knows how much he's overheard from our very public argument with Wil. Or if he witnessed the four of us suddenly pop into existence from nowhere.

"Did you get my text?" Ethan asks in his delicious British accent. He runs a nervous hand through his hair.

"No." I'm not that surprised. Ever since my room was broken into a few weeks ago, both my laptop and my cell phone have been acting strangely—even though I had my cell phone at the time. Texts to my parents and to the other Sparks are almost always delayed by a half hour or more. I spent an hour on the phone with the cell phone service provider and although they claim they've fixed my texting speed, I have no doubt that the Collective are constantly monitoring everything I do.

"Oh. Well, it wasn't that important. Just... saying hi."

Our cheeks burn an equal bright shade of red. A grin takes over my face. "Hi."

"Hey," he says.

I kick at the grass, trying to bury my feet in there. "Ookay. I think we can move beyond this stage of conversation, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, for sure."

Ethan peers beyond me to Jia, Wil, and Misty, and I follow his gaze. The three of them give Ethan friendly but wary smiles.

They tend not to interact with the other students outside our tight friend group unless they have to. Ever since Jadore hurt my father and the attempt to pin our protest on Laura didn't work as planned, we can't afford to extend our friendship and risk endangering our peers. Wil especially has been critical of my relationship—if you can call it that—with Ethan.

Since Ethan obviously only wants to talk to me, I take a tentative step away from my three friends. He acknowledges them with a slight wave—which they return with about half as much enthusiasm—as Misty nudges Jia, and together they head toward Rita House. Wil follows slowly behind them, with a furtive glance at Conrod Building, looming in the distance across campus. Looks like we'll be having that meeting after all.

Or, *they* will.

“So,” Ethan says, clearing his throat. He seems to relax a bit more now that we're alone. “Do you have any plans for the weekend? I know it's only Tuesday, but...”

“Um...not sure.” I glance off in the direction where Jia, Wil, and Misty have headed. I have a sinking feeling my time is about to be eaten up with Collective-fighting activities. “But if I don't?”

“Well, if you don't, maybe...maybe we could do something?”

“Definitely maybe,” I say quickly, balancing on my tippy-toes because otherwise I'd be jumping up and down with excitement. “Like what?”

“Not really sure. Play some music. Get some food.” He looks me over to see if either of those things catch my interest. “Not

too many things we can do in Sparkstone, I'm afraid. Don't have a car either."

"That's too bad. I only date guys with cars, you know."

"That really is too bad for me then." He leans forward until our foreheads are almost touching. "Just try to let me know as soon as possible if you can do something, all right?"

I sigh. I have a bad habit of letting fighting-the-Collective stuff get in the way of dating-Ethan stuff. "I'll do my best."

"My room is in Morris House if you ever find that, you know, you can't get a hold of me any other way."

I bite my lip as he moves away. I don't think Ethan remembers it, but I have been to his room before. He'd gotten mysteriously sick weeks ago and the Sparks and I had to carry him from downtown Sparkstone to his room in Morris House. Thanks to Ms. Agailya and the Collective, Ethan did recover from his strange sickness, but we still have no idea if he got sick because of allergies, or if it's because he's developing superpowers.

"I'm sure I won't have any problems finding you."

"Yeah. Just look for the door with all the paint stains on it. Anyway, Ingrid, I got a painting that needs finishing." Trying to hide a smile, glancing around to see if anyone is watching, he kisses me gently on the cheek. "Cheers, love."

"Cheers," I whisper as I watch him fly down the path towards his studio in the Lewis Art Building, beyond MacLeod Building but away from the town. My brain travels to a cloudy dream land. Ethan just called me love. Does that mean he loves me? No, no, it's just something that Brits call

people that they're fond of. Yeah. That sounds correct. I stand in my hormones for a few minutes, savoring the freshness of the moment as it becomes a memory. My time with Ethan is all too brief.

Wil's voice in my mind, inescapable but reassuring, grounds me in our dystopian reality: *We're in the girls' washroom, second floor.*

I sigh. The bathroom? Kinda busy right now, Wil.

Even as I feel him taking note of my location, I can't help but feel a sense of calm. It is assuring to know someone has your back, even if he can creepily spy on you. I guess that's something I've gotten used to with him—despite his power, I know he's not going to pry.

*I hope this meeting isn't long. I want to go back to the lab after this,* Wil continues.

The hafelglob at the desk in Rita House mutters something derogatory beneath his breath as I race up two flights of stairs to the second-floor washroom. It's somewhere I thought I'd never have to go again. It's an odd place to have a meeting, though perhaps it's a room that's not monitored. All of the dorm rooms I've been in on campus have had private bathrooms, though perhaps not every student pays to have such luxury.

I hope they're still there. I'm not as winded as I would have been a month ago when I first arrived, and I try to appear casual as I stroll down the hall. Rita House is a female-only dorm and it's unfortunate that the muffled sound of Wil's voice carries from the bathroom, and explodes as I push open the door.

“I *told* you that—”

“I don’t give a flyin’ eff what you told me, ‘cause it don’t matter—”

Only Jia acknowledges me as I slam the bathroom door and lean against it. She leans nervously against one of the sinks, keeping her distance from Wil and Misty as they exchange choice words. Harmony was never our strong suit, though Misty seems to thrive on conflict. Her defensive stance near the window reminds me too much of when I had to pull her back from the brink of death weeks ago, in this very place. Her right hand steams from the fire born of her will and her palm, likely ready to throw it in Wil’s face if he continues to oppose her. I don’t know if his mind powers would be able to save him from that.

“Hey,” I say sharply, cutting between my two arguing friends. “Keep it down, because this bathroom isn’t *that* soundproof.”

Wil furrows his brows, outwardly calm. Misty leans against the wall, arms folded defensively, and grumbles, “He’s being an asshole.”

“What else did I miss?” I ask mostly Jia, who tends to avoid conflict when possible.

“Just more of this,” she replies, eyebrow raised at the two of them.

Misty throws a dark glare at Wil. “We need to tell Hildie the truth.”

Wil shakes his head and paces away from her, switching to his silent mind-speech. *It isn’t the best option.*

I frown. “Mrs. Harris isn’t going to believe us. Unless she knows about Sunni’s dreams.”

