

# **When The Walls Become Thin...**

**Beauty and the Beast / The Phantom of the Opera**

**Cross-Over Story**

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*All the characters in this story have simply been borrowed for a time, and are always returned to their own universes, completely unharmed...*



*“I was born on the night of Samhain, when the barrier between the worlds is whisper-thin and when magic, old magic, sings its heady and sweet song to anyone who cares to hear it...”*

*Carolyn MacCullough*

*Halloween...* Vincent turned his face up to the sky. The evening has turned damp and cold, scattered showers of rain sending the usual revellers scurrying indoors or to any kind of shelter from the downpours.

This allowed Vincent unprecedented freedom to roam at will. He walked along the built-up side of the street, still careful from long habit to keep to the shadows and the darkness that lived between the sullen yellow splashes of the streetlamps.

*Halloween...* The Celtic festival of *Samhain*, when ghosts and spirits were believed to walk abroad in the night.

"Am I one of those?" Vincent sighed.

He didn't feel like a ghost or a spirit, but he might as well have been one, for no one saw him pass like a phantom in the night. He was grateful for the thