

AND NOW A WORD FROM OUR SPONSOR

by Lyn Roewade

Vincent came suddenly awake from a sound sleep.

Someone was in trouble.

'*Catherine!*' he thought.

'*No. She was safe. Far away,*' thought Vincent bitterly. '*Perhaps as unhappy as I, but in no danger.*'

Flinging on his cloak, Vincent left his chamber, and began prowling the tunnels, searching for the source of his pain.

He came to a section which had been abandoned long before.

Frequent rock slides made it too dangerous to inhabit. Even as the thought came to Vincent, a low rumble and the rattle of loose stones told him that another cave-in had recently occurred.

Picking his way carefully among the rubble, Vincent heard a low moaning. Pinholes of light from Above confused his night vision and told him he was very close to the surface. But there was no mistaking the sight of a human hand protruding from a pile of rocks, and the ragged breathing which came from underneath.

Vincent began moving away the rocks. He soon uncovered the still form of a young woman.

She was about twenty years old. Long blond hair, darkened with dust, spilled over her face and streamed over the rocks beneath her. Her face was deathly pale and caked with grime, yet a faint smile still played upon her lips. She moaned and coughed as air finally reached her.

Vincent knew he must get her to Father. She was unconscious, but she could awaken at any moment. Just as Vincent was gathering the girl into his arms, an aftershock of the cave-in sent another section of the ceiling crashing around them, bathing the tunnel in light.

At that very moment, the girl opened her eyes.

Short of dropping the injured woman, Vincent could not back away from her, so he steeled himself for the inevitable sound of her scream; from her face recoiling in horror at the sight of him.

Her eyes widened - and so did her smile. "It's you!" she cried. She tried to look around. "Am I here? Did I make it? Then her eyes closed, and she was unconscious again.

"Will she live?" asked Vincent.

Father finished bandaging the last of the patient's cuts, and reached down to take her pulse. "She should be fine," he said. "Vincent, do you have any idea how she got down here?"

"Through one of the abandoned shafts, I would imagine. Much of the ground is soft there; it shifts often."

Father nodded. "We must send a repair team at once. This must not be allowed to happen again."

"I shall see to it," said Vincent.

"In the meantime," said Father, "let us learn what we can about our mysterious visitors." On the table near

the infirmary bed lay a green vinyl backpack the girl had been wearing. Father began to sift through it. There was a change of clothes - a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, similar to what she had been wearing when she arrived. A small zippered pocket contained four dollars in change, a comb and a pack of Kleenex. At the bottom of the pack, accounting for most of the weight, were several paperback books.

"Whoever she is, she's well read," said Father, glancing at the familiar titles. '*Utopia*' by Thomas Moore, a volume of Shakespeare's sonnets, '*Island*' by Aldous Huxley. There were two Father had never seen, both anthologies. '*The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume IV*' and Spider Robinson's '*The Best of All Possible Worlds.*'

"Curious," said Father. "No driver's license, no ID... of any kind."

"Here's something," said Vincent, carefully lifting a scrap of paper from another pocket.

Father put on his glasses and peered at it. "It's part of a hospital discharge form," he said. "Although I can't make out which hospital from what's here, or what she was there for, at least we have her name."

"Sarah Conner," Vincent read over the older man's shoulder.

"Well, at least we know what to call her when she wakes up."

Vincent nodded slowly. "Get some rest, Father. I'll sit with her."

Father shook his head. "I'll call Mary when I need rest. You need to see to our security." He glanced in the direction Sarah had come from.

"Of course." Vincent hurried out.

"Has she regained consciousness at all?" Vincent asked, later that day.

"Briefly. She was not very coherent. She's been calling out to a number of people."

"Probably her family."

Father nodded, but was not convinced. "The last time I took her pulse, I noticed these." Father drew aside the blanket which covered Sarah and lifted her left wrist.

Vincent's eyebrows lifted. "Scars. Self inflicted?"

Father nodded. "Repeatedly."

"Then perhaps there was purpose in her coming here."

"Vincent," cautioned Father, "you know she cannot stay."