“She doesn’t,” Misty and Wil say at the same time. Misty glares at him and shifts in her weight from one foot to the other, and Wil surprisingly concedes the floor to her with a tired gesture. “She don’t know,” Misty continues. “Sunni’s mum is ultra-Christian. Least, when I was living in Wimberley she was. Would’ve gone all Carrie’s mother on her if she knew Sunni had freaky powers.” I’m shocked by the Stephen King reference, and Misty beats me to the punch. “What? I read sometimes. God. Even after all we’ve been through, you *still* judge me by the way I—”

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to. I just didn’t know.” I wave my hands like I have superpowers that can make her instantly forgive me. She’s a wounded snake: quick to bite and slow to trust. “So why do you think she’ll believe that Sunni is dead and that the school is run by a huge alien organization set on harvesting our super-duper DNA?”

“Well, she’ll probably believe the dead part,” Misty says quietly. She picks at some dirt under her left forefinger. “Problem is, we have no proof of that. No...no body.”

A reverent silence descends upon us. Jadore took Sunni’s body just after she murdered her, presumably to harvest Sunni’s DNA, so that they can enhance their technology, and better the alien species *privileged* enough to be part of the organization.

Jia closes her eyes and nods. “I think we should tell her too. She has the right to know the truth.”

I nod slowly, but Wil is rubbing his clean-shaven head, staring out the window towards the tall concrete wall that

surrounds the town of Sparkstone. “The Collective will kill her either way.”

“No, they wouldn’t...would they?” Jia says, clutching the neckline of her shirt.

“One of two things is going to happen in the next couple of days. Perhaps weeks, if we’re lucky,” Wil says, holding up two fingers. “Regardless of what we choose to do, the Collective is going to realize that they haven’t been careful enough with their cover-up. Mrs. Harris isn’t the only person going to die here. I bet you anything that those aliens up there who screwed up are going to be shown the door, and there’s going to be some shifting in the mid-ranks.

“So, enter us Sparks, meddling in the Collective’s business. Scenario one: we tell Mrs. Harris that her daughter is dead and that the Collective is responsible. Mrs. Harris gets fired up, threatens a law suit, and suddenly, media everywhere, maybe, if the Collective don’t act fast enough. They’re not going to let Mrs. Harris leave this town now, even if she hadn’t bunkered down in Rita House. In that scenario, she’s dead within twenty-four hours. Undetectable poison, or whatever the Collective’s latest killing method is.”

“Yeah, but if Mrs. Harris dies, everyone is going to immediately suspect the school,” I point out.

Wil shakes his finger. “Maybe. But if they’ve got rid of the screw-ups, there’s a chance they’ve got some better people in charge of, shall we say, *risk management*. The hafelglob have shapeshifting technology. Who’s to say that they won’t just off Mrs. Harris, and put someone in her place?”

“Maybe Joseph G. Campbell will protect her,” I say quietly.

Misty snorts. “Where was he when Sunni was getting blasted, huh? Your favourite alien was probably sipping human blood filled with our precious special DNA and laughing as he watched the whole show from his spa on Jupiter!”

“Misty’s right. We can’t rely on him for this,” Jia says.

I hate to agree, but I know they’re right. It’s up to us to protect Sunni’s mother from her daughter’s fate. “So what’s scenario two? What do you think will happen if we don’t tell Mrs. Harris where Sunni really is?”

“Something similar. A potential media blitz if the Collective don’t handle things quietly. A hafelglob impersonates Sunni for a while—though I suspect that wouldn’t fool Mrs. Harris for long. In their human forms, you can tell there’s something odd about them. They’d have to find something more reliable to impersonate Sunni or Mrs. Harris herself.”

“Would it really be such a bad thing if the media were here?” I ask. “If the Collective is exposed, humanity could have a fighting chance. Organize a resistance.”

“Yes, because our protest worked so well last time,” Wil says sarcastically. “We don’t know how far and wide the Collective has infiltrated. They may bury the story outright. Or, suppose that the Collective isn’t careful, the media shows up, and humanity refuses to believe the outlandish truth that aliens are harvesting our DNA.”

“It is the truth, and we could provide them evidence,” Jia says quietly.

“Yes, but they may choose not to believe it.”

Jia places a delicate hand on the tiled wall. “I hate to bring this

up. But we should consider the possibility that the Collective has the ability to...to clone people.”

Misty’s eyes bug out. “No...”

“It’s possible they could try to bring Sunni back to life. But I feel like if that were part of the agenda, they’d have done so already. Sunni had a valuable power that they coveted.”

“She could be up there now,” Misty whispers, her gaze flickering to the blue, cloudless sky outside. “Workin’ for them.”

“I feel I would have sensed her if that were the case,” Wil reminds her, not unkindly. “If not a shapeshifter, if not a clone, then...then perhaps something technological. Like a hologram.”

I sit up straighter as an idea fills me. “Wil. What if...what if you were to beat the Collective in a race to build such a hologram? Or, a sophisticated visual response program? What if...what if we built something Sunni-like long enough to fool Mrs. Harris? To assure her that Sunni really is out there? Is that ... possible?”

Wil gives me the most peculiar look. “It’s...possible.” He gives it more thought. “It would be the safest route. Mrs. Harris would get what she came for. The Collective leaves her alone—leaves us alone. She might be able to leave alive. It would also be very tricky. I mean, I could do it.” Wil shrugs, like I’ve just asked him to add two and two. “But it would take some time.”

“How much time?” I ask.

“Weeks, at least. If I didn’t have my current projects, maybe one week, working fifteen-hour days. But I can’t get rid of my current projects. I’ve already committed.”

“Can you change them?”

“I’m already too far into them. And... even if I could, I don’t want to change them.”

“Not sure you *want* to stop your stupid effin’ projects to *save* Sunni’s mother?” Misty retorts, advancing on him.

“What I’m doing in the lab,” he says, “I’m doing for *all* of us.” I hesitate. “Your project?”

Wil nods, but to me he says, *It’s beyond that now.*

“Your project on self-driving car AI safety? How is that for us?” Jia asks, genuinely curious. “I thought you only had one project for Jadore right now.”

He ignores her, focussing squarely on me. He senses my distrust, my disbelief in him.

