

ALL WE KNOW OF HEAVEN

by Carol Kyne

"Thanks, Dad ... I don't think so. No, I'm fine. It's sweet of you to ask. But not this weekend. Talk to you soon, okay?"

Catherine set the phone down, and relaxed back into the sofa. She looked across at a vase on the sideboard, overflowing with yellow roses, and her father's card beside it. *'Happy birthday to a special daughter.'* Well, he was a special father. But he wasn't the man with whom she wanted to spend this birthday weekend.

Her glance moved on, through the bedroom door, to a silver bud vase on her dressing table. It held a single red rose. The card beside it was unsigned. It contained one word only, in an elegant script --- *'Tonight.'*

Catherine smiled. Her hand instinctively sought the crystal hanging at her neck. On impulse, she unclasped the fine, gold chain, and held the crystal up to the light. It spun dizzily, throwing out multicolored sparks. Mesmerizing.

A tap on the French doors brought her back to reality. Grabbing her sweater from a chair, she shrugged it on as she headed for the balcony, crystal and chain still clutched in one hand.

The early autumn chill hit her immediately as she opened one side of the double door.

He was standing in shadow, out of the light spilling brightly through the door. It always came as a surprise to Catherine how quiet he was - how softly he moved in and out of her life.

She turned to close the door, shutting in the warmth and light of Above, islanding them in this special, starlit Between World.

"Vincent. I was so glad when I got your note. I've been hoping all week that I'd see you tonight." She smiled up at him. "Thank you for the lovely rose."

"Did you think that I would forget your birthday?" He took a step closer and clasped her hand in both of his. "But I don't want to keep you from a celebration. If you have plans..."

"I told Joe and Edie that I might be going to Groton for the weekend with my father. And when Dad called, I postponed our sailing plans till another time. Vincent, you know the only one I want to spend my birthday with is you."

Vincent released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "If no one else has a claim on your time this weekend ... Catherine, would you like to spend the next two days Below? I know that Father and Mouse and Mary - Jamie - all your friends - would be so pleased. You've done so much for everyone - given us all so much. And the children are always disappointed that your visits Below are so short. They'd be delighted to have you come for the whole weekend."

She hesitated, groping for the right answer.

"Catherine, don't feel you have to come. It was just an idea. The choice of how to spend this special time should be yours."

"Vincent, I'd love to come for a visit. It's just... I know this sounds selfish, but..."

"Catherine, I've never known you to be selfish. Tell me."

"I was hoping to have some time just for us."

"Oh, Catherine. It's your birthday, and you give me this gift! How do you always know the right thing to say?"

"Because I care." And lightening the mood, she added, "And because I had a good teacher." Looking down to hide a grin, she noticed the crystal in her hand.

"Vincent, there's so much of your world that I haven't seen. Would you take me to see the Crystal Chamber? Could we do that, and still have some time to spend with Father and the others?"

"Of course. You'll need to take some warmer clothes. It's a long way from the inhabited tunnels. And it's more than a little damp. When you're ready, I'll meet you in the park."

Catherine squeezed the soft, furred hand holding hers, and turned back toward the door. Without even a whisper of sound, he was gone.

Father looked up from his book as they entered the study, hand-in-hand.

"You look like two children playing hooky. What are you up to? Nothing outrageous, I hope."

"Catherine has come for a birthday visit. She's taken a notion to see the Crystal Chamber. I think she's really angling for earrings to match her pendant."

"Vincent!"

He and Father laughed at her indignation.

"Dress warmly, both of you. And go carefully. We know very little about that part of our world."

"We'll be careful, Father. We'll be back by tomorrow evening."

"See that you are. I intend to claim a share of this lady's time and attention myself."

Vincent bent and kissed Father's forehead as he turned to go. Catherine shyly followed suit. Vincent and Catherine started off through the tunnels. She had not been to the Cavern of the Winds before, and was so enthralled that they lingered for some time. They had gone only a short way beyond it when Vincent noticed a perceptible slowing of Catherine's pace.

"Are you tired, Catherine?"

"Sorry. I guess I am. It's been a crazy week at the office."

"We'll spend the night here then, and go on when you're rested, tomorrow."

Vincent chose a spot where the tunnel widened slightly, and built a fire. Producing food and a small kettle from his knapsack, he warmed soup, and cut bread and cheese into satisfying thick slices, preparations complete, he eyed the meal dubiously, and glanced over at his companion, who had been watching with interest.

"Not an elegant menu...," he began.

Catherine laughed as she sipped a mug of soup, and reached for a sandwich. "If you're trying to talk me into twenty-one instead, you'll lose. I wouldn't trade this for all the haute cuisine in Manhattan."

They ate and drank, lingering over the meal until Catherine's eyelids began to droop.

"Before you fall asleep..." Vincent handed her a small, flat package. "Happy Birthday, Catherine."

"What is it?"

"A book, of course. Our relationship is nothing if not literary."

Catherine untied the blue ribbon, and unwrapped the white paper. She turned the volume so that she could read the gilt letters on its spine. *'LORNA DOONE.'*

Vincent grinned wryly. "One of my childhood favorites. I used to dream of being *'girt John Ridd,'* and rescuing Lorna from Glen Doone."

"Poor Vincent. And you've had to settle for rescuing Catherine Chandler from guard dogs, vigilantes, voodoo cults and assorted unromantic thugs."

"Catherine!"

"Just teasing. Thank you, Vincent. I love it. Will you read it to me?"

"Tonight?"

"Well, we can make a start."

She lay back, hands behind her head. But before John Ridd ever won his first schoolyard battle, Catherine was sound asleep. Vincent closed the book and crossed to place his pack under Catherine's head. Gently covering her with his cloak, he sat back against the stone wall, and lost himself in contemplation of his own bittersweet love story.

Catherine woke with a start. She couldn't remember where she was, but it was definitely not her bed.

As her eyes adjusted, she saw the last embers of their fire, and Vincent asleep at a neck-wrenching angle against the opposite wall. Propping her head on her hand, she lay for a few moments examining this extraordinary man. When he was awake, his deep-set, eloquent blue eyes dominated his features, and he exuded strength and control. Asleep, he seemed younger - more vulnerable. Catherine had become so accustomed to Vincent's company that it was his sharp intelligence and gentle personality to which she related. Staring at him now, she remembered her first, terrified reaction to his alienness. Only a little over a year ago. How strange. Another Catherine - another life.

She rose quietly, trying not to disturb him. Stirring the embers to life, she added paper and kindling from the pack she'd found beneath her head. Exploring further, she located the rest of their loaf from the night before, and coffee makings.

Vincent roused to the aroma of coffee, and found his heroine mundanely making toast.

"Good morning, Catherine. Did you sleep well?"

"Good morning. More comfortably than my escort, by the look of it." She laughed as Vincent rubbed his neck.

"You are always surprising me, Catherine. For a girl who's spent her life in the city, you look very much at home beside a campfire."

"Oh, Dad has a cabin up in the White Mountains. When Mother was alive, we'd spend most of our summers up there, with Dad coming up on weekends. After Mother died, we went less often, but Dad and I still manage a long weekend every now and then. So you could say I grew up cooking over an open fire. I filet a mean trout, too."

Breakfast was quickly disposed of, and they moved on. By mid-morning they were approaching their destination. Vincent paused.

"Wait here a moment, Catherine. This passage has changed since my last visit." He moved carefully down the tunnel, peering up, and to both sides, as he went. In a minute or two he returned.

"The roof has caved in ahead. Strange. There was no sign of activity in these rocks before. But this passage is completely blocked now."

"That's too bad. Shall we go back?"

"We may have to. But let me look around a bit first. There were several tunnels opening into the Crystal Chamber. Perhaps I can find another way in. Do you mind waiting alone? I won't go beyond the call of your voice."

"Of course not. There's light enough to read - John and Lorna will keep me company."

