

# Twice Upon a Time

The terrible noise was just beginning to fade when the little girl woke again, coughing as though the air itself had grown thick enough to choke upon. It was dark and her head hurt; and when she tried to roll over, pain shot upward from her ankle and she cried out, "Vincent!" -- but her cry only brought the sound of more falling rock, and more coughing.

Where was she? Her heart pounding, the five-year-old blinked dizzily into the blackness. She didn't remember coming into any place as dark as this. Even without her candle (and what had happened to her candle?), there should have been *some* light. Even down in the Catacombs --

The Catacombs! That's where she was. She remembered, now. She'd slipped away from nap-time in the home tunnels to come exploring. But they'd surely start missing her soon, and she'd be in Trouble, for the Catacombs were forbidden territory. The child tried to get up again -- and again she felt that sharp pain in her leg. With a whimper, she sank back into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \*

"You heard it, Vincent?" Jacob Wells demanded, as his son came hurrying into the chamber, followed by Catherine.

"We heard it. Where was it, do you think?"

"No word yet. Pascal's put out an emergency all-quiet, except for relevant information, and our people checking in. Was anyone working on the lower levels?"

"Not yet, although Kanin and I were planning to go down a little later."

"The children," Catherine said urgently. "What about the children? Are they all safe?"

"We'll soon find out, my dear; Mary and Sarah are doing a head-count. The little ones were napping in the nursery, and so they should be all right, I think. The older ones will gather there at once; they know the procedure. The families will report directly to Pascal."

A rapid-fire tapping sounded from a large pipe overheard, and the three froze into immobility.

"All of our people have been checking in, one by one," Father said, for Catherine's benefit, his relief apparent. "And it doesn't look as though any of our populated areas were affected. That's a blessing."

"But if it was close enough to *feel*..." In Catherine's mind there was the sudden frightening memory of past disaster; of wanting to batter herself uselessly against a tumbled wall of rock that hid everything that mattered in her world, or under it. She felt Vincent's large warm hand enclosing hers, and knew that he was remembering too. "Where was it?"

"We're not sure just yet..." He cocked his head, listening intently. "Now who is that, I wonder... Ah, Cullen, of course."

"Cullen's chamber isn't far above the Catacombs," Vincent murmured. "He thinks there may have been a cave-in down there somewhere. -- Has Mouse checked in?" he asked Father suddenly; for that young man was famous for his impulsive exploration of outlying areas.

"Yes, Pascal says he was one of the first. Wanted everyone to know that whatever's happened, it 'wasn't his fault.'" Father allowed himself a small wry smile, now that it was beginning to seem that their community had escaped disaster. "Well, it looks as though, this time -- Wait just a minute..." Another series of taps was ringing out, more urgently this time.

Vincent started for the door. Catherine, hurrying after him, cried out, "What is it?"

He didn't turn, or pause to wait for Father, limping after them, as he might normally have done. "It's one of the children," he said tightly, springing up the short metal stair and into a run. "One of the children is missing."

Struggling toward wakefulness again, she opened her eyes and would have cried out again with fear --

"Don't shout," came a soft young voice, not far away. "You'll make it start again."

"But it's dark!" she quavered, struggling up onto her elbows.

"Don't be afraid," he told her. "Everything will be all right."

It was a boy's voice, Naomi thought, and somehow familiar; but it wasn't Geoffrey's, or Kipper's, or even Eric's... and none of these favorite playmates had come along on today's quest, anyway, or been here when the world turned upside-down. "What happened?" she asked, knuckling grimy tears from her eyes.

"Cave-in. Father always says the Catacombs aren't safe to play in. Guess he was right after all."

Cave-in! Naomi had heard about cave-ins; and Father had told the story, often enough, of the time he and Vincent were trapped in the Maze together. She gulped with fright. Without Catherine's help, and Mouse's, they would've died in there. Father said so. She started to cry in earnest then, and that only made her head throb all the harder. "I want to get out! I want to go home!"

"It's going to be all right," he whispered, urgently now and much closer. "I promise. But you can't make so much noise in here -- you'll make it start again."