“I can probably do all of the projects,” he says finally. “Make excuses to Jadore if I’m tardy with what I’ve promised her. None of us can afford to raise her suspicions any further. If she finds out just how far we’ve progressed with our powers, it would be a promising motivation for her to abduct us. With Jia’s help, maybe yours, and Misty’s”—she gives him a look that says, *ain’t no way I’m gettin’ my hands dirty in your stupid lab*—“I can manage to do everything. I can do this.” He nods, convincing himself that he can.

“We probably don’t have much time. Likely the Collective is brainstorming, just as we are,” I say.

“Likely,” he replies. But he’s still staring at me. Telepathically, and likely privately, he says, *I don’t need your permission to do what I do. I’ll tell you what my other project is when it’s done. When it’s ready.*

My curiosity piques some more. “You have to,” I say aloud. “The fewer secrets between us, the better.”

Jia and Misty are staring expectantly at us, frustrated that Wil is having a private conversation with me.

Annoyed, he replies, *You’re one to talk.*

He doesn’t like being scolded. Who does? Our ragtag group doesn’t have an appointed leader, but because of his superpowers, Wil is often the centre of our network. He arranges our meetings because he can communicate over great distances without aid, and he keeps us safe from prying ears and eyes. I know he can look inside me and see where I’m coming from, and know that I mean him no ill will, but that doesn’t stop him from feeling like he’s been deposed. With that, Wil heads for the door.

“What did he say?” Misty demands. “What secrets?”

“He’ll tell us when he’s ready, he said.”

“Yeah right.” Misty seethes. She’s never been good at hiding her anger, or keeping it under control. “He thinks he can just walk around, tellin’ me what I can and can’t comprehend.” She yells across the campus at him in what I think is Mandarin, and then Spanish, and then spits on the floor. “Comprehend *that!*”

Wil does not acknowledge us, telepathically or otherwise.

“I should get him out of the building unseen,” Jia says tiredly. “He’s right, though. For now, we should all work on our projects, or at the very least, get some rest.”

“Of course you’d defend him,” Misty mutters.

Jia crosses her arms. “What do you—?”

“Okay. Let’s not get into that now,” I warn them both, ready

to jump between them and prevent a fight if necessary. “He probably just wants some time away from us. We all could use some privacy.”

“Privacy,” Misty snorts, as Jia leaves to attend to Wil. She saunters to the window, and looks at the campus below. “No such thing here.”

# CHAPTER 3



I cannot sleep.

To my right, Jia snores away. She's also stolen most of the blankets. The bedroom is cold, and wearing a sweater to bed would overheat me. I roll towards her, thinking about nudging her to stop the snoring, but think better of it. I'm awake now, no matter what.

I sit up. It's only quarter to ten. An early night for all of us. Misty lays sprawled on a double mattress crammed between the bed and my dresser. Even though I've offered to switch with her, Misty seems content on the floor. In the back of my mind I wonder if Jia knows Misty is a lesbian (though Misty did say she hates the term gay—can I really call her gay, then?). I also wonder if Misty is afraid of alienating Jia, or me, by asking if she can share the bed.

She mutters in her sleep. It's not as frequent or as annoying as Jia's snoring, but it can prevent me from sleeping. I thought my dreams were vivid—I guess I'm not the only one. Sunni missed a real opportunity by picking me instead of her best friend as her dream message conduit.

Determined not to wake my two sleeping friends, I slide to the end of the bed, remove my pajamas, grab some clothes from the laundry, and slip into the bathroom to change. When I'd returned to my dorm after the meeting, I'd fallen asleep in a pile of black hole and astronaut brain research on my bed. No Sunni dreams this time, just confusing images and turbulent feelings that, when I woke up, left me feeling like I'd been on a rollercoaster. A waste of an afternoon. No wonder I'm so awake.

Jadore will rip me apart tomorrow.

I push it to the back of my mind. There's only one thing I want to do now, one thing that will definitely put me at ease. Music. Ever since Jadore had my keyboard destroyed and Misty and Jia have been sharing my room, I've been visiting the music trailer on campus. It's stuffed to the brim with pianos, trumpets, guitars, pipes, and other instruments. No harps, unfortunately, but it's otherwise the perfect environment for me to escape.

The moment I step from the bathroom, I'm relieved to hear Jia's snores. After what happened in the quad today, she needs her rest. Yet Misty cuts the otherwise quiet ambiance not with a whisper, but with full-blown ignorance. "Where you going?"

She startles me. "I can't sleep," I say. "Outside."

"Do you need me to—?"

"No, I'll be fine. I have my phone. Thanks." I add the pleasantries as an afterthought as I grab my shoulder bag and shut the door. She's just concerned about my welfare. I really shouldn't be wandering around at night anyway.

And yet...my fingers itch for ivory keys.

My shoulder bag is so long that it bumps against my knees as I stride, reminding me to do a mental checklist—got my key card, yes. Cell phone? Yes. Did I text Ethan earlier? No. Shoot.

While I'm scolding myself, a door opens suddenly ahead to my left, and who should appear from her room but Mrs. Harris. She shuts the door behind her and tries the doorknob to ensure it's locked. She studies the black box next to the door quizzically, and mutters something about damned technology under her breath.

There's a brief moment where I consider just racing by. I don't know Mrs. Harris. She doesn't know me. She's alone, and while the camera at the end of the hall stands guard, she doesn't appear to be in any hurry.

Numerous hafelglob could descend on us at any moment, I remind myself. It's late enough in the evening. I can't underestimate the Collective.

I also can't allow myself to keep being afraid of things I can't see.

Filling my lungs with courage, I square my shoulders and will my feet toward Mrs. Harris. "Um...hi. Did you get locked out of your room?"

Mrs. Harris whips around and clutches her purse to her heavy white winter coat, as if I've just threatened her life. Her mistrust melts when she sees I'm just a lanky, tall, seventeen-year-old. She cocks her head in recognition, but we were never formally introduced during our brief meeting

in Jadore's office. "No. I was just wondering what the darned thing was. This." She points to the key card scanner.

"Usually they give you a key card. You swipe it, it lets you in. Did Ms. Agailya give you one?" The temporary residences in Rogers Hall don't have them, but every other building seems to.

"Oh. Yes." She reaches into her purse and pulls out the white, thin plastic. "So I use this when I want to get back in?"

"Yeah. The door locks automatically, so you're fine." I extend a hand to her. "I'm Ingrid Stanley. My dorm is just down the hall."