Vincent was about to reply, when a familiar light came into his eyes. "Catherine!" he whispered, then turned abruptly to the door.

"Vincent!" Father put a restraining hand on his son's shoulder. "Please. Don't go to her. She can bring you only sorrow."

Vincent's only answer was to remove his father's hand gently from his shoulder and hurry through the door.

Distracted by his worry for Vincent, Father failed to notice when Sarah slipped quietly from her bed and left the Hospital chamber.

They stood beside the falls, gazing into each other's eyes.

"The time apart is becoming unbearable," wept Catherine. "The loneliness... I have no life without you..."

"Catherine, it is agony for me as well. Yet there is no other way..."

"If I thought there was some hope that we might someday truly be together, I could endure anything. But as it is..."

"Then we must part."

"Vincent, no!"

"We have always known that our love was star-crossed."

"Oh, will you cut it out!"

Startled, Vincent and Catherine looked up to see Sarah standing on the rocks above them. Her arms were crossed against her tattered shirt, and her blue eyes sparkled with anger in her pale face.

"Sarah," said Vincent. "You should be in bed."

"Vincent," whispered Catherine. "Who is she?"

"Her name is Sarah. I found her this morning."

While the lovers were speaking, Sarah was picking her way down the rocks. She landed on her feet before them.

"Sometimes," said Sarah. "I don't understand you two! You have more than most of us ever dream of - and all you can do is turn it into sorrow!"

Vincent's brows lifted quizzically. He settled back to listen. Catherine was not so patient.

"Who are you? she demanded. "What do you know about us?"

"I know you have a love that I would gladly trade my life for, Catherine! And that's not the half of it! You have a perfect world you can drop into any time you like! You have a family I've dreamed about every day of my life!" Sarah's voice broke and she began to sob.

"I watch you on television every week," sniffed Sarah, digging into her pockets for a Kleenex.

Catherine and Vincent exchanged a look.

"It isn't anything new for me," continued Sarah. "I've flipped out over TV shows before. But you... you've always been my favorite fairy tale."

"It was all right at first. When I saw you, Vincent." A blush crept into Sarah's pale cheeks. "I fell in love with you right away." Noticing Catherine's sudden indrawn breath, Sarah quickly added, "I was never jealous of you, Catherine. It was just enough to watch the two of you, live life vicariously, you know?"

"But later, when I expected to start seeing the two of you do things together, and really rejoice in all you had - that's when everything went all dark and gloomy. You have more time together than some of the married couples I know - yet you spend most of it moaning about how little time you have!"

"There is truth in what you say," said Vincent. "Yet, you oversimplify. We are not as other couples."

"But that's what makes you so special. That's why so many of us Above want what you two have! Being like other people doesn't make most of us very happy." Sarah shook her head. "There is joy and sorrow in everything. Why can't you focus on the joy?"

Vincent and Catherine stared mutely for a moment. Finally Catherine said, "I always thought we did."

"That's not how it looks from my side of the screen," said Sarah. Weakness began to overcome her and she swayed.

Vincent stepped forward and caught her. Helping her to the bench beside the falls he said, "There is great sorrow in your life as well, Sarah."

Sarah gazed in wonder at the gentle hand which held her arm. "Yes," she said. "But this moment makes it all worthwhile. I'm really not so different from thousands of other people up there. And I'm luckier than some. I had my dreams."

"What dreams were those?" asked Catherine, coming forward.

Sarah looked around her. "This place," she said simply. "I dreamed of a world like this. A family, a home, a lover like Vincent. I guess what pushed me over the edge was all those Friday nights I had to set home alone, and watch so many other people have it. And know that I never would."

"Sarah," Vincent said softly. "With dreams, anything is possible."

"But you need '*faith*' as well. I ran out of that." Sarah noticed the barest flicker in Vincent's eye as he glanced at something behind her. She stood, but she did not turn. "Hypodermic needles are out of character for you, Father. So is sneaking up on someone with one." She turned to find Father, needle in hand just a few feet behind her.