Naomi made a valiant effort to choke back her sobs, and wiped her nose up and down her sleeve. "Can we -- can we get out?"

Her companion seemed to hesitate. "Not without help from outside. But they're looking for you. It won't be very long before they come."

"My leg," she said, remembering suddenly. "It hurts --"

"Don't pull on it," he warned. "It's caught."

"I can't see it."

"I can," he said, "a little. Can you be still for a minute?" There was the sound of careful movement; and then the weight was being lifted, little by little, from her foot and ankle, and she heard the rocks being set aside one by one.

"It still hurts," the little girl sniffled, when he'd freed her finally.

"I think it's probably pretty bruised," said her unseen helper. He felt along her ankle, and she gasped. "Well, perhaps



it's sprained a little too. It's already starting to swell." He propped her heel up on what she thought must be his knee. "Do you have a handkerchief?"

"I... I don't know."

"That's all right. I think I do." After a moment during which she could hear him going through his pockets, he began to wrap her ankle. His touch was gentle and sure. "I never practiced doing this, blind," he said, and she could feel him winding and tucking soft fabric. "I hope it comes out okay."

"Who are you?" she asked him.

"Now, I don't want you to touch that," he said, with a fair imitation of Father's own sternness. He lowered her foot to the tunnel floor again. "Just leave it alone, all right? And don't try to stand up."

She felt his strong, wiry arm come around her, helping her toward the rough wall behind her. She put her hand on his shoulder, and her eyes widened. She felt... strands of long hair. And yet she was sure this wasn't one of the girls. It was a boy. But how could that be? None of "her" boys had long hair. "I want to go home," she repeated in a tiny little voice. "I want to get out of here."

"Soon," the boy reassured her. "Soon they'll find out where you are, and they'll dig you out. Do you believe me?"

She did, although she didn't know why. "I had a candle..."

"We'll never find it now," he said. "What's the matter? Are you afraid of the dark?"

"No," she lied.

"Would you like some light?"

"Do you have a candle?"

"I have a lantern," he said, with boyish smugness.

\* \* \* \*

"It's Naomi," Mary said worriedly. "I put her down in here, with the others, for a nap. She wasn't here when the shock awakened them."

Naomi, Catherine thought, fighting a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. *Of course -- who else?* The little girl had hardly kept out of mischief a single day since her rescue from the city streets, the previous autumn.\* "Have you looked in her chamber? Maybe she decided to nap there instead." But of course someone would have checked there at once; and indeed Mary was already shaking her head.

"Naomi's in trouble," young Jesse sang out merrily.

"Please, Jesse," Father said tersely. "Does your mother know you're safe?" he asked, and saw the child nod. "All right, then, I want you to go along and find her. Mary; is there any indication -- any indication at all -- where Naomi might have gone?"

"No, nothing." The woman pushed a long streamer of hair back behind her ear, distractedly. "She seems to have just crept away, again -- "

"You children," Vincent said, coming down onto one knee before Jesse and the others. "Is there anything you can tell us? Something she might have said, or...?"

"The Catacombs, maybe," Kipper said, from the corner where the older children had gathered.

Vincent came to his feet. "The Catacombs?"

"Now why would she go down there?" Mary demanded. "She knows that area is completely off limits!"

Geoffrey stepped forward. "She wanted to go exploring there, the other day," he said, his brown eyes round. "We wouldn't take her. We told her not to, Father, we *told* her -- "

"Yes, I'm sure you did," the old man said grimly. "All right, then, we'll have to check there first. Has Pascal given the all-clear?"

"Except for Naomi," Mary nodded. "Everyone else has checked in... all but Narcissa, of course."

Father nodded, hardly disconcerted by this news. Narcissa rarely emerged from the deeper reaches more than once or twice a year, and seldom responded to any of their signals or summonses. But as frail as the old woman might appear, she seemed to have a special knack for survival. Father would not worry about her... yet. "All right, everyone. We'll probably need picks and shovels, whatever you can carry... and light, of course. -- No, Geoffrey,

\* "Promises to Keep" and "Promises Fulfilled"

you and the others stay here with Mary and help keep an eye on the little ones."