"Ah. Ingrid. Yes. You were with Misty this morning. I recognize the hair." She smiles pleasantly, and appraises me from head to toe. "Is it dyed?"

"No. One hundred percent real!" Probably the most common question I'm asked when meeting someone new. Except for here, since everyone is so caught up in their projects, or fighting alien invasions. My gaze falls on her tan-coloured purse, slung over her arm, and her white winter coat. "You going out somewhere?"

"Oh, just to the bakery. I hope they're still open. I know the hour is absurd, but I'm a bit of a night owl, see. That Ms. Agailya woman said that many businesses in Sparkstone have later hours around this time of the semester to accommodate the students. I could smell those biscuits from my car on the drive through town. Divine! Wanted to see if they tasted as good as they smelt. Would you like one, if the bakery is still open?"

I purse my lips. “Um...no thank you, Mrs. Harris. But I’ll come with you to the bakery if you’d like the company.”

And because I shouldn’t leave her to wander the dark streets of Sparkstone alone.

“That’s very kind of you, Ingrid. Maybe I can get you to change your mind about the biscuits. You look like you could use the extra pounds.”

“I’m just naturally thin,” I reply shyly. “How was your drive up from Texas?”

Mrs. Harris smiles wryly as we head down the hallway together. “Long. Took me a few weeks. I can’t do those fourteen-hour-day drives like I used to. Even tried to drink one of those energy drinks. Nasty things. Had to pull over and spill my guts on the Trans-Canada. Never again. Probably threw out my back, what with all the car-sleeping I did. Hotels are costly, you know. My prayers kept me warm, though, and I made it here in one piece.”

“Yes, I’m glad.” Innocent conversation will be hard. Every question I can think to ask will lead back to Sunni, or why Mrs. Harris is here. “The beds are pretty comfy here. Hopefully you can get some rest.”

“Hmmp. The mattress is a little too soft for my taste.” She glances up at the camera as we pass beneath it, frowns, and then continues, “Although now I understand a little better where my tuition money went. Private rooms, as good as any hotel I ever stayed in! I can see why Sunni was so charmed by the place. Oh fiddles. These stairs. No elevators in the dorms, I take it?”

I keep a careful eye on Mrs. Harris as we descend the three flights of stairs to the lobby. She speaks her daughter's name with such pride, without fear, it's as if she expects to see Sunni every time she turns a corner.

The same security guard from earlier, still transfixed by the television, sits reclined behind the main desk in the lobby. The desk is littered with dirty dishes from the cafeteria and a discarded tray. He gives us a cursory glance with his bloodshot eyes—has he been unable to leave his post since this afternoon?—and returns to the screen, now blaring a reality TV show.

Mrs. Harris, visibly annoyed by the slobby demeanour of the guard, picks up her pace and heads toward the door. “I reckon it's chilly out there tonight.” She evaluates my thin long-sleeved shirt, skirt, and leggings curiously. “Are you going to be warm enough?”

“I'll be okay.”

“Are you sure, child? You're skin and bones! I can wait while you go get a coat.”

“No, I'm fine. I have a high tolerance to cold.”

She doesn't believe me. “Well, all right then. But if you get cold, we will head back. I'd offer to give you my coat, but these old bones aren't used to the shrill Canadian winds.”

The guard at the desk finally decides that we're worth paying attention to, and leans forward in his office chair with a cringe-worthy *squeak*. “Where are you going?”

“Never you mind,” Mrs. Harris retorts, zipping up her winter coat, and then hurries out into the windy night without looking back.

I hold back a smirk, and ignore the hafelglob's follow-up question as I leave Rita House behind. Mrs. Harris, for an older woman, is more sure on her feet than she looks once she's on flat ground. She walks at a good clip through the grass, toward the Sparkstone Boulevard roundabout that officially separates the campus from the town. I jog to catch up with her.

"You don't have a curfew here, do you?" she asks, mildly concerned.

"They don't really like it when we're outside at night, but there's no official ban on nighttime walks, no."

"Hmmpf." She clutches her purse tighter to her chest. "I ain't never seen a man so curious about the comings and goings of the ladies. Now, I could understand if he's keepin' promiscuous young men from calling, but how dare he ask *me*, a guest of the university, about my comings and goings. As if I would dare call upon a gentleman at this hour, in a town I don't—"

I struggle to keep a mask of interest as Mrs. Harris continues her rant. The streets are quiet, but brightly lit. Her matronly presence reminds me with a heavy heart that my mother and father are far away.

"Anyway. You don't make a habit of going out late at night, do you?"

"Uh, I try not to," I reply stiffly. Her comments about meeting men make me wary, and I glance back at Morris House, where Ethan is likely slaving away at his latest charcoal drawing or watercolour painting. I look around the other shoulder towards the Lewis Art Building. I could sneak over and see him, after my music session in the trailer, especially if he's in his studio since that's a bit closer. He seems to split his time between the studio

and his dorm, doing art where the spirit moves him. Between schoolwork, the four of us investigating the missing students, and my draining, intense nights inside Sunni's dreams, it's been hard to make time for him.

Together, Mrs. Harris and I cross the roundabout, and I leave the idea of seeing Ethan tonight behind. "I'm pretty busy with schoolwork, like pretty much everyone else."

"Hmmm. You're a freshman?"

I nod. "I got here the beginning of September, which apparently was at least a few weeks into the first semester."

"They started early, didn't they." The distaste in her voice is palpable. "Sunni couldn't wait to leave. She always loved bugs. Plants too, but bugs in particular. Collected them in the backyard, and down in Cyprus Creek. I always thought that was a boys thing, but I never said nothin' about it. It is good to have a passion, something you can throw yourself into to pass the time, to keep your hands busy while the brain works through what it has to work through. You understand." Without waiting for a vocal confirmation, she asks, "And what do you study?"

"Psychology." My half-written, bullcrap paper on Joseph G. Campbell and the theory of multiverses doesn't quite fit within that discipline, but then again, I haven't declared my second major yet. Unless Jadore and Agailya want to continue the pretense that I don't know what's going on, I doubt that will ever happen.

"Ah. I see where you and Sunni would have gotten along. I never really understood what insect psychology was. Maybe you do."

“Not really,” I admit, smiling. “To be honest, Mrs. Harris—”

“Hildie, please, dear. Svanhild is an awful name from my Swedish grandmother, but I’ve made do while honoring my roots.”

