

## Chapter 3

# The Gathering

Parvaneh froze, staring back at the two men in horror.

For a brief second, she thought about trying to talk to them. There were so many things she didn't understand about Eronsay, about what was going on here – perhaps they might provide her with some answers. But their strange, freakish looks were anything but friendly. And, if they were the ones who kidnapped Dr Phillips, what was to stop them doing the same to her?

No, she thought, she had to escape. Her heart racing, she glanced anxiously at the window, the only other exit, which lay slightly open. But what was on the other side? It might lead to safety, but might just as well lead to a sheer drop onto the wave-shattered rocks. Was it worth the risk? Besides, one of the men might easily skirt round the outside of the lighthouse and catch her anyway.

The flashing orange button by the door caught her eye.

‘DEFENCE! EMERGENCY USE ONLY’

She had no idea what would happen if she pressed it, but something told her this was no ordinary button. Defence against what? Against such men as these, maybe. Just a few steps away, it was worth a shot.

Parvaneh leapt towards the door, towards the men. Their eyes widened with surprise as she hit

the button with her palm.

The tiny horns fitted to the inside of the door frame sprouted, their heads expanding, and then began to vibrate.

A high-pitched squeal swelled around them. The whole building reverberated, as if the noise was carried and amplified by the very stones from which it was built.

Parvaneh clutched her ears, while the two men threw back their heads and gave out a long, slow, agonising gasp. Their eyes glazed over, their heads fell forward and they were still.

She watched them for a moment, standing there, frozen, with their heads bowed. Her first thought was to escape. She cast her eye around the lighthouse, at the steps leading up to the first floor, at the light shining down from there. Part of her wanted to investigate this place further – perhaps there were more clues about Doctor

Phillips upstairs.

But she had no idea how long the noise would last. What if it only lasted a minute, and then stopped? What if the men woke up again and she was left facing them anew? No, the best option was get out of there as soon as possible.

Parvaneh trembled fearfully as she squeezed past them. Then she was outside, staring at their backs as they stood, like shop mannequins, in the doorway.

She had to talk to someone, an adult, to persuade them to listen, to act. There were so many questions swirling around in her head. Who was this Montvill and where was he or she coming from and what were they coming for? Right now, the only person she was sure she could trust was Alice. She had saved Nasim's life after all.

\* \* \*

Back at the cottage, there was no sign of her host, and Nasim wasn't in bed. Parvaneh found him in the kitchen, fiddling with a torch, a map of the town spread out on the table in front of him.

"I heard the phone ringing, so I answered it," he said, in response to her questioning look.

"Where is Alice?"

"She put on her coat and left, soon after you did."

"Where did she go?" Parvaneh watched him fitting batteries into the torch, then screwing on the top. Only now did she notice he was wearing his coat and boots. "What are you doing, Nasim?"

"It was my friend, Connor, who phoned," he replied. "He said he saw the black van, parked outside a house up on the hillside. A big white house, 'The Shieling' I think they call it. Look."

Nasim pointed to a spot on the map. He traced his finger along a broken line that curved

around the edge of the village and led back towards the cottage. “We can use this path to get there, it runs from the lane behind us. It will only take a few minutes to walk.”

“No, Nasim, we’re not walking anywhere. It’s too dangerous.”

Nasim stamped his foot, determined. “I want to help, Parvie.”

“Go back to bed!” she said, in her firmest voice.

Nasim stared back at her in disbelief. All of a sudden, he looked grown up, like a man.

“I am going,” he snapped, “and that’s it!”

He snatched the map, folded it, then made for the door. There, he hesitated, looking round at Parvaneh. Now, with the fear and uncertainty in his eyes, he was a child again. “You ARE coming with me, aren’t you?”

Parvaneh sighed. The police didn’t want to

help, so it seemed finding Doctor Phillips was up to them. – perhaps this was their chance. She rummaged in Alice’s cupboard and found a storm lantern and a bottle of paraffin. She filled the lantern, struck a match and lit the wick. “Come on then.”

\* \* \*

Outside, the harbour was quiet. The only sounds were the whistling of the wind off the sea, the lapping of the waves, and the clack-clacking of the rigging striking the masts of the boats as they bobbed on the water. They climbed the steps that ran between the harbour cottages, leading up to the lane where the black van had nearly run Parvaneh over. The hairs tingled on her arms as she thought of it. “Which way now?”

Nasim checked his map, then angled his torch towards a gap which cut through the hedge.

Parvaneh went first, treading carefully along the stony path. The route climbed gently along a line of trees, curling up and around the back of the village, so that before long they were looking down over the rooftops, the harbour, and, further away, the lighthouse. She wondered if those two blond men were still there, frozen on the doorstep.

Ahead of them stretched the dark hillside. “How far is it?” she asked, but Nasim didn’t respond. He’d stopped still, his eyes fixed on something in the distance.

She followed his gaze to see a light, small and green, moving up the hillside some distance off, heading towards the mouth of a glen.

Parvaneh blew out her lantern, and Nasim switched off his torch. As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, they watched the light as it disappeared behind the hill. No sooner had it gone than another light appeared, the same small,



green light, and another, and another. The lights were all coming from different parts of the village, but they were moving in one direction, up the hill.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of a twig snapping behind her. She spun round, then suddenly pushed Nasim off the path, for another two lights appeared, and these were right behind them.

They crouched low behind some bushes, watching the lights pass by. As they did, Parvaneh saw that they were actually candles, strange candles that glowed and did not flicker. They were being carried by people wearing dark robes, their footsteps slow and steady and silent.

“What’s going on?” whispered Nasim.

