

Chapter 4

The Key

A tall figure loomed over Parvaneh in the darkness. Freakishly tall, perhaps seven feet or more – too tall for most humans. Its shoulders, wide and powerful, and its hand, gripping her wrist, felt cold, moist and scaly on her skin.

A shape shifting on the ground. A foot, but not a normal foot – one with three long, grotesque toes. A face now, peering into hers. She caught a glint of yellowy lizard eyes, and she screamed. This was no human.

A deep growl, like the sound she'd heard a crocodile make in the zoo. The creature yanked her arm and dragged her through the bushes. Parvaneh kicked and struggled, but it was no use, its grip was too strong.

Confused and frightened, she had a vague sense that she was being taken somewhere. She figured that if the creature wanted to do away with her it would have done so already, so she stopped struggling.

The path led uphill. A light ahead, torchlight. The creature pulled her into a clearing, surrounded by pine trees. She found herself on top of a headland, looking out over the water. A stone tower stood in the middle of the clearing, about four metres tall.

The torch was held by a man, who reached out to grab her as the creature threw her down.

Mr Cochrane.

Parvaneh felt a huge wave of relief as he helped her to her feet. Relief at seeing another human, an adult too. He'd been right from the beginning about the 'others'.

"I told you," Cochrane said to the creature, placing a protective arm round Parvaneh's shoulder, "the girl is one of us."

The creature stared down at the two humans with cold, hostile eyes. For a brief second, Cochrane's torch beamed in its face, and it flinched away.

Amazingly, the creature now spoke, snapping at him. "Switch off the light!"

"Sorry," said Cochrane, his voice quivering. He angled his torch away, explaining to Parvaneh. "They don't like the light, these things. They look like reptiles, but, actually, they are creatures of the dark."

In the low light from the torch, she could see

the creature much better. Those three large toes had not been a trick of the eyes, they were real. She instantly thought of the dinosaur footprint she'd found on the rocks outside the lighthouse, millions of years old. What if, on another planet somewhere, creatures like the dinosaurs had not died out, but evolved into highly intelligent beings?

The creature's skin glistened, and its small head was hairless, with a dark spiny ridge running down the back. It wore brownish armour and carried a long metallic rod, probably a weapon.

Other shadows shifted around them. There were more of these reptilian creatures, occupying the shadows.

"Mr Cochrane, what is going on?" said Parvaneh.

"Please, don't worry," he said. "They'll be gone soon."

“I do not understand.”

“Because Montvill is coming. And he’s going to take them away, all of them.”

The two blond men, who Parvaneh had escaped from earlier, emerged from around the sides of the tower and stood like robots. Then a light appeared high up in the sky, a red pulsing light, which looked like it came from a group of stars known as Orion's Belt.

This light seemed to stretch, reaching effortlessly through the cosmos and the cold northern night, until it widened into a shaft, then curled down and touched the ground only a metre or so away. It was the dimmest kind of light, like the gloom in the darkest depths of the jungle floor.

A figure appeared, taller and skinnier than the reptilian creatures surrounding Parvaneh. Wearing a long dark robe with a high collar it slipped out of

the shaft and stood before them. Then it snaked its wrist into the half-light from the torch. It wore some kind of wrist strap, with a glowing button. A long white finger touched the button, and the shaft of dim red light snapped back up into the sky, returning to the pulsing light on Orion’s Belt from where it had come.

“Montvill,” Cochrane explained in a hoarse whisper. “He travels in a kind of transporter beam.”

The reptilian creatures, who Parvaneh now took to be foot soldiers, all bowed their heads. Montvill slid towards her. He was different and, if possible, even more terrifying than his accomplices. His skull was white and hairless and rough – it seemed to be made up of lots of dried up flakes lumped together. There were gaps, pieces missing, as if it hadn’t quite been finished yet.

And his eyes, as he leaned towards Parvaneh and scrutinised her closely, were white too, with thin black slits for pupils. But, as with his skull, the pupils were dotted and bitty, the black mixing roughly into white, like an image that was dissolving on a screen.