“Hildie.” I think of Misty pronouncing Sunni’s mother’s name with such reverence. I don’t know if I can do it justice. “I didn’t know Sunni all that well. She transferred the day after I arrived.”

“Is that right? But you said you got here about six weeks ago. The semester started in the first week of August, yes?”

“I think that’s right. I got here late. September fourth.”

“I was told she transferred on September third.”

“I...” I didn’t mean to add fuel to the fire. “That’s interesting.”

“Interesting is the least of it.” She stops, turning towards me and blocks the path. “You’re certain of September fourth, that’s the day you arrived?”

My heart sinks. I consider lying, but I’m not great at it, and it makes me feel sick that I can’t tell her the truth of Sunni’s fate. “Yes.”

Hildie’s bottom lip curls upward as she stares at the dark wall surrounding town. “I knew they were lying to me. From the very beginning. I feared that by coming here, I’d get nothing but the bureaucratic runaround. But I have kept my faith, and God has given me an answer through you.” She lays an appreciative hand on my shoulder. “Thank you, Ingrid, for your honesty.”

My weak smile is all I can offer in return for her heartfelt words. “The bakery is just here.”

The cute bakery cafe, complete with white curtains, a red-and-white striped awning, and the pleasant smell of baked bread—even at this late hour—seems at odds with the dead, lifeless streets. The bakery is brightly lit, and there are two patrons sipping tea and enjoying an evening scone inside—both professors, by the looks of it. With almost every establishment selling food injected with Substance 454, it’s hard to get a proper meal nowadays and stay clearheaded. The bakery is one place that doesn’t modify its food, as far as we know. My stomach rumbles. Even though she offered me a snack, I don’t deserve anything from her until I can tell her the complete truth. I inhale sharply, hoping that Hildie doesn’t hear.

Hildie draws a deep breath. “Ah good. They’re still open. And still baking! That’s dedication. Or perhaps they’re preparing for a morning rush. Are you sure you don’t want anything?”

“I’m fine. Thanks. Maybe another time.”

“All right then. I’ll hold you to that. In the meantime, you don’t have to wait for me. I know my way now,” she says reassuringly, patting me on the shoulder. “It’s dark, and I don’t want to keep you from your evening.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely. I think I can handle myself, what with that wall keeping all the *dangerous* farmers out.” She chuckles, though her gaze darts down the unlit residential side streets of this constructed paradise.

“I suppose it’s stopped a stray cow a time or two,” I reply. I reach into my shoulder bag for my phone. “I’ll give you my number, just in case.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Ingrid.” She digs in her purse for her phone and we exchange digits. “Text only, if you can. Roaming charges are mighty terrible now that I’m not in America. Though I suppose that’s what you use your phone for nowadays, isn’t it.”

“Sure.” I turn to leave. I’m not sure if there are cameras in every streetlight, but I’m willing to take the risk, now that I’ve come this far and said this much. “Um, Hildie...if you ever want to talk about...anything...I just live down the hall. You can knock on my door anytime.”

She smiles wistfully. “Thank you, Ingrid. Hopefully we can get this business sorted and bring Sunni home again.”

I purse my lips and nod. “I hope so too. Good night.”

I turn and put one foot in front of the other, hating to leave her, but also anxious to get to my music. I glance over my shoulder, seeing Hildie walk inside the bakery. Regretting my decision to leave, my steps falter, my flats scraping the sidewalk in protest as I come to a standstill in the quiet of the night.

Sometimes when you’re alone, there’s a brief moment where you question reality. I breathe in the sharp night through my nose, and feel the goose flesh on my arms and the fluttering of my skirt around my legs, wondering if I am dreaming. If in the absence of cameras, it’s suddenly okay to be me again, and if I am anyone at all if I’m not embroiled in an extraterrestrial, superpower-filled battle for my home and friends. Did I have a life before this, or was I asleep, or a character in one of Sunni’s dreams?

I look up at the sky and identify the constellation of Orion. If I am dreaming in this moment, I decide, I would not be able

to fixate on the stars—they would change with every passing random thought. I am still here. This is reality. I am special. I have abilities that others would kill for. I am a real person with thoughts and feelings.

I just can't show them when I want to.

My feet carry me back to campus to the music trailer. It's situated at one edge of the quad, behind MacLeod Hall and the Sparkstone University Library, and close to a walking trail that leads towards the residential, Stepford-Wives-houses area of Sparkstone. My key card lets me in with a reluctant *beep*. I'm surprised I haven't been restricted, though I suppose Jadore may be watching my late-night trips to the piano with interest. There's a closet-sized entryway with three doors; it's the rightmost door that requires another key card swipe to access my place of solace. My music called Joseph G. Campbell to this realm before. Whatever reason she wants him, she wants it bad.

Ensuring the doors are secured behind me, I set my shoulder bag down and hurry to the grand piano at the back of the room. At the keys, I can forget that I'm one of the few trying to prevent a full-blown alien invasion. I can just be Ingrid Stanley, talented musician, regular girl that just happens to have the ability to teleport across space and maybe time. Although I miss my keyboard and my harp, at least the Collective has granted me this, even if it's a mean to their own ends.

I let go of the worries of the day, pouring them into my music. Ethan springs to the forefront of my attention, and I get the overwhelming urge to stop playing and see him—but I fight it, knowing that playing is the only way I can relieve stress so that I can get some real, non-dream sleep.

If I sleep, Sunni might stab me. I never find restful sleep anymore, not with her in my dreams.

The missing students. I think on them, trying to compose music that fits them all. I recall their names, and even if I don't remember their faces, I allow the music to create forms in my mind. *Daniel Chomber. Avery Trites. Fahima Osmond. Kendra...Kendra who? Sunni Harris.*

My thoughts inadvertently drift from the students, back to Misty and Jia in the dorm. I should be heading back soon. How many hours has it been since I got here? Time doesn't exist in my musical realm. The Collective could be in my room right now, abducting my friends, and here I am, selfishly playing music.

What would happen if Misty or Jia were taken, right now? Likely Wil would realize it, if he wasn't asleep. Would Campbell interrupt, and give me subtle hints about what to do—and guide me to them? I can't rely on his sporadic appearances. I'll have to think of a contingency plan.

