

TO BE ALONE

by Rhonda Collins

Vincent shifted restlessly while Father taught class. He could almost feel Father's passion for the story without even touching him to pick up the feeling directly. Father was an excellent storyteller and reader and usually Vincent became lost in simply listening to him, but today he had other things on his mind. Fourteen was not a patient age at the best of times and lately had not been the best of times.

"Vincent," Father called to get his attention. "Do you have the slightest idea where we are?"

Embarrassed, Vincent hunted desperately through the text then looked up sheepishly, sighed and shook his head. "I am sorry, Father...."

Father removed his glasses and stared pointedly at Vincent a moment, then motioned to dismiss the other children. "I think we have had enough for today."

Vincent tried to leave with the rest of his classmates but Father's hand fell on his shoulder and Vincent cringed a little at the concern and compassion that flooded through to him. It was sometimes too much.

"Are you all right, Vincent?" Father asked quietly.

Staring at a place just past Father's head...not meeting his eyes, Vincent nodded solemnly. "Yes, Father. I'm fine." Vincent would've liked to talk to Father about Devin, but he knew he couldn't. Every time he tried to bring his brother's name up, the sorrow he felt from Father just made his own misery that much worse.

Clearing his throat, Father laid his glasses on the table, then lowered himself into his chair. "You're certain? You would tell me if you were not?"

Vincent shuffled his feet but refused to change his answer. "Yes, Father. Truly. May I go?"

"Very well," Father responded with a sigh. "Why don't you go find something enjoyable to do. Take the rest of the afternoon off. I cannot think of any chores for you at this time."

Relieved, Vincent nodded and escaped. He walked slowly through the tunnels, his hand trailing the pipes. The vibrations reminded him of Pascal, who was busy

by now doing his regular afternoon stint on the pipes. Thinking of Pascal automatically reminded him of Devin...just as *everything* reminded him of Devin. He, Devin, Pascal and Winslow had always run together...mostly he and Devin, but whenever they could, Pascal and Winslow would join them. Now that Devin was gone and Pascal had become more and more interested in the pipe codes and involved in working the pipe chamber, that only left Winslow; and though he and Winslow were friends, the older boy was far too volatile by himself for he and Vincent to really be close on a one-to-one basis. Devin had always acted as a buffer. *There really is no one left for me to really talk to, with Devin gone...and Lisa.* He shied away from even the thought of Lisa and what he'd done to her. After he had wounded her, Father sent her away. *Why does he blame her for something I did? My fault.*

Vincent had other friends, but somehow right now, his many differences just made him feel alone...cut off from them all.

He continued wandering aimlessly through the tunnels, not really sure where he was headed, then suddenly he found himself in an old sewer line that he, Devin and the others had found that went directly under the museum. They'd studied plans and found the sewer line and the older boys had devised a grand plan of how to sneak Vincent in. Winslow had even built a false wall from old matching bricks from the water tunnels; they were going to make themselves a permanent door that they could use whenever they wanted. Vincent sighed heavily. *All that work and planning for nothing*, he thought bitterly. Because Devin had argued with Father...and all because Devin had wanted Vincent to have a ride on the old carousel in the park and they'd almost been caught. Then Devin left.

All my fault. Everything. Devin and Lisa would still be here if not for me. His vision blurred as he stumbled along, bringing his hand up to wipe his eyes and brush away the wetness there. He found himself walking faster and faster until he was running through the tunnels. By the time he reached the point where they'd left the false wall and the crowbar, the point where they were going to make their door, he felt better. Bending over, he leaned against the wall, hands on knees, letting his breathing slow to normal. *Why not?* he asked himself defiantly. *They were doing it for me, anyway. Why not?*

Vincent's stomach was already beginning to feel empty, so it had to be late enough by now for the museum to be closed. Picking up the crowbar, he began working at the bricks, being careful to make sure he made the hole no larger than the false wall. When he was through, he peered inside into the darkness. *No one around.* As he slid through the opening, he noted there was some dust and debris and saw a broom propped against the room. Slipping through the hole, he took the broom and swept the debris back into the tunnel. He made sure the false wall fit the hole. It did. Turning back and replacing the broom, he turned to his adventure.