Father's jaw dropped, but he recovered quickly. "We found out which hospital Sarah was released from," he told Vincent as the hypo disappeared into his bag. "It was the psychiatric ward at Bellevue." Another form stirred in the shadows, and Peter Alcott appeared beside Father, carrying Sarah's backpack.

"Inside my copy of '*Utopia*,' Father, is a copy of the '*Hippocratic Oath*'," said Sarah. "I wanted to give it to you. You seem to have lost yours."

"Now just a minute!" cried Catherine.

"What are you defending him for?" demanded Sarah. "He hasn't said one nice thing to you all season!"

"Sarah, please," began Father. The girl's eyes widened at the gentleness in his tone. "There is more truth in your words than I care to admit, but contrary to what you believe, I do care about the suffering that goes on beyond these tunnels. Don't you think I know that for every person we take into this world, there are a thousand bleeding souls who need it just as desperately?"

Sarah blinked. "Then why are you so callous towards us? Why is security always more important than reaching out?"

Father smiled sadly. "Because you were wrong when you said we have a perfect world here. If it '*was*' perfect, there would be no room for you - and everyone else who needed it." He waited while Sarah slowly digested his words. Then, glancing at Peter, Father continued. "Your pain is real, Sarah. But we are not the ones who can help you."

Peter stepped forward. "There is a clinic I know of. I donate time there when I can. I'd like to take you there."

Hurt and anger returned to Sarah's eyes. "That would be fine for you, wouldn't it? Lock me away someplace I'll never get out of. I can say anything I want and no one will believe me. For a moment, I almost believed you, Father. But your secret is still more important to you than I am!"

"I meant what I said," Father was not offended. "But I am not surprised at your distrust. I have felt the same myself."

"The place I'm talking about is nothing like Bellevue," said Peter. "You will be free to leave any time. I give you my word."

Sarah could feel the truth in the words of both men. Still, she hesitated. "Vincent? Is what they're saying for

real? IF you say so, I'll believe it."

"I would trust these men with my life, Sarah. And with yours. They are telling the truth."

Sarah nodded slowly, then smiled. "I guess it really doesn't matter. I offered my soul to God, Satan, or anyone else who might be listening, in exchange for one hour in this world. I'd say whoever took me up on it has been more than generous." She accepted her backpack from Peter, and turned to follow him out of the tunnels.

"Just one more thing." Sarah turned to Vincent. "Just in case the good doctor and his friends can't pull me out of my private well of quicksand, there is one thing you could give me that would make this visit worth any price I have to pay."

"And what is that?" asked Vincent.

All at once Sarah looked like a little girl. "A hug," she answered shyly.

Vincent's fangs showed in a leonine grin. He swept Sarah into his arms in a tender embrace. "For each of us there are times when pain seems beyond enduring," he whispered to her. "Yet you can endure it. And what lies beyond is richer than anything you have yet imagined."

"I want to believe you!" cried Sarah as she clung to him.

"If I can overcome my obstacles," said Vincent, "so can you."

Sarah stepped back and looked into Vincent's remarkable eyes. "But you've had a home, and people to love you since the day you were found," she argued.

"So have you, you just didn't know it." Vincent brushed her cheek with his lips, then stepped back into the shadows.

In a daze, Sarah followed Peter out of the tunnel.

"That was one very troubled young woman," sighed Father.

"She thinks we're a '*television show!*'" cried Catherine, shaking her head. "She actually believes she watches our lives on TV."

"Well," said Father. "At least we know what she was doing in Bellevue."

"I'm not so sure," mused Vincent.

Catherine glanced at him quizzically. "What other answer is there? Or do you perhaps feel that *your* life IS a TV show?"

"Can we really be so sure of our own sense of reality?" asked Vincent. "Look at your life, Catherine. Look at mine. If someone had told you two years ago what the future held for you, would *you* not have thought him mad?"

"I would not have thought him a storybook character!"

Vincent smiled and gathered Catherine into his arms. "Who knows?" he sighed as a feeling of deep peace flowed through him. "What is fantasy to one person may well be reality to another. It is not for us to judge. We must simply hope that one young woman who touched our lives - however briefly - can somewhere find the right reality for her."

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