Forest greens coil around my limbs; my synesthesia is strongest when I'm playing music, but it attacks me when I'm emotionally stressed. My fingers shift into E-minor, and before I know it, I'm playing his song. It isn't a specific melody that I can pin down—more like a feeling that I'm transcribing as I go—the feeling of having a large fish on the line, and wanting desperately to reel it in before it escapes and you're left empty-handed.

Too late I think of the camera in the room. It wasn't here the night Ethan romanced me and we played the music singing in our hearts. Monitoring me has become a priority for the

Collective. Better to force me to play in this music trailer, away from my friends. Yet the mental tug to play is stronger than my fear. Behind me, near the doors, I both hear and feel the sound of cloth ripping; a deep, dark-blue sound. Then, the sound of someone finding their feet on the hard floor, taking hesitant, cautious footsteps toward me.

Campbell is in the room. Directly behind me.

I did it. The camera, positioned above the entrance to the trailer, can see everything.

Jadore might barge in at any moment, and take him from me.

I'm afraid to look at him and find him unreal. "You came."

"I always come when you call."

The voice is unfamiliar, yet my brain recognizes it as his. My fingers hover above the keys. *I've only successfully called you once.* But it didn't last long. "If Jadore finds you here..."

"I'm not afraid of her," he says, not unkindly.

The song falters beneath me. "Are you afraid of anything?"

"Of course." The sound of soft soles shuffling on the tiled floor, hesitantly making their way closer. "Please, don't stop on my account."

Tentatively, my long fingers follow through on a hesitant E-minor chord. "Jadore is watching through the camera."

"And all she'll see and hear is you playing the piano."

I lean into the chord and transform it into a haunting slow jig. Campbell's powers are largely a mystery to me, though his ability to appear and disappear at will is certain. I must use my time with him wisely, and see what answers I can squeeze from him.

“Are you here because I called you, or do you have something to say?”

Slow, heavy footsteps approach from the right. I keep my focus on the keys, closing my eyes as he sits beside me, a heavy weight on the bench. He has no smell, and even the physical sensation of knowing someone is behind you feels incorrect. There is no brushing of arms, no heat, no sound of breath beneath my playing. Even the weight could just be an inanimate object.

“Something tethered winds its way around its anchor,” is the reply.

Great. So he’s going to do *that*. I just came here to unwind, to play. I hadn’t meant to call him...or had I? I’m already sick of my brain dancing in circles, trying to figure him out, but I can’t leave, not before I have some answers.

“Why me?” I ask. “Why are we connected? Why do I know you? What do you want with me?”

His laugh is low and rumbly, and harmonizes with my lackadaisical piano music. “If you are asking me those kinds of questions, then I’m guessing I’m near the beginning of my time with you. Correct?” He doesn’t wait for my affirmation. “Then again, I suppose you wouldn’t know beginning from end. You cannot see it from that perspective. I apologize. I’ll rephrase. We haven’t spoken before, have we?”

“Not...directly. In dreams. You’ve sent me messages. I have your treatise in my toilet. You led me to it, through Sunni, in dreams.”

“My treatise is in your toilet?”

“I think it’s the safest place for it.” I wonder if Jadore knows where I’ve stored Campbell’s treatise. She’d kill to get her green alien hands on it. I’ve read the treatise in the bathroom, just a page or two at a time in the mornings. It is one volume of many, and this particular one talks about the creation of the world. Or *a* world. As a champion of a multiverse theory, and as someone who seems to have the ability to travel between worlds, he seems uncannily interested in the creation of only select versions of one planet—a planet that is undoubtedly Earth. So far, I’ve found nothing useful that would explain my connection to him, or his connection to the Collective.

I curl my lips, hoping that just as Campbell is magically editing himself from the camera feed, he’ll also squirrel that information away as well. Jadore would stop at nothing to have that bit of information. I descend into G-major. “Have we spoken before, in your perspective? Are you from the future?”

“I am not from anywhere. I weave in and out of your time stream, and age within Time. But yes. We have had many conversations before, you and I. For me, I believe we will have at least one more. You have many to look forward to.”

This isn’t the first time he’s referred to Time as if it’s a person. The question is on the tip of my tongue, and it takes every ounce of willpower to hold it back. *What will happen to us in the future?* Every time travel story comes to mind at once, warning me not to interfere. That by asking, I will inevitably set future events in motion. Though, by his very nature of existence, my future is fixed, and there’s nothing I can do to change it, which scares the hell out of me. “Why do you think

we'll only have one more conversation after this one, from your perspective?"

Although I have not stolen a glance at his features, I get the distinct impression he is meditating carefully on his response. "Have I not made my desires clear to you?"

"Um, I've had a lot of dreams of Sunni asking me to open a door, and then killing me if I don't. Does it have anything to do with that?"

I look over at him then. His face is an ever-changing, fleshy, melting canvas, swirling, draining into the absence of light in the center.

Oh god, he has no face...

I plunge my fears into F major, willing its vibrant purples to carry me away. He's always been solid with an unremarkable face, until now. In this form, he's a monster. I've summoned a monster. How can I be inexplicably tied to a *monster*. "How do you know I'll help you?"

"Because you're still alive."

My skin ripples with cold fear. "Is that a threat?"

"No, it is science. You have already made the choice, in a future point in your journey. A time I have not yet experienced, but it will happen. If you had not chosen to help me, everyone everywhere would've ceased to exist. I know that I will be successful. It is a matter of tending to the details, so that the versions of me past can live those experiences, and the future versions of you can shape them."

His words wash over me like warm water, barely registering on my skin. All I can think about his how the hell he can talk

without a mouth, how he can hear without ears, and how I can escape him without him trying to hurt me.

“I wouldn’t ever hurt you, Ingrid,” he says softly, because mind-reading is definitely in his scope of powers. He does not, however, apologize for his appearance.

My face heats. I descend into G-major, slowly, inviting the rich browns to cool my skin.

“I do want you to open a door of sorts, yes,” he admits, after several notes float by. “More than want. It is a need. I...*need* you to open a door.”

“Is that what the Collective wants too?”

“Yes.” His answer is hesitant. “Though for different reasons. I regret it now, turning them on to the possibility. They gleaned knowledge from me and have twisted it to their own means. Now, it cannot be undone.”

I remember Ms. Agailya’s words: *The Collective is of different minds.*

“I don’t know what doors you want me to open,” I admit quietly. “I can teleport, sometimes. Barely. I guess if you wanted me to teleport you somewhere...”