Parvaneh could barely look at him, she was so scared. And yet his mouth turned up into a smile, a wicked, gleaming smile.

Cochrane cleared his throat and blurted out: “They’re all here, Montvill, just take them. You can take them, and leave Eronsay in peace.”

Montvill shifted his gaze to Cochrane, the way a rattlesnake might eye up its prey, and gave a soft, slippery chuckle.

“Whatever gave you the idea I was leaving?”

“But... But... You said,” Cochrane spluttered.

“I have an entire fleet waiting out there, waiting for my word to attack this place, what do

you call it, Eronsay?”

“I trusted you!” said Cochrane, in a panicked voice. “You promised.”

Montvill waved his slender white hand, like he was waving away an insect. “My people do not make promises, not to primitive apes like you. We seek, we take, we conquer.”

Parvaneh had seen such a man before. Her mind flashed back to an interrogation room in her home town, an officer in uniform sitting behind a desk, asking questions and making her father sweat. The smugness, the arrogance. She felt anger building up inside, and spoke defiantly, without even a second thought.

“Why? Why do you want to attack Eronsay?”

Montvill’s eyes slithered across to her, a gaze that cut through the cold icy stars. “Free-thinkers, rebels, renegades, deserters...” He turned his head and gazed out over the sparkling night sea,

reflecting the coloured light from the aurora. “Revolutionaries, fugitives from justice, scum. You are harbouring our enemies. These hideouts are a breeding ground for rebellion. They must be... neutralised.”

“You can’t!” cried Cochrane.

“Can’t we?” replied Montvill, coolly. He nodded at his foot soldiers, who lurched in Parvaneh’s direction, wielding their long metallic weapons.

“Run!” she yelled, and pushed Cochrane into the bushes.

“Quick, follow me!” Cochrane grabbed her hand and dragged her deeper into the dense undergrowth.

A flash illuminated the bushes behind them, and a tree trunk exploded, sending shards and slivers of wood showering over their heads.

Parvaneh could still hear Montvill behind her,

his rasping laugh echoing through the night. “Run! Run if you will. There is no escape.”

* * *

Cochrane led her downhill, stumbling over falling logs and fending off branches, until they joined a rough path which led back to the village. They paused for breath under the first street light.

“What have you done, Mr Cochrane?” said Parvaneh.

Cochrane sunk his head into his hands. “I can’t believe I’ve been so stupid. I thought if we gave him the others, then they would leave Eronsay in peace.”

Parvaneh recalled what Alice had told her earlier, about her and the other aliens being refugees, just like Parvaneh. It had taken her encounter with Montvill to realise that Alice was right.

“Alice, she is one of them....” she said.

“I know,” he nodded.

“And the postman, and the nurse, and many other people that you know. Your customers, your neighbours. You were just going to hand them over to that *thing*?”

“They’re aliens. They shouldn’t be here.”

“And what about me?” she asked.

“You’re different,” he replied. “You’re human.” He ran his hands down his face and sighed. “Look, I’m sorry. I thought it would make us safe.”

“So what do we do now?”

But Cochrane only shrugged. “I don’t know, I don’t know,” he kept saying, running his hands through his hair.

Parvaneh racked her brains, but how could they possibly hope to fight against aliens with advanced technology and weapons? No, they

couldn’t fight them, she thought, and they couldn’t hope to save the village. But perhaps they could at least save its inhabitants.

“The police sergeant, he knows about the others?” she asked.

“Yes, he’s been helping me,” said Cochrane. “He’s down at the harbour now.”

“Then let us go. We have to evacuate the village, and he’s the only one that people will listen to.”

As they hurried towards the harbourside, Parvaneh’s heart thumped, her mind racing over all the strange sights she had seen, and the new things she’d found out. Aliens, refugees, a fleet hovering above the Earth waiting to attack. There was danger everywhere. Then, suddenly in horror, she remembered... Nasim. Where had he gone? What if those awful creatures had got him? Would she ever see him again? Her eyes began to well up

with tears. Should she go back and try to find her little brother? She knew she couldn't. Alone, she was helpless. She pressed on towards the village.