Vincent left and returned several times in the next quarter hour, working a search pattern of the adjoining tunnels. Finally he called from no great distance.

"Come ahead, Catherine. This tunnel seems to go through."

Catherine tucked '*Lorna Doone*' into her jacket pocket, and followed the direction of Vincent's voice.

A hundred yards down the tunnel, he was waiting for her. He took her hand and they walked on together. Around the next turn the entry to the Crystal Chamber came into sight. The reflections from millions of crystal facets cast an otherworldly light far out into the passageway. Vincent and Catherine were looking eagerly ahead when the tunnel floor collapsed beneath them. They plunged down and struck cold water.

Vincent had retained his hold on Catherine's hand as they fell. His boots drove into the soft bottom of ... whatever it was they had fallen into. He drew Catherine to him, encircling her waist with his arm - holding her head and shoulders above the water's surface, which was mid-way up his chest.

After her first gasp of shock, Catherine forced herself to remain still, afraid of dislodging Vincent's hold on her. As he drew her closer, and changed his grip from hand to waist, she raised frightened yes to his.

"What in the world..."

"We fell through some sort of wooden flooring. The boards must have rotted. I felt the surface of the floor change just as we fell."

He looked slowly around at what seemed to be a wide well, or cistern. The walls were stone - mossed over, slick. The waterline on the wall was an inch or two above his eyes. Reluctantly, he raised the hand not holding Catherine to his lips. Salt.

"I think that someone, sometime, used this as a water source. We're not far from the harbor here. The salt water must have seeped through and contaminated the well. So they boarded it over."

Catherine had been looking around also. But the words '*salt water*' brought her gaze into sharp focus. The waterline was distinct - and frightening. Clearly the water level in the well rose and fell with the tide.

The tunnel floor was about six feet above Catherine's head. Vincent gauged the distance and came to a decision.

"Catherine. Listen carefully. I'm going to take my arm from your waist. Put your hands on my shoulders, and then lift your foot and put it in my hands. I will boost you up until you can step up on my shoulders. From there I think you can catch hold of the tunnel floor. Be sure that your hands are on stone, not wood. The boards might not hold you."

"Vincent, are you sure..."

"I'm sure, Catherine. Please ... try it."

She did as he asked. Reaching a standing position on his shoulders was scarcely more than a slippery scramble, her hand pressed against the slimy stone wall, no purchase there. But even on tiptoe, at the full stretch of her arms, her fingers didn't come within six inches of the tunnel floor.

Then she felt Vincent's hands on her ankles. She stiffened her knees. A strong lift from below, and Catherine's fingers hooked over the jagged flooring. For a moment she scrabbled about, feeling only splintered wood. But one last push from Vincent brought her eyes above floor level, she could see where the boards gave way to stone. She pushed herself waist-high to the solid surface. Bending sharply to secure her position, she swung first one leg, then the other up onto the tunnel floor. She felt the scratches the board had made on her hands and wrists. For a moment she lay flat on the cold stone, trembling with reaction.

"Catherine, are you all right?"

Gathering her self-control, she replied, "I'm fine. Your turn."

A pause. "That may be a little more difficult."

Catherine edged to a spot where she could look down into the cistern, careful not to rest her weight on the rotten boards. The first thing she was aware of was the water at Vincent's shoulders. Could it possibly be rising that fast? Surely not.

"Vincent, what is it?"

"My feet are sinking into the mud at the bottom."

She realized that being shorter than her companion, and having been held in a strong hold, her feet had never touched bottom.

"You weren't sinking when you were holding me. I'd have felt it. Vincent, did you push yourself lower when you lifted me up?"

"There was no choice, Catherine. Our both being down here would not have served any purpose."

"It ... it's not quicksand, is it?" There was an edge of panic in Catherine's voice.

"No, I don't think so. It seems to be very soft mud. If I don't move, I remain stationary. But any attempt I make to free one foot drives the other one deeper."