“It is more than that,” he replies. “Your power will grow. It must. When the time comes, you’ll need to open a door for me, and let me through. Everything depends on it, Ingrid.” His tone becomes more serious. “You...you’re different than the rest. You are the only one of your kind, across the verses. No one else but you can do this for me. That is why I am drawn to you. Because you’re the only one who can help me.”

“I find that hard to believe,” I say honestly. But the part

of me so in love with these stories, be they set in space or in another land imbued with magic, and has been waiting for this moment for so long that my legs shake with excitement. “Everything you’ve done so far...speaking to me in dreams, magically beaming objects into my bedroom, appearing to me now...you seem omnipotent to me. Why can’t you open the door on your own?”

“I am not an unmoved mover, Ingrid.”

Thomas Aquinas’s five arguments proving the existence of a higher power are murky, but present in my mind. “I know you’re not God.”

“But you think me one. And that is a mistake. Just because I see the fabric of Time and weave in and around Her like an experienced dancer, doesn’t make me in control of my movements. I am just as much at Her mercy as you are. You have the luxury of a, shall we put it, linear existence. You also have the power to save me. To save us.”

*How To Save Her.* The title, written in a dream in a book of his, returns to me suddenly and sharply. Explaining the scene in words doesn’t do it justice. Unlike music, words cannot communicate the same level of feeling with the same effort. “All of us, or just one person?”

“By saving her, I save us all.”

“And who is she? Do I know her?” *Is she me?*

“Her name is too powerful to utter here.” I feel him smiling, though I am too afraid to check his swirling face to see if it has settled.

“If I open this door for you,” I say slowly, wondering if I am

about to make a deal with a devil, “what will you do for me?”

“Other than ensuring your continued existence?”

“I thought we established that that’s what *I’m* doing for you. And.. .if you’re coming to me from the future, then you must already know what you’ve done for me, assuming you’ve done it. Unless I haven’t opened the door yet.”

“You haven’t yet, no. Soon, you will. From my perspective. Tell me what you want in return.”

I know I should take time to think of what I want. But it is already at the forefront of my mind. “I...I want to escape this place. To rescue as many as we can. To stop this hideous experiment on my peers. For good.” I brave his ever-changing face. “The connection goes both ways, I think. You’re not behind this. You started the Collective, I think...you have some involvement...but you’re too busy living out of order, out of this...universe...to know what’s really happening.”

As if I’d uttered open sesame to the legendary cave filled with treasures, Campbell’s face stops shifting, and manifests clearly. It is utterly forgettable, not striking, not ugly. More like a Ken doll. Plastic. Bright blue or green eyes. Brown-blond hair. He has a nose, though it is unremarkable. Most importantly, this face is one I know to be his, it resonates so strongly that my foot goes instinctively to the reverberate pedal. The chord holds, never weakening as I am never blinking. My eyes dry and beg for relief but I cannot take my gaze from him, fearing that if I do, I will forget he is in the room, and I have no black markers handy to mark that I’ve seen him on my arm.

He stares at me sadly.

“You’ve been playing the same three notes over and over. Play something else.”

“Sorry.” I suppose Campbell would hate electronica if he hates repetitive tones. I file that away for future reference and switch to a more complex reel. I play it deliberately, concentrating on each note to ensure they are correct.

Beside me, I feel him relax, as if he has just slipped into a hot bath. “Better.”

“Well? Will you help us escape, if I help you...open a door ... when I’m able?”

“I... don’t know.”

“You know or you don’t. You’re from the future!” I slam my hands down on the keys, creating a thunderstorm of sound and colour. “If you don’t know, that means in the future at some point, we’re still trapped here. Right?”

“Ingrid—”

“*Right?*”

He cringes, and then sighs. I can actually feel his breath now. Somehow I have made him more real. “Please don’t stop playing.”

“You must not have music where you come from, if you love my playing so much.”

“A feeble assumption. On the contrary, Ingrid. Music is to me what breathing is to you.”

I lift my hands from the keys. “Is that your Achilles heel, then? No music, no life?”

He chuckles. “No, though life creates the music we experience around us. The vibrations I hear are not just coming

from within you, but within every physical thing. But that is another conversation. Yes, you are still here, the last time I spoke with you.”

“Which is how far in the future?”

“I—”

“*How far, Campbell?*”

Saying his name out loud sends a shiver down my spine, and down his as well, from the look of him. “One Earth year. Perhaps six months.”

Six months. That’s April—the end of a traditional winter semester. And I’m supposed to be coming to the end of my conversations with him. The only way I can process this is by playing again, which relaxes us both.

“It hurts that your distrust of me extends this far back, Ingrid. I truly do want to help you and your friends, if it is within my power. If I let you run free now, understand that I cannot prevent what Jadore and the others will do to your families. I am tethered to you, but I only come when you call me. And my times with you are brief, disorganized, and I am often only half in the room, so to speak. As it is, I am near the end of my days, and to me, the changes you have asked me to make—that you will ask me to make—do not make much difference in the events to come. I’m sorry. The power I wield does not truly belong to me, it has limited effect in this world—likely because of our link.”

“And we’re linked because of my teleportation power. Somehow.”

He simply nods.

I sigh. “The only thing I want is my freedom and the freedom of my friends and peers. Until I get that, I don’t know how I can help you. The more my power develops, the more likely it is that the Collective will kill me. Which will apparently happen in six months. And who knows how many students will die in the interim.”

“You have your freedom. As does the Collective. You simply choose to stay out of fear that they will kill you and your friends and family if you try to leave. And you are correct to have that fear. Now. There is something else I can give you, instead of escape.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?” I yawn; the music is finally starting to do its work. I might actually get a few hours tonight.

“Knowledge is the most valuable thing I can impart. I will give you choice tidbits that you can pass on to your friends in a time of need.”

My gaze flickers from the piano. “You’re going to tell me what happens to us in the future?”

“Your friend Sunni is not here, and while I am not blessed with her gift, I have seen images in her mind. I can impart what she knew, and I can tell you some of what I have seen.”

The song dies as my fingers go limp on the keys. I swivel around the bench to face him. “You have my attention.”

“I thought I might.” He’s smiling—giddy, almost. He gestures emphatically, urging me to begin.