Seeing their disappointment, Vincent said, "It will be too dangerous for you children down there. You may be able to help us later. Catherine -- "

"Don't even think about it," she warned him. "I'm coming too. Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

Naomi blinked against the flare of a match being stuck. It hurt her eyes and she covered them.

"It's all right now," came his reassurance after a moment. "I turned it 'way down. You can look. See?"

Slowly she uncovered her eyes.

"We can only have it on for a minute," he was saying. "Father says that in a cave-in, if you survive, what you mostly have to worry about is the air. You could breathe up all the air, and fire uses air too. But I wanted you to see it was all right, and not be scared any more. See, there's enough room for hours of air, for somebody as little as you."

But she wasn't looking at the confining rock walls, or the dim and flickering lantern, or at the air itself, visible still with the dust settling through it. She was looking at him. When she could catch her breath again she asked him, "Who are you?"

\* \* \* \*

A miners' procession trekked hurriedly down to the lower levels. At least two dozen of the able-bodied had insisted on coming to help, and nearly all of them carried picks or shovels, garden-claws, even bricklayers' trowels.

The entrance to the Catacombs yawned black and still before them. A hush fell over the group; while they could see no sign of fresh rockfall from this vantage-point, everyone knew that loud



talk could be disastrous at the site of a recent cave-in. "Vincent," Father said softly. "You and Mouse probably best know the way..."

"Devin and I used to play down here," Vincent murmured to Catherine, pressing her back among the others. He lifted his lantern. "Mouse, are you...?"

But that young man was already hurrying forward. "Over here," came his urgent stage-whisper. "Hurry."

\* \* \* \*

She was staring, open-mouthed with astonishment. "Who are you?"

"Don't ask silly questions," he said, with an elder-brotherly disdain that might have come straight from Kipper. "You'll use up all the air."

He sat cross-legged by the opposite wall, only five or six feet away. He was about ten years old and clad, as she was, in the patched and secondhand clothing all the tunnel-children wore. His long hair fell down over his shoulders; its color was hardly dimmed by the drifting dust. He blinked deepset blue eyes at her; his cleft cat-like mouth smiled a smile she *knew*.

"I thought there was only one of him," Naomi stammered. "He said he was the only one."

"I'm going to have to turn this off now," he said; and leaning forward, he blew the lantern out. At once, darkness enveloped them wholly once more. "I just wanted you to see it was going to be all right. Don't worry, I have some more matches if we need to turn it on again later."

Naomi could still see him, in her mind's eye, just as though the light still glowed between them. "I'm not allowed to have matches," she confessed.

"You're too little," he agreed, unseen. "You'd probably set yourself on fire."

"Would not!" she retorted, stung by the jibe.

"Would so. You'd probably burn the tunnels right down."

"You can't burn down solid rocks," she said uncertainly. Or

could you? She rubbed her face tiredly. "Aren't you ascaresd of the dark?" she asked him suddenly. "Aren't you afraid of being in here like this?"

He was quiet for a long moment. Then she heard him moving, and unexpectedly she felt him settle beside her. "Tell you what," he said. "I'll be brave, if you will."

\* \* \* \*

"Well," Father said. "That's what I was afraid of."

A short way into the labyrinth, they'd found one of the side-tunnels blocked by rockfall; the dust in the corridor was still clearing. Catherine felt it tickling her nose, catching deep in her throat. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough," Vincent told her, not taking his eyes off the cave-in.

"I seem to recall," Father said grimly, "that it was very near here that we nearly lost you and Devin in a similar incident. Where does this tunnel lead?"

"Nowhere, now, Father... it's a dead-end," he replied. "There is no other access." There would be no easier way in, as there had been when he and Father were trapped in the Maze.

"And of course," Father went on, "we still have no way of knowing that Naomi is actually down here. For all we know, she could have sneaked away Above again, and be picking flowers in the Park."

Jamie thrust herself forward, and with her pick began rapping a signal on the rockface. "If she's back there," she said grimly, "maybe she'll hear this."

"She is there." From the darkness ahead the words came, spoken with a familiar and almost musical accent. "She is there, so close... just behind the rock."

"Narcissa!" Vincent exclaimed, as the old woman stepped toward the light. "What are you doing here?"

