

“Aloneness...”

Judith Nolan



“Why are we back here again, Brother? You’re losing focus. I keep telling you that you have no need of such a soft, city woman. I certainly do not care for her doe eyes and simpering smile. Remember, Father warned you that this was never meant to be...”

“You have no place, here!” Vincent snarled, trying to ignore the carping voice of his Dark Self, muttering its poison. “Leave me!”

It had been some weeks since the darker half of his soul had made its unwelcome return to his consciousness. Vincent’s present state of emotional agitation had loosened the mental shackles he’d succeeded in imposing upon the dark shade. He did not welcome the intrusion. Not now.

He had followed Catherine when she left the tunnels, after rescuing Mouse from the clutches of Burch’s security guards. She was in such turmoil over Elliot Burch. Vincent could sense her mind running in too many different directions, as she tried to decide what to do for the best.

She now saw Burch as he truly was. A human being, capable of many things, good or bad. Simply a man with human feelings and needs. And Catherine felt guilty because she saw herself as trading on his feelings for her.

Vincent sighed as he came to rest on the edge of the roof overlooking Catherine’s balcony. He couldn’t decide what to do, or where to go. He just knew he needed to be near her, in case she needed his protection.

'I'm bored! This is such a waste of time for both of us. Leave her be. She doesn't want or need anything from you, Foolish One. What have you to offer a woman like her?'

Vincent tried to ignore the dark one's voice, as he settled in to watch and wait. He wanted to go down to Catherine, but he knew the hour was very late, and she had been up all night helping to rescue Mouse. He had to be content with the small distance between them, until the sun rose again, and drove him Below.

'This simpering romance of yours can never be. We both know that, but you refuse to admit it. Remember, I am a part of every one of your thoughts. Lie to yourself, if you wish, but never to me. I live with the consequences of every one of your actions.'

"Be silent!" Vincent snapped. "I am content simply to be near her."

'Look down, Vincent. There is the spot where you named me for the first time. You called me Aloneness. Do you remember that moment? You said that you reminded people of what they're most afraid of...'

"Their aloneness..." Vincent frowned, staring at the very spot where he had uttered those fateful words.

'There you go! Now that wasn't so hard, was it? I like my new name. It has power. Aloneness. I'd never had a name, until that night. I think it suits me very well. All names must have power, don't you think? Vincent, the Conqueror...'

"You assume too much. You are less than nothing, to me." Vincent stiffened. He immediately sensed Catherine's surprise at finding Elliot Burch sitting on a chair in her hallway. He had obviously been waiting for her for some time.

'Ah, so she has more than one ardent lover seeking her company tonight. This is becoming very interesting. Lean closer, I want to see him...'

Vincent ignored the comment. He tensed when he heard voices in the apartment below. Catherine had allowed Elliot in. The lights came on, throwing squares of bright warmth onto the balcony tiles. He settled back onto his haunches to wait until Elliot had gone.

He heard Catherine say, "It's been a long night for both of us. I have to be at work in a few hours. I can make us some coffee."

"I could use some." Elliot Burch replied.

"Instant ok?"

“Anything’s fine, I don’t care.”

Vincent crouched back as he saw Elliot open the balcony doors before stepping outside. Elliot stood looking out over the city. It was still dark outside, but there was a faint light on the horizon, the first hint of dawn.

Vincent frowned at the line of dawning light and knew he would soon have to leave. But he wanted to stay, to understand what there was between them, and why Elliot Burch was here.

‘A pity if the dawn comes early before we get to the nub of this matter. But I would have you left wondering. A little torment is good for the soul...’

Vincent watched as Catherine emerged carrying two steaming mugs of coffee. She handed one to Elliot.

He accepted it with a nod. “I can never get enough of this city. Thanks. God, how beautiful she looks. You know, you oughta be able to see the tower way to the south, about in there.” He lined up a space with his hand.

Catherine frowned at him. “Elliot, you’re not here to talk about the tower. What is it?”

Elliot shook his head. “I’ve never quite felt like this before. After I released your friend, my security chief called me up and very politely asked me if I’d lost my mind.”

“You did the right thing.”

Elliot laughed. “Yeah, I seem to be making a habit of that because of you.” He paused, frowning at her. “Cathy, I’m in love with you. I’ve had other relationships, but from the very first moment that I set eyes on you, I knew you were different. Then when you walked out of my life that was really different and... and I wanted you twice as much.”

“Because you couldn’t have me. That’s obsession, Elliot, that’s not love.”

“At first, yes,” Elliot acknowledged. “But then when you came to me, you needed my help, right then I knew that I could make you mine. I know desperation when I see it.”

Vincent felt Catherine’s wariness about what Burch had just said. She remained silent.

Burch shrugged. “When somebody has something I want, I take it. I mean I go for the win, it’s what I do, it’s what I am. No, it’s what I’ve become. But not that day. Why?”

“Because you’re a decent man who couldn’t turn his back on a friend.”

“I don’t have any friends, Cathy. Somewhere on the way up, friends became inconvenient.”

Catherine stared into her coffee. “Love can be pretty inconvenient too.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. Do you think I wanted to be this out of control? I feel like a fourteen-year-old boy, confused and awkward and... and scared... I’m never scared, Cathy, I don’t allow myself to be scared. You know, despite everything, I’d rather be here with you now than any place else on earth.”

He stared down into his coffee. “There’s nothing I can do about the past, but there’s plenty that we can do about the future together. Cathy, I’m asking you to marry me.”

“Elliot...,” Catherine said, warningly.

‘Oh, ho...well, it seems that the cockerel who crows the loudest takes the prize. You’ve never considered asking her to marry you. An opportunity missed? But will she agree? Will she cast you aside for this puffed-up, strutting peacock?’

On the balcony, Elliot rushed into speech. “Don’t say anything, not now. All I ask is that you think about it seriously after you’ve had a little sleep.”

“Sleep won’t change anything.”

“It might. Give me that much at least. I didn’t ask for this, Cathy, but it is real, and I do love you, and I’d do anything in the world to make you happy if you give me the chance.”

Catherine remained silent, staring at Elliot.

‘Well, brother mine, this is a turn-up I did not expect. This night’s work is paying dividends, after all. What will you do now? Climb down there and tear him to pieces? I’ll admit I should like to see that. But would she still be yours, afterwards?’

“You will see nothing but darkness.” Vincent rattled the chains of mental confinement. He heard Aloneness snarl his displeasure.

‘I have told you before, my brother, she will be the end of you! You can do without her, but you will always live with me!’

“Perhaps, but the decision will be entirely mine. I will always freely accept that.”

‘Then what is to become of me?’

“I neither know nor care. I have told you before, your thoughts and wishes do not matter to me.” Vincent tightened the mental chains until the carping voice inside his head was choked into resentful silence.

He turned his attention back to the balcony. But the pair had gone back inside. He heard the front door open and close, and he sighed with relief, knowing Elliot Burch had left.

He heard Catherine turn the locks before all the lights went out. Vincent turned his face to the rising sun, and shafts of bright light pierced his vision. He too must be gone.

He left the building as he’d arrived, taking great leaps from rooftop to rooftop, until he reached the safety of an abandoned warehouse, and moved easily Below, into the sheltering darkness.

There he paused to brood on the night’s revelations. What could he do now, but endure and wait for Catherine’s answer to Elliot Burch’s question?