“Won’t...won’t you telling me alter the future? What if you tell me something, and I do the opposite?”

“As I said. Your future is my past. It has already happened, and will happen. Take solace in that.”

I don't know if I can—the idea that everything has already been written scares me to the bone. “So...I can ask you anything?”

“You can ask me whatever you wish. I will answer, if I'm able.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. Questions swirl in my mind. “What is the Collective's biggest weakness?”

“Strategically?” He gives it some thought as his finger strokes the ivory, and the key softly descends beneath his ethereal touch. “It is vast. It does not easily consider the individual, even though there are many powerful individuals puppeting and orchestrating events. Yet that is not knowledge from your future. You must have deduced that.”

He's right. I need to be more clever with my questions. “Tell me something major that will happen to each of my friends. Jia. Wil. Misty. Ethan. And any others.”

“Though she is good at masking her emotions, Jia wears her true fears on her sleeve. But that, you already know. So here is something you do not know about her: it is not loss that will consume her spirit, but the replacement of something dear.”

“What kind of...replacement?” Memories of Ohz and the other hafelglob shifting and oozing creep into my thoughts.

“I don't know. I know only what Sunni knew. Vague images of suffering, of her crying, and eventually, healing.” He frowns. “Misty...there is more for her. Her power will grow by leaps and bounds compared to the rest of you. Her anger, unchecked, may be the ruin of her. But in the ashes of her destruction, she will rise again.” His left hand plays an A chord. “She always does.”

I'm afraid to ask. "And... Ethan?"

He lifts his eyebrows. "Ah. Yes. Him, I... have no images for. Sunni did not think or dream of him, barely knew him really. And you were not eager to talk to me about him, as I recall. When I brought up the subject, you'd blush, or you'd be angry, and in pain. It is hard to say."

Anger wells and threatens to explode but I stay my internal volcano. "I wouldn't want to know his fate anyway."

"Better to be surprised while you are still able," he replies, almost good-naturedly. "I sense you are getting tired. Our connection is weakening. You should sleep. I will take my leave from your stream." He stands.

"Wait." I also rise. "What about Wil?"

"What about him?" he replies incredulously.

"You had something to say about everyone else, except Wil. And Sunni was friends with Wil." I frown. "Something bad's going to happen to him, isn't it."

"Nothing bad happens to anyone. Merely actions and reactions, intended and unintended. Though if you mean *bad* in the *unavoidable* sense, then yes. I can no more change his path than I can change mine. He has already made the choice that will doom him. He has already been doomed, and the world has moved on."

"Then you can tell me what it is, so that I can prevent it."

Campbell laughs condescendingly, as an old man would laugh at a child for her naivety. "I thought you would have understood by now that what will happen has *already happened*. I have seen it. There is no preventing what you will do. Humans

and hafelglob and the ahmei and the d'ntak and all of the other aliens within the Collective, you travel within Time in one direction. Your path is linear, yet twisted, intricately so, never crossing into future happenings.”

“Tell me what happens to Wil.” My hands are fists. “Or I won’t help you.”

He rounds on me, his face suddenly drawn and gaunt. No longer is he Ken, but an old G. I. Joe soldier who has been in the trenches and seen death. “This is a war, Ingrid. There are always casualties.”

My mouth feels dry. “Wil.”

*But Ethan is safe! Your family, they are safe.*

I don’t know that for certain. In six months, we all might die, even if I do what Campbell asks and use my power to open a door.

“How does he die?”

“Ingrid—”

I grit my teeth. “Tell me *how* he dies.”

“You cannot prevent it. You have already tried. And failed. It will happen.”

“Then you shouldn’t have any trouble telling me what will happen.”

He heaves a long, tired sigh. “Jadore will kill him. It will be in battle. I watched it, as you will.”

I cross my arms, looking away from his face. His anger is my anger. This tethering he describes is a thick rope wrapped around my gut. It ties us more deeply than I can understand.

“Wait for me at the portal.” Campbell’s face twists again, and he approaches me. His grin widens, spreading all the way up to his eyes in an exaggerated *u*. He is losing his form; he is fading now. I have not played my music enough. His image blips in and out of reality—one moment a foot away, and then next, kneeling before me, his hand reaching for my face.

“Wait. Don’t—”

I reach for his hand, but it disappears; there is only cold air where he once was. The echo of his voice is more in my mind than in the world; I hear it nonetheless.

“No, no no.” I spin around, slam my hands down on the keys, and start playing. What was the song again? What was it?

For fifteen minutes, I try to remember. I play every song I can think of, mixing them, experimenting with them in E-minor, for that for certain is the key. Desperate, I try G, and then F, and finally, A. Nothing. He is gone.

My first conversation with Campbell is possibly his last. Six months until I see that version of him again.

*Wait for me at the portal.* I’ll try to remember that.

I drift in and out of a delirious sleep with my head and my hands resting on the keys, heavy with prophecy, burdened with questions. When I wake, the run is beginning to stream in through the single window in the trailer. I rise from the bench, stumbling in a sleepy stupor, toward the windowpane.

Six months until I save the world.





END OF SAMPLE!

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# **DARKNESS** **IN HER REACH**

BOOK FOUR  
THE SPARKSTONE SAGA

# Acknowledgements

The Acknowledgement Faery devised a scheme to exact revenge on the publishers. One night, she snuck into a large warehouse, and with the wave of her wand, turned the pages in all the books into heartfelt acknowledgements! Bookstores were outraged and returned stock immediately to the publishers. People were angry and disappointed that their anticipated new release was just a bunch of thank-yous!

Sir Copy Right thought the Acknowledgements Faery was taking this too far. The publishing world was on the brink of war. He was conflicted. As he was about to confront her, he came up with the perfect solution. Or so he thought...

*What will Sir Copy Right's grand plan be? Tune in to the next Sparkstone Saga book to find out!*

## **Champions of the Acknowledgements Page:**

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# About the Author

CLARE C. MARSHALL grew up in rural Nova Scotia with very little television and dial-up internet, and yet she turned out okay. Her YA sci-fi novel *Dreams In Her Head* was nominated for the 2014 Creation of Stories award. She is a full-time freelance editor, book designer, and web manager. If there's time left in the day, she devotes it to Faery Ink Press, her publishing imprint. When she's not writing or fiddling up a storm, she enjoys computer games and making silly noises at cats.



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