"Narcissa, thank heaven," Father sighed. "At least you're all right. But you shouldn't be down here, either. It's very dangerous." It hadn't escaped his notice that she'd come not from



the safety of the main tunnels behind them, but from the uncertain maze ahead.

"Not for me," the old woman chided him, as she might one of the children. "I know all the ways."

"Narcissa," Vincent said, reaching out his hand. "We fear that one of the children is caught behind this rockfall. A very little girl, just five years old -- "

"Yes, yes." The old woman was nodding her head, her expression beatific. "This little one, she has hair like the dandelion, no? And she wanders. I know."

"If you were down here," Catherine said urgently, "then maybe you saw her, saw what happened -- "

"Not with these eyes," she replied, turning her milky gaze upon them. Her dark skin gleamed like mahogany under the light of their lanterns. "But I *did* see. It's why I came. To tell you."

"Tell us? Tell us what?" Father asked brusquely. "What can you hope to tell us, if you didn't actually see anything -- "

"Please, Father." Vincent turned back to the old woman. "You... saw something?"

"The Father is impatient," she smiled, her homely face creasing with affection. "As always. But I only come to tell you that this child, your little wanderer, she is alive. She is just behind this rock; not far, not far at all."

Vincent's voice was tight. "Is she badly hurt?"

"Really, Vincent," Father began, "we haven't time for -- "

"She was frightened," Narcissa nodded. "But she will be all right now."

"What do you mean?" Jamie asked her, from her crouch at the rockface. "What do you mean, she'll be all right '*now*'? How can she be all right, when she's in there in the dark all alone -- "

"Oh, no, child," Narcissa chuckled -- a rich and reassuring sound, made strange by their anxiety all around her. "No, no."

"What do you mean, Narcissa?" Vincent still held her wrinkled old hand clasped in his.

"Do you remember another time, Vincent? You and your brother, frightening the Father? I came then, too." She beamed up at him, just as though she could see every detail of his leonine features.

"Yes... I remember." Narcissa *had* come that day, almost to

this very spot, to watch over the digging. And when he and Devin had finally squeezed back out into the light, she'd looked just as she did now... ageless and enigmatic. He said, "Please, Narcissa, we haven't much time. What are you trying to tell us?"

"The little one," she answered. "She is not alone."

\* \* \* \*

The distant tapping startled Naomi, who felt her friend get up at once. "What's that?" she asked him, shivering.

"Can't you hear it? They're just outside! They're signalling! We've got to let them know you're in here." The boy was scrabbling around the rocky floor, apparently looking for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Finding a good rock."

\* \* \* \*

Father hushed the resulting clamor before it could bring more rubble down upon their heads. "Now what does that mean, 'she's not alone'? Zach, run back and have Mary conduct another head-count. I want you to relieve Pascal in the main pipechamber, and have him come down here to us. And let us know *immediately* if it's discovered that anyone else is missing. Hurry." He watched the long-legged teenager sprint away up the tunnel. "Now, Narcissa -- "

"She's gone, Father." Vincent sounded entirely bemused; he was looking down at his hand as though he'd never seen it before. "I was holding her hand; I only looked away for a second. When I looked back, she was gone."

"She can't have gotten far," Catherine said, feeling a chill move down her spine. "Didn't any of you see which way she might have -- "

"She's old," Jamie frowned. "How fast can she move? -- Sorry, Father," she said quickly, wondering if she'd insulted him.

Vincent shook his head. "I have no sense of her... anywhere nearby. She is truly gone again."

"Well," Father said tersely, "we don't have time for a game of hide 'n' seek down here. At least we know she's all right. Come now -- Vincent, Cullen, Mouse, we have work to do."

It was only moments later that Pascal arrived. Catherine, working next to Vincent to remove the loose outer rubble, looked up to see him conferring with Father near the entrance. "Was anyone else missing?" she called out to him.

He shook his balding head. "All accounted for."

"There, you see, Vincent," Father fumed. "For all her good intentions, Narcissa can't have been correct. All our people are accounted for. There couldn't possibly be anyone in there with Naomi." But even he could see that their little company seemed steadier, and easier in their own minds, following the old witch-woman's reassurance.