From her own climb out, Catherine knew that the walls provided no handholds. He would need leverage - something to grip and pull himself up. There was no doubt in her mind that he could do that. She had just had a vivid reminder of his strength.

"Vincent, I'm going to find something for you to hold onto and climb out. Stay very still. I'll be right back."

"Catherine..." But she was gone.

She ran down the last stretch of tunnel and into the Crystal Chamber. The beauty of the place, which an hour ago would have dazzled her, was just so much lifeless mineral. All she wanted of that Chamber now was a pole or a rope. And of course, there was nothing of the sort. Glittering crystals mocked her fears.

She made short excursions down each of the three tunnels that exited the cavern, but none of them offered promise of what she was seeking. Feeling chilled by more than just her wet clothes, she ran back to the scene of their accident.

"Vincent, there just isn't anything here. But my jacket is a tough fabric, so is your cloak. If we knotted them together, would they be long enough?"

"Perhaps. Do you see anything up there to tie them to?"

Catherine saw at once that he was right. The smooth tunnel floor and walls provided no outcrop to secure makeshift lifeline. And the floorboards were worse than useless - they were clearly rotted through.

"Can you take your cloak off and toss it up to me without pushing yourself deeper?"

"I think so."

Catherine caught the soggy bundle of material that came hurtling up out of the well. The weight of it nearly knocked her off her feet. Wringing as much water out of it as she could, she double-knotted one end of it to the denim sleeve of her jacket. Vincent had been carrying his pack in one hand when they fell. It had caught on a splinter of board, and dangled over the opening. She retrieved it, and tied it securely to the other jacket sleeve, dumping the contents in a heap on the floor.

Catherine tested the knots again, then lowered her line into the hole. His teeth were chattering, and she could feel the betraying tightness in her throat that presaged tears.

"Watch your head. It's coming down." The rope was long enough and to spare. Vincent caught the end, and looked up at her.

"Catherine, what is it tied to?"

"There isn't anything to tie it to, Vincent. If I lean against it..."

"No." He would not even consider any attempt that could land Catherine back in the water. At the level to which he had sunk, he wasn't sure that he could lift her out again. "No."

"Vincent, we have to try something!"

"Do you think you could find your way back alone? You could go for help."

"Is there time?"

"There's no way to tell. We don't even know if the tide is coming in or going out. But I can't think of any other solution."

"I'll go. Quickly, tell me the way."

Vincent carefully took her back, verbally retracing their route, giving her landmarks to watch for. "You may not need to go the whole way. If you reach the pipes, tap out an S.O.S. Pascal will see that Father receives it at once, and Father knows where we were headed. Now, repeat the directions back to me."

When she had done so to his satisfaction, he continued. "Good. One more thing. Take a crystal from the chamber, and mark the walls as you go. That way, if you miss the way home, you can find your way back here. This is where they'll come looking for us if we don't return."

"Eventually!"

"Catherine, don't underestimate the danger. If you're not careful you could become hopelessly lost down here. Promise me that if you feel unsure of the direction at any point, you'll return at once. Please, Catherine."

She hesitated, but time was critical. And his tone said what his words did not - that this might be the last request he would ever make of her. "I promise." One long look into the eyes turned up to her. "Vincent, hold on. Wait for me."

"I will. Go safely, my dear."

"I love you." And she was gone. Another minute, and even the echoes of her hurried footsteps faded away.

Vincent cherished no delusions about the immediacy of the danger he was in - an inch or two of water spelled life or death. Without help, he had no chance at all of surviving the next high tide. But luck seemed

to be favoring him. For the next hour after Catherine's departure, the water level gradually fell. At first he thought he was imagining it. But after a while he was certain. The water had dropped several inches, he could look down and see the top button of his tunic, which had previously been submerged.

And there the water level remained for several hours. Then, just as slowly and inexorably as it had fallen, it began to rise. He considered again if he had overlooked any possible escape alternatives. There were none, and at some level of consciousness he had known it from the beginning. Any exertion on his part would only hasten the end. So he forced himself to remain still.