Vincent cautiously climbed the steps from the basement, checking each door as

he climbed. Finally finding one that was unlocked, he opened it carefully and went through. As he looked around, he caught his breath. The room was filled with butterflies in glass cases...but with the light off he couldn't see the colors... and he wanted desperately to see the colors. Below, colors were so muted. Devin had told him about the colors. Suddenly Vincent felt a tremendous *need* to see the colors. Sticking his head out the door, he peered around...listened. He couldn't see or hear anyone. Barely daring to breathe, Vincent silently searched the walls for one of the small switches that Devin had told him about. The ones that turned on lights. Finding a switch set in the wall, he hesitated only a second before flipping it--and was blinded momentarily by instantaneous, brilliant light. When his eyes adjusted, he walked slowly from one case to another, marveling at the beauty of the insects. Devin had brought him butterflies from Above to show him, but their beauty was always diminished a little by the candlelight. These were wonderful, but he still found himself wishing he could see them alive and fluttering around him.

After feasting his eyes on the brilliant colors he reluctantly flipped off the lights and walked into the next room. It was a room with Egyptian artifacts, and although the lights were off, there were a few smaller lights illuminating the cases. Besides, his night sight could see the details quite well, so he decided to leave the lights off. Wandering from exhibit to exhibit, he delighted in the beauty of things that had been created so long ago by people who were long since gone. He read every detail of the labels, examined every artifact.

Suddenly, Vincent heard footsteps. Someone heavy was running toward him. He panicked, realizing immediately that he must have somehow set off an alarm. Taking off out the other door, he could hear the guard at his heels and he fled from room to room with the man yelling at his retreating back. Eventually, Vincent doubled back, once again running through the rooms with the Egyptian exhibits and the butterflies...far enough ahead of the guard to get through the "door" in the basement and put up the false wall.

Vincent sat panting on the other side of the wall, listening as the guard stumbled around in the dark basement...feeling his confusion and anger as he looked for the light. The man was swearing and calling out. Eventually, Vincent heard the man's retreating footsteps and he leaned his head back against the smooth wall of the pipe and relaxed. *Close call*, he thought with a shuddering breath, thinking of all Father's warnings. But he grinned. Devin would've been proud of him. He'd managed not to get caught. Devin was right. There was a certain...exhilaration in the forbidden. Vincent ran his hand over the false brickwork and smiled. *I suppose I'll have to come and mortar it in, eventually. But maybe I'll come another time or two...if I can work up my courage again.*

Sighing with weariness now that the excitement had faded, Vincent picked up the crowbar and headed back home. Father *would* be angry if he missed supper... and he *was* hungry.

Once back in the living areas, Vincent headed for the kitchen. But when he saw Father, Father asked him to come share supper in the study. Vincent was delighted. Father hadn't done that for some time, now. Not since things had become so strained between the two of them after Father had sent Lisa away. He followed Father back to the cluttered study and found his usual perch in the leather chair beside Father's octagonal table. His angular, lanky body and long legs were awkward and still too small for the chair, but Father lit more candles and the chamber became cheerful and comforting and any awkwardness was forgotten.

As they sat quietly eating their evening meal, Vincent felt very much at peace and felt very loved. When Father reached across to pat his hand to get his attention for a point he was trying to make, Vincent could feel Father's love for him.

"Vincent," Father said finally, "I have a gift for you."

Excited and a little surprised, Vincent could only ask quietly, "What is it, Father?"

Father held out a slim, beautifully bound leather book. "I had Peter pick this up for me Above. Just for you. It is a journal, Vincent. Like my own. I thought perhaps if you had someplace you could write your feelings...put them down and organize them...it would help with the changes you are going through. It still helps me. A journal is like a friend you can always trust never to reveal a secret. No one else will ever read it."

As Vincent took the journal from Father, their eyes met and Vincent blinked back tears. "Thank you, Father. I will cherish it." He rose and moved around the table to Father, embracing him and giving him a son's kiss.

After supper, they sat reading poetry to one another. Father read Vincent a poem that was to stay with him for the rest of his life:

*'When I'm alone'--the words tripped off his tongue
As though to be alone were nothing strange.
'When I was young' he said; 'when I was young...'*

I thought of age, and loneliness, and change.
I thought how strange we grow when we're alone,
And how unlike the selves that meet and talk,
And blow the candle out, and say good night.
Alone... The word is life endured and known.
It is the stillness where our spirits walk,
And all but inmost faith is overthrown.

Father's hand rested on Vincent's head and he could feel Father's sensitivity to his aloneness...that Father, too, had known what it was to be...alone. He lay his head across Father's knee and sighed, and they sat for a long while that way in the quiet communion and understanding that sometimes comes between two people who love one another very much.

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"Alone" Siegfried Sassoon: Modern British Poetry; ed. Louis Untermeyer; Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York

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