"Better if there was somebody," Mouse muttered, his face already streaked with grime. "Better not to be alone."

Vincent made no reply; only worked on steadily with his bare hands to pass the ragged rocks to those behind him.

Jamie looked up at him. "Should I keep trying to signal?"

"Yes," he said, not pausing. "If she can hear you, then it may reassure her."

\* \* \* \*

*After a moment the boy was still again; and at the far side of the rough small chamber, Naomi could hear him rapping too. "Are you telling them?" she asked.*

*"I hope they can hear it. It can't be more than a couple of feet... There's an old fallen piece of pipe stuck in the rocks here; maybe that will carry the sound out to them."*

*She listened for a moment, but couldn't make out the message he was tapping. She'd been going to pipe-classes almost every day since coming to live Below, but found she couldn't pick up more than a word or two of what he was doing. "I don't understand that," she complained.*



"It doesn't matter," he told her. "So long as they do."

\* \* \* \*

"Listen!" Jamie cried. "Hold up a minute! I think I hear something."

"Pascal!" Vincent had barely uttered his name before the little man was shouldering his way forward, to drop to his knees beside Jamie. He leaned forward, almost pressing one large ear to the rock. After a moment, he took out his stethoscope and began using that.

"Can you hear anything?" whispered Father.

"Wait... just a minute..." Pascal leaned forward, his whole being focused on the small sounds hidden in the rock beneath his hands. "It's a signal, all right -- *Shhh!*" he warned, as a murmur of relief arose behind him. "I can't hear... Okay, there it is again."

Catherine watched his features crease into a scowl. "Is it Naomi?"

"I... I'm not sure. It sounds like..." His eyes drifted up toward Vincent; he shook his head, and returned his attention to the rockface.

"What is it?" Father asked him impatiently.

Pascal, who knew the pipe "signature" of every one of the tunnel-dwellers whether they identified themselves or not, shook his head again. "Nothing, Father. It just didn't sound like... like *Naomi*, for a second."

"It couldn't very well be anyone else," the patriarch frowned.

"No," said the pipemaster, his voice still uncertain. "I guess not..."

"What is she saying," Vincent pressed him. "Is she all right?"

"*'Not badly hurt... sprained ankle... air's okay,'*" Pascal translated. And then, with a gasp of surprise, he sat back upon his heels, staring as though the stones themselves had spoken.

Vincent put a large hand on the smaller man's shoulder. "What

is it? What did you hear?"

Pascal took hold of the earpieces, and hung the stethoscope around his neck. "Well, it looks like she's okay, but... I didn't even realize it at first, but she's using the old code. You know, Vincent -- before we shorthanded the system. Nobody's used that code in over twenty years. Where could *she* have learned it?"

\* \* \* \*

"Do they know about you?" a drowsy Naomi asked the boy a little later, when he'd returned to her side. "Does everybody know? How come they didn't tell me?"

"Don't fall asleep," he told her. "You hit your head, didn't you? Does it hurt?"

She nodded; but her ankle was throbbing so that she'd nearly forgotten her headache. Tired of the dark, she'd been rubbing her eyes until pinwheels of light spun there like neon.

He said, "If you hit your head, then you can't go to sleep. You could have a concussion."

To the five-year-old, this sounded serious. "How do I know if I have a -- a -- one of those?"

"Well, Father says one symptom is, you might see double. Two of everything."

She blinked into the absolute blackness around them. "Would I know if I was seeing double, in the dark?"

"No," he said, after a moment's consideration. "I guess you wouldn't. So, just to be safe, you can't doze off."

"But I'm tired."

"Then you should have taken your nap," he pointed out.

She didn't pause to wonder how he knew about that. "I can hear them coming, a little," she said. "Can you?" And felt him nod, the long hair brushing her cheek.

"They'll be here soon," he reassured her. "They'll break through; then you'll be safe."

"Do you think Father will be mad?" she asked. "Is he going to

scoold me?"

"Probably," the boy replied, with a smile in his soft voice.

"Well," the little girl said, "I guess I don't care if he does, if we can just get out of here."