Hope was strong in his makeup, and he would hold tightly to the quality which had made his whole life possible as long as consciousness remained. His thoughts turned to Catherine, and their strange but treasured relationship. He knew how true and deep her feelings ran, and how she would suffer if she returned too late. For hours he had been feeling her sternly repressed anguish right along with his own emotions, their normal empathy heightened by proximity and the depth of her fear for him. A line of poetry ran ceaselessly through his mind; *'Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell.'*

Catherine hurried back through the twisting passages that they had traversed that morning. She had started out at a run, but realized almost at once that she would exhaust herself before she had covered a fraction of the distance. So she slowed to a brisk, distance-eating walk, speeding to jog-pace when the floors of the tunnel permitted. She grudged the precious seconds it took to mark the tunnel and forks, but she recognized the wisdom of Vincent's insistence that she do so.

She stumbled on an unevenness, and caught herself against the wall. Leaning back to catch her breath, she felt the cold of the rock strike through the thick cloth of her shirt. Her clothes were damp now rather than wet, but their general clamminess made her agonizingly aware of how cold the water in the cistern was, and how long Vincent had been in it. Glancing at her watch, she was startled to realize that she'd been gone for more than two hours.

The realization hit her like a blow. She should have passed their campsite by now. She hurried on for five minutes more, but the general unfamiliarity of the passage only confirmed her conviction that she had taken a wrong turn somewhere.

Haunted by the specter of rising water, she turned and retraced her steps, trying an alternate route at the last intersection she had passed, and then at the one before that. But nothing looked even vaguely familiar. Finally she stopped and faced the fact that wherever she had gone astray, she was only increasing her disorientation by trying one unknown tunnel after another. Her only hope was to go all the way back to the Crystal Chamber and begin again. Time! Was there enough time?

Catherine set out at a run, panic a short half-step behind her. She followed the scratches she had made on the walls, knowing that when she set out again, this final set of marks might well lead her astray, and destroy what little chance she had of finding the way out.

Her run had slowed to a stumbling walk when she came at last to the corridor with the collapsed floor.

"Vincent." Harsh from shortness of breath, her call elicited no response. Exhaustion forgotten, Catherine raced to the gaping hole. "Vincent, answer me!"

She threw herself down on the stone floor and peered down into the cistern. Vincent's head was still visible, thrown as far back as it would go. Even at that unnatural angle, the water was above his mouth, and almost to his nose. His eyes were closed, but it was apparent from the tension in him that he was still conscious.

Frantic, she grabbed the soggy mass of cloak and jacket and pack. She wrapped the pack straps firmly around her hands. Then she dropped the other end down the well. Her jacket smacked against Vincent's

face, and his eyes opened.

"Grab hold of it!"

He could not respond. Catherine wasn't even sure that he could hear her with his ears below water. But she was sure that he understood what she wanted him to do.

He looked up into her eyes with boundless love and sympathy, and made the slightest negative movement of his head.

"Vincent, take hold of this, or I give you my word, I'll jump back in."

He was still looking into her eyes. Whatever he saw there must have convinced him of the inflexibility of her resolve. He raised one hand above the water, and grabbed the gently swinging line. His other hand came up and took hold. Catherine immediately threw her slight weight against her end of the rope. Vincent's mouth and chin emerged, and he drew in a deep gasp of air.

Catherine was on her knees, at the very edge of the stone floor. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Catherine. Are they coming?"

Tears suddenly flooded her eyes, her sense of failure overwhelming her.

"Never mind, Catherine. Don't cry. I can see that you didn't find your way back to the pipes. It was foolish of either of us to think you could. It takes a lifetime Below to develop the instincts to travel surely and safely. Don't think about it anymore."

"When the water level goes down again, I can make another try."

"No. It was too great a risk once. You're going to stay right here. They will come looking." Neither of them needed to voice their inner conviction that for Vincent the searchers might come too late.

"What can we do?"