“I don’t know. Come on.” She figured it would be better if they were off the path for now, so clutching her brother’s hand, she scrambled over a stone dyke. They crossed the field, halting every

now and then and ducking down so that they would not be seen.

As they neared the edge of the field, the mouth of the glen came into view. Now Parvaneh could see where all the people were headed.

The lights were banked up around a natural hollow, reminding her of an outdoor amphitheatre she'd seen in a book about ancient Greece. She became aware of a sound, a low, disturbing hum, which grew louder as they crept closer.

They lay down behind a grassy ridge and watched. There must have been dozens of people gathered, and they were all wearing those same dark robes. No one was speaking, their faces blank and expressionless. Why then did Parvaneh get the feeling that they were somehow communicating with each other?

With a growing sense of dread, she began to pick out some familiar faces among them. There

was the deerstalker lady, the elderly postman, the nurse and one or two of the teachers from school.

Worse still, their faces were different, their skin appeared silvery, as if it were glistening. And their eyes, reflected in the green glow, were not normal, but white, with no pupils. What is more, they did not blink, they just stared, wide open into space.

As the hum increased in intensity, Parvaneh couldn't help feel that there was only one answer to all this.

Aliens.

The *Others* that Mr Cochrane and the police sergeant had spoken of were real.

And then, worst of all, she spotted one final face. A face that sent a cold shiver running up her back. The one person she thought they might be able to trust, she was with them, with the aliens. Staring white-eyed into darkness.

Alice.

“No...” was all Parvaneh could utter.

Nasim spotted Alice too. He gave a sort of whimper and jerked back, knocking his torch over the edge of the ridge.

Parvaneh watched with growing horror as the torch slipped out of their reach, bounced down the slope, then landed with a clatter on some rocks below.

The humming ceased immediately. And then, as if they were one, the blank eyes of the aliens whisked round and glared at them.

“Run!” She grabbed Nasim by the hand and led him sprinting back across the field, her mind racing. What was going on here? Were Alice and her group linked to the two blond men and to Doctor Phillips’s kidnapping? Had Alice even reported anything to the police? Probably not. How stupid I’ve been, thought Parvaneh. But for

now, the main thing was to get away, to escape.

She slowed down to quickly glance over her shoulder. “They’re coming after us!” she yelled.

They sprinted faster, driven on by a rush of adrenaline. Parvaneh dropped her lantern, then in the confusion let go of her brother’s hand. As they reached the trees, she heard Nasim call out in the darkness. “This way, Parvie!” Then he ducked behind some bushes and disappeared.

Parvaneh tried to follow him but tripped, feeling the scratch of gorse against her cheek. When she stumbled to her feet she called out to him. “Nasim!” But only the darkness and the silence answered. He was gone. She wasn’t even sure which way he’d run, or she would have followed.

Footsteps and shadows closed in on her from all sides. Panicking, she turned and ran. Ran until she could run no further, until she reached the

end of her energy.

She collapsed on her knees on top of a grassy knoll, gasping for breath. She held her face in her hands and cried. “Nasim!” She should have insisted her brother stayed in the cottage, but she hadn’t and now they were separated. Separated when she’d sworn they’d never be separated again. And it was all her fault. What would father say at such foolishness?

To have come all this way, she thought, to have come through hell. To have suffered and lost, only to be led here, to the very ends of the earth to face a new threat. Why? Why us? It wasn’t fair.

She gazed up at the sky through tear-streamed eyes, only to see that it was glowing, shimmering. Electric blue, neon red wavy curtains of light dancing across the sky, and stars brighter than any she’d ever seen. And the Milky Way, the great white band stretched across the heavens

above her. From here, the galaxy yawned open, and how awesome and frightening it was. Parvaneh had never seen anything so...

“Beautiful.” It was Alice’s voice, from behind her.

Parvaneh stared fearfully at the shadow looming over her.

Alice lit the green candle she was holding, illuminating her face. Her eyes were normal now. “The aurora borealis, the Northern Lights...” She eased herself down on a rock nearby, clutching her robe around her. Somehow, Parvaneh didn’t run, not yet. A last relic of trust, perhaps.

The edges of Alice’s mouth turned up into a smile. “I have travelled many worlds, across vast tracts of empty space. I’ve seen the moon dogs of Arcturus, seen double eclipses and supernovas.” She gazed up at the lights in the sky. “But I’ve never seen anything that stirs me so much as

this.”

After a moment, Alice turned her head back towards Parvaneh. “We are not to be feared, you know.”

“Then why am I so scared?” said Parvaneh.

“We are just like you. You are one of us.”

Parvaneh shook her head, thinking of their silvery skin reflected in the light. She couldn’t be any less like one of them. “NO, I am not.”

“A refugee,” Alice added. “We’ve all fled from horrible things, bombs, torture, killing. We’ve made Eronsay our home.” Alice leant forward, her eyes flashing white again. “And we’re going to fight for it!”

“NO, NO, NO!” Parvaneh ran. Without thinking, without caring, without even knowing which direction she was going, there was no idea in her mind except to escape. To run, just like she’d been doing since the war, since the day, that



horrible day she and Nasim left their home town behind them, frantic, scared and alone.

She ran from Alice, and yet she soon stopped, for that memory fired something inside of her. A resolve, a decision.

No, she thought, I will not let it end like this, separated from my brother, separated from everyone I love. I am done with running.

Now it was time to fight back.

But then, a hand reached out of the darkness and grabbed her shoulder.

**And now you decide...**

Who had grabbed  
Parvaneh in the  
darkness?

**A)** Mr Cochrane

**B)** The police sergeant

**C)** A large, dark figure

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