"It'll be okay," came his certain reassurance. "You'll see."

\* \* \* \*

"We're almost there, Father." Cullen grunted audibly as he helped Vincent to lift a particularly large chunk of stone. "It can't be more than another foot or so."

"Slow work," Mouse complained, wiping more dirt onto his face with the back of his hand. "Ought to use --"

"Now don't you even suggest that, Mouse," Father said sternly. "You heard Cullen; and this far too unstable an area to even consider using plastic explosives." He pretended not to see the young man's rather transparent disappointment. "Cullen, you look all in. Why don't you let Kanin take your place there?"

"Vincent," Catherine whispered, drawing him aside as the two men changed places. "Can't you rest for a minute, too? You haven't stopped at all since you started." That had been more than two hours ago. *You must be exhausted*, she thought, studying his face, ashen with strain and dust.

He shook his head, his deepset eyes never leaving the shrinking rockfall even though, as soon as he'd stepped away, someone had slipped in to take his place. "I can't stop, Catherine. I keep thinking of how frightened she must be --"

She took his face in her hands, compelling him to look down into her eyes. "Naomi is all right, Vincent. Narcissa said so, didn't she?" Catherine wasn't sure how much credence she herself gave the old seeress's cryptic "intuitions"... but there was no denying that Narcissa had been inexplicably accurate in the past. "We still have every reason to hope."

"I'm sorry. I... I keep remembering..."

"When you were trapped? With Devin?"

He nodded.



She said, "You were frightened."

"It was small," he said with difficulty, "and very dark. Devin was older; he pretended not to be afraid... but I have always remembered it. I couldn't do anything. I felt helpless."

Catherine knew how confinement affected him. She remembered feeling his quiet desperation through the bond, while he'd been trapped in the Maze with Father. Had it been worse for him, as a child? ... And was Naomi facing those feelings now as well? Catherine pushed the thought away. "You were a little boy," she said softly. "I'm sure you were as brave as you needed to be."

"Even so, Catherine... I promised myself then that if such a thing ever happened again, I would try to do something. To not be so helpless."

She glanced over toward the tunnel patriarch, sitting wearily out of the way on a stool someone had brought him; and she dropped her voice still further. "You were a great help to Father, that day in the Maze. I don't think he would have survived, trapped there all alone... And you're doing something *now*." He'd been working as tirelessly as a machine to clear this rockslide. With her fingers, she combed the long hair -- now straggling with sweat and dust -- back from his face. "Naomi will be all right. She's a survivor; you know that. And she knows we're out here, and that you're coming for her. How many times has she told me that no matter where she hides, or how she manages to lose herself -- '*Vincent always finds me.*'"

His hands settled at her waist. He bowed his head, and pressed his forehead gently down to hers. Closing her eyes, Catherine willed fresh strength through the bond to him; willed him to feel her faith and certainty. *It will be all right*, she thought with all the force of her love for him, and for the child she'd helped to bring into their world.

\* \* \* \*

"They're pretty close," her young guardian told her. "It won't be long now. I can almost hear what they're saying, over the picks and shovels."

He'd been telling her stories to keep her awake. Naomi felt so tired, she had to bite her lip to keep from bursting into tears all over again. Still, she could feel them in her throat, a hard aching lump. She could hear her friends outside now too, but it didn't help. "I want them to come *now*." A little gravel pattered

down from the ceiling. Naomi whimpered with sudden fright at the sound.

"It's all right," he started to say; but the sound or vibration of a pick being applied with exceptional vigor outside seemed to jar their little dark world, startling more stones free of their precarious perches. "Uh-oh," the boy whispered. "I think..."

In that instant a rumbling roar drowned him out. He threw himself over her, shielding her from the fresh rockfall; but still, when it was done and he lifted himself away, Naomi felt freshly bruised all over. She sat up, whimpering softly. "Where are you?"

"Right here," came his voice from the darkness ahead.

"What are you doing?"

A match flared; as he lit the lantern she could see that the glass had been cracked by the rocks that lay scattered around it. She looked up at the boy then; he was crouched there in the flickering light, clutching his wrist, and she gasped to see the blood darkening his sweater-sleeve.