"Hold on as long as we can." He looked carefully at their relative positions. "Catherine, it won't work this way. The straps are cutting off the circulation in your hands. I'm going to try to get a purchase on the wall. When I let go, unwind the straps from your hands.

"No."

"Listen to me, Catherine. I know you're not giving up, neither am I. But I won't trade your hands for my life. I think I can keep my head above water for a minute or two. Use your belt to strap the pack to your waist, then lie on the floor and lower the rope back down. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm letting go - now." He transferred one hand, then the other, from jacket to stone wall. He slid an inch, then his nails caught and held.

Catherine pulled the makeshift lifeline quickly up, belted it securely to her waist, and threw the end back down. Vincent caught it. When he could see that she had positioned herself on the floor, he gradually let the rope take his weight again.

She felt that weight pinning her to the floor, but relief that the maneuver had worked made her feel light-headed. Now, if she could just keep his head above water, surely help would come.

"When do you think Father will send someone out to look for us?"

"I'm not sure, Catherine. I told him we would return this evening. But it may be quite late before it occurs to him that we could have run into trouble." *'Or even sometime tomorrow,'* Vincent thought. *'He knows how precious my time with Catherine is to me, and he will be reluctant to intrude on it until he's sure we're*

missing, and not just lingering.' This thought, however, he withheld from his companion. She was under sufficient emotional stress already without his adding to it. At the moment she was at least deriving consolation from the fact that her efforts were keeping tragedy at bay.

He closed his eyes and tried to share her relief, but it wasn't easy. He was all too aware of the growing numbness in his arms. Hours of immersion in the cold water, and the present strain, were taking their toll.

They were both in need of a diversion.

"Catherine, do you have '*LORNA DOONE*' in reach?"

She looked around, and spotted it where it had fallen when she shook it from her jacket pocket. With a nudge of her foot, she pushed it within reach. "Yes, it's right here."

"Are you up to reading aloud?"

"Of course." Taking the thick, leather-bound volume in her hands, she opened to the flyleaf. For the first time, she saw the inscription.

*Catherine,
May this birthday and the year ahead be filled
For you with the richness of joy you have given me.*

Vincent.

"Oh, Vincent, don't you know that you've given me back - many times over - any happiness I've given you? You've shown me that life has a purpose - that it's something precious to be shared and rejoiced in. Wherever we're headed, I don't believe that our love is meaningless. I '*believe*' in '*us*.' You have a generous heart, Catherine. But if today is the measure of our time together, I beg you not to remember it in bitterness. If my life ends here, it has been my love for you that gave it meaning, and your love for me that gave it sweetness past measuring. Will you hold that memory, and find someone else to complete your soul, as you have completed mine?"

"Vincent, no memory of you could ever be bitter, but don't ask me to think of loving someone else. You are my other self - and you always will be, whether you're with me or not. Don't give up. Try to stay with me. Please - you '*have*' to."

"I will, Catherine, as long as I'm able. And beyond."

Catherine turned the pages, and read with as steady a voice as she could manage the timeless love story of plain John Ridd - an English yeoman of great strength and great heart - and Mistress Lorna Doone, a noblewoman raised by outlaws, who could give her heart only once, even when that giving seemed hopeless.

The lovely old vellum was blistered more than once by tears, as Catherine sensed Vincent's growing weakness. She read on, praying silently that he could hold on till help arrived.

Hours crawled by. Vincent hadn't spoken in a long time. His eyes were closed again, but Catherine could tell he was still listening, in some realm on the border of consciousness. She felt sure that her voice was the thread preventing him from lapsing into blackness, and relaxing his hold on safety. The water level had begun to drop again, but it mattered very little now. In Vincent's present state, if he let go of the rope he would inevitably slip under and drown.

Catherine's arms ached from hours of holding the book. That pain was at least reassuring. Her legs had gone from pain to pins-and-needles to numbness. She could no longer feel anything below the rope that cut

off circulation at her waist.

'But the small entreating hands found their way, as if by instinct, to my great protecting palms, and trembled there, and rested there.'