* * *

The harbour master's office was nothing more than a shed, which sat next to a stunted clock tower at the end of the pier, with lobster creels piled up on either side. Someone outside was shining a high-powered spotlight across the water, scanning for something among the fishing boats. The figure turned towards them as they appeared. It was the police sergeant.

"Cochrane, what's going on?" he barked. "So many strange noises and weird lights."

"Sergeant, we've made a terrible mistake!" gasped Cochrane. "We should never have trusted them."

"What!" cried the policeman. "You told me it

would be finished, and they would all be gone."

Suddenly, a voice called out from behind them. "Parvaneh!"

Alice stepped out from behind a car and strode towards them, still wearing her robes. The two men fell silent.

Others stepped out behind her, cautiously: the old postman, deerstalker lady, and the nurse from the surgery.

Parvaneh didn't think, didn't question. All the suspicion she had towards Alice and the others was gone. She instantly rushed towards her. "Alice, I am so sorry I ran from you."

"It's alright." Alice smiled sadly.

"Listen, everyone," said Parvaneh. "We have to get all the people out before they attack."

Alice shook her head. "You go, dear. We've decided we are not running anymore."

Deerstalker lady leaned forward and patted

Parvaneh's hand. She didn't seem so awkward and ungainly as she had the first time Parvaneh had bumped into her, at Mr Cochrane's shop. "So sorry if I appeared a bit odd before."

Alice explained: "She only arrived here the same day as you. It can take a while to adjust to the new body."

"Then what do you look like really?" asked Parvaneh. "Anything like that monster, Montvill?"

Alice eased herself down onto the harbour wall tucked in her robe. "Oh no, nor his henchmen either. Although, if you did see us as we really are, I'm not sure it would improve your evening."

Alice stared up at the night sky. "Montvill is from a group called 'The Faction'. There's a war going on up there. We are its victims. Montvill is like a secret policeman. He's been hunting us down, taking out our hideaways one by one."

"What about those two blond men, are they

aliens too?"

"Oh no, just his drones," she said. "Androids, sent ahead in advance. Usually, if we just carry on as normal, they don't notice any difference."

"And what about Doctor Phillips? How does she come into it?"

"Doctor Phillips is one of us." Alice gazed over at the lighthouse. "She's been building something in there. Something that would have protected us, protected the whole planet in fact. A defence shield. It's ready, but only she had the key, and we don't know where it is."

Alice's shoulders slumped, while deerstalker lady and the postman stared downcast into a puddle.

At that moment, Parvaneh's mind went back to the conversation she'd had with Doctor Phillips on the bench, the day before the doctor was kidnapped. And then it flashed forward to the

interior of the lighthouse. To her mum's book, lying there, and the inscription written inside, and the strange rectangular shape cut out of the bank of computers.

She knew where the key was. Doctor Phillips had left her clues.

"Yes!" she yelled. Everyone, from Alice to Cochrane and the police sergeant, stared at Parvaneh as if she'd gone mad. "The book! Don't you see? The lighthouse book is the key."

Alice stood up, hope sparking in her eyes. "You have the key?"

"I do." And Parvaneh was about to tell them her plan. It was so simple. All they had to do was get the book to the lighthouse.

Suddenly, a flash of dim red light nearby, and a voice called out of the shadows, followed by a low booming laugh, a laugh that sent shivers up Parvaneh's spine.

Montvill stepped out from the dark gap between two buildings. He lifted his long, thin hand and touched the glowing button on his wrist. The dim red light flashed again and disappeared. Flanked by the two blond men, he glided across the street, shielding his eyes against the soft amber glow from the street lamps.

His foot soldiers, the tall reptilian guards, emerged from behind the buildings on either side to cut off any chance of escape. Parvaneh looked one way, and the other, but it was no use. They were surrounded.

Montvill slithered up to her face, his fierce eyes boring into her, and smiled.

"I told you," he growled. "There is no escape."

And now you decide...

**How can Parvaneh
escape?**

A) A strong beam of light comes from the lighthouse, shining directly into Montvill's eyes

B) Alice and the others create a diversion

C) Parvaneh turns and leaps over the harbour wall into the water

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