\* \* \* \*

"Everyone stop what you're doing!" Kanin cried, to the people working at the rockface with both tools and bare hands; but it was too late. They all heard the rush of rock on the inside. On their side, too, a small avalanche of pebbles peppered down from above. Several of the tunnelfolk began coughing anew as more dust filled the air.

"All right," Father said finally, wearily, after a long minute of waiting stillness. "Pascal, do you hear anything?"

The pipemaster had his stethoscope out again, and was listening fiercely at various points along the stone. "No... not yet... Okay. There." He sagged with relief. "She's okay."

Catherine turned to Vincent and felt the hard safety of his arms around her.

"Now, we mustn't be so overeager that we become careless," Father was saying. "We must proceed more slowly, so that nothing like this can happen again. We're so close now; we must do nothing to endanger the child, or ourselves, any further."



\* \* \* \*

"What are you doing?" she demanded, very frightened now.

He looked up from the piece of broken pipe, where it lay embedded in the rubble. "They'll be worried," he said. "We have to let them know you're all right."

"But you're bleeding!"

He ignored her, holding the fist-sized rock with both hands now; and she could see his small, sharp teeth clenched against the pain. When at last he paused, he sat with his wild head cocked attentively. "Listen," he whispered. "Can you hear them?"

She could. The reassuring tapping seemed very near now. When it stopped, she said, "You're hurt."

He looked down then, as if remembering the injury for the first time. He turned his palm up to the light; and with his free hand, he rolled the bloodstained sleeve upward. Naomi saw him wince at the sight of the small curving gash high up on the inside of his wrist. "It's still bleeding," he said. "I... don't have another handkerchief."

But Naomi was desperately going through her pockets. Father was always reminding her to carry a hankie -- didn't she have one with her today? When she found it finally, she looked up with a watery smile.

He'd been watching her, watching her with a patient and familiar blue gaze. "You don't have to," he said; but although she couldn't go to him, she was holding out her small grimy hands, waiting.

The boy crawled over to her, cradling his arm against his chest. When he reached the little girl he sat down, and gravely offered her his small clawed hand.

\* \* \* \*

"All right," Father was saying, leaning heavily on his stick. "We seem to be getting down to the last of it. Carefully, now..."

Nearly an hour had passed since the second, smaller slide. In



that time they had cleared rock steadily from what had been the doorway to a short corridor -- or a narrow chamber -- without incident. Now Vincent, crouching there, lifted a small boulder out of the way... and saw open blackness beyond. "Naomi!" he called, but there was no reply. He redoubled his efforts, Catherine at his side; and even those who had begun to grow weary went at their work with a fresh enthusiasm, the end now in sight.

When they'd cleared a reasonable crawlspace, Vincent thrust head and shoulders into it, calling the child's name again even as his friends continued to widen the opening around him. "Naomi!"

A small, weak cry answered him. He crawled forward a foot; then another, and another, until he'd nearly disappeared from view.

"Be careful," Catherine and Father said unison, and gave one another sheepish looks.

"Is she all right?" someone called out. "Can you see her?"

Slowly, carefully, Vincent began to back out of that dark place. Pebbles began to rain down again as he did so. Larger stones quickly followed, and he all but tumbled seat-first into the dirt in his backward lunge toward safety. In the next moment the rockfall stopped; and in the settling dust his friends saw that he cradled a filthy and tear-streaked Naomi in his arms. Her own arms were locked tightly around his neck. She blinked owlishly at the light -- and at all of them. A hushed sort of a cheer went up among everyone present, for they were all still mindful of the danger.

Catherine fell to her knees beside the pair, weak with relief. "Oh, Naomi," she cried, "do you have any idea how worried we all were about you?"

"You're all dirty," Naomi said, staring. She looked back at Vincent. "How did Catherine get so awful dirty?" The general laughter that followed, seemed to mystify her. In the midst of it she saw Father making his way toward them. His hair and beard were powdered with dust. "I won't do it again," she blurted.