For a little while we lingered thus, neither wishing to move away, neither caring to look beyond the presence of the other, both alike so full of hope, and comfort, and true happiness, if only the world would let us be.'

Catherine stopped reading, lifted her head, listening. Vincent's eyelids flickered, but didn't quite open. She was sure now. Sure of those blessed shouts in the distance. "Catherine! Vincent! Vincent!"

"They're coming, Vincent! They're coming!" She saw the furrows of pain and effort in his forehead relax. The corners of his mouth turned up in the ghost of a smile. And slowly, terribly, his hands slipped from the rope.

"We're here! Here!" she shouted hoarsely. Running footsteps approached. She ripped the belt loose from her wrist, and dropped over the side into the cistern.

A moment later, Jamie, Pascal and Mouse came around the last turn of the tunnel at a dead run. They stopped at the very edge of the gaping hole, and looking down, saw Catherine holding an unconscious Vincent's head above water.

Mouse stood open-mouthed, but was prodded into action by Jamie and Pascal. In minutes they had lowered Jamie into the well. She secured a rope around Vincent's chest. The men hauled Jamie up, followed by a reluctant Catherine. It took their combined efforts to pull Vincent free of the mud, and up to floor level.

He opened his eyes an hour later, and found himself wrapped in blankets beside a crackling fire. Mouse and Pascal grinned at him from across the makeshift hearth.

"Where's Catherine?"

"We sent her off with Jamie to get out of those wet clothes. It took all three of us to convince her that she could safely leave you for five minutes." Pascal winked at Vincent. "It might be worth almost drowning to have that lady hold your hand."

Mouse turned on him. "Not a joke, Pascal. Catherine was very brave."

"Yes, she was, Mouse. And resourceful, too. I didn't think she could manage to hold me above water without risking another fall into the well. But she did."

Pascal clasped a somewhat mollified Mouse on the shoulder. "You don't have to defend Catherine to me, Mouse. She's a heroine in everyone's book. I was just giving Vincent a hard time. But I don't think he stayed awake long enough to realize that Catherine took another dip."

Vincent glanced at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"You lost your hold on the rope and slipped down when you blacked out. When we arrived, Catherine was treading water and keeping you from turning into a new form of marine life."

Vincent cast his eyes down, and gave a rueful shake of his head.

Catherine and Jamie appeared from the direction of the Crystal Chamber. Catherine in an interesting sarong and cape of blankets. Her face lit up when she saw that Vincent was awake, and she crossed quickly to take her place at his side, and reclaim his hand. A clasp he warmly returned.

"How did you find us so quickly, Pascal?" Vincent asked.

Pascal and Jamie exchanged a look. It was Jamie who replied.

"I came in this direction last week. I thought I saw Paracelsus in the distance. At the time, I put it down to imagination. But when Father told us this morning that you and Catherine had set out for the Crystal Chamber, I told him what I thought I'd seen. He was worried that Paracelsus might have set some sort of trap." She glanced at the well. "Maybe Father was right."

They were all silent. If it had been attempted murder, and not an accident, it had almost succeeded.

"I don't think Paracelsus had anything to do with the well," Vincent said thoughtfully. "It's far too old. But he could have engineered the rock fall that blocked the direct route and sent us in this direction." He stared into the fire, seeing other flames, and an implacable enemy. Then he looked up at his three friends and smiled. "However it happened, your arrival certainly saved my life. And I thank you all from the bottom of my heart."

"I, too," added Catherine. Her grip on Vincent's hand tightened convulsively.

A moment passed. Then Mouse brightened.

"Have to get back early tomorrow, Vincent."

"Of course, Mouse. We mustn't leave Father in uncertainty any longer than we have to."

"Father, too," said Mouse. "But I meant Mary. Have our heads if Catherine's cake gets stale."

"Okay, good. Okay, fine," quipped Pascal and Jamie in unison.

"Happy Birthday, Catherine." Mouse smiled at her shyly.

"Yes, Mouse," she replied, her eyes on Vincent. "It is."

END