"No," he said sternly, "I should certainly hope not." His tone was betrayed by the crinkling of his faded blue eyes as he watched Vincent rise carefully with his burden. "Now then, aside from that ankle, are you all right?" With a physician's deftness he turned her head this way and that, examined her hands and fingers, watched her eyes following his movements.

"She'd fallen asleep in there, waiting," Vincent told Catherine, who had reached out to squeeze Naomi's hand.

"He told me not to," the child said guiltily. "But I just got so tired by the end."

"That's just as well," Father said, "because you'll be going straight to bed, just as soon as we get you safely back."

"But we can't go yet!" Naomi twisted in Vincent's arms, straining back toward the opening. "That boy's still in there -- you got to get him out, too!"

"Boy? What boy?" asked Father, alarmed.

"What Narcissa said," Mouse reminded him darkly. "Maybe --"

"Oh, really, Mouse. Pascal, please look again -- do you see anyone else in there?"

Vincent was gazing down at the little girl, perplexed. "I saw no one there with you," he said softly.

"But he looked just like you."

"Like me!" he exclaimed.

She nodded. "I saw him, when he lighted the lantern."

"There's no one there," Pascal confirmed, emerging from the crawl-space. "No lantern, either."

"But where did he go?" Naomi quavered, from the safety of Vincent's arms. "There wasn't any other way out!"

Father reached out to lay the back of his fingers against the child's cheek and brow. "I think perhaps you hit your head, and you had a little dream. -- Oh, Mouse, Cullen," he called out as the two men turned to follow the rest toward home. "I'll want to speak with you both, tomorrow, about sealing this area off once and for all."

Mouse's face lit up. "Got just the thing! Take a little wire, stick on a little bit of --"

"I don't think," Father said, grimacing, "that I want to know about it."

"Come on, Mouse." Cullen clapped him on the shoulder, winking back over his shoulder. "You can show *me* your gizmo..."

Naomi was looking up into Vincent's face. "I didn't just dream it," she told him fretfully. Her chin was beginning to quiver.

"I believe you," he answered, seeing her distress. His arms tightened around her; and at Catherine's enquiring look he whispered, aside, to her: "*Worried about her friend.*"

Naomi caught at Father's sleeve. "He was *there*, Father, and



he made a light, and he wrapped up my ankle. See?" And she thrust her small foot up into his face.

He examined it, briefly and critically. "Not a bad job of field-dressing. Very good, child." And then: "Good heavens, Vincent, I didn't know you still had any of those old handkerchiefs of mine left, to give her."

Vincent opened his mouth to speak; then caught Catherine's eye and, perhaps thinking better of it, remained quiet.

"That's not my hankie," Naomi told Father. "That's the *boy's*. I gave him mine."

"Oh?" the old man said absently, his attention still focused on her swollen ankle. "And why would you do that?"

"He cut his arm when the rocks fell down," she said. "He was bleeding. So I wrapped it up in my hankie." She took hold of the front of her sweater, stretching the weave out straight. "See the blood?"

"Let me see." Catherine's eyes widened. "It does look like dried blood... doesn't it?"

"Naomi," Vincent said, "did you cut yourself?" With a worried frown, he studied the bedraggled waif more closely. Had she some injury they'd missed?

"No, no," she said impatiently, "I told you, it was the *boy*."

"A nosebleed, perhaps," Father dismissed the stains. "That would hardly be surprising, under the circumstances. And you're lucky, young lady, very lucky indeed, that nothing more serious happened to you. Vincent, we're going to need some cool compresses for this ankle, tonight..."

"He hurted his arm, Father," Naomi went on stubbornly. "He cut it right *here*." So saying, she reached for Vincent's great clawed hand and turned it palm upward, tugging the sleeve away to bare his wrist. "Just like that," she said, pointing to a small crescent-shaped scar half-hidden by tawny hair. She didn't seem at all surprised to find it there. "See?"

Catherine traced the faint white impression with a fingertip. When she looked up, she found Vincent and Father both still studying it, and then the child, with an almost comical bemusement. "You know," she said hesitantly, "it's funny, but I don't think I remember ever noticing that scar before."

Vincent raised his eyes to hers. "I'd almost forgotten, Catherine. But I've had it since I was cut there during the first cave-in... when I was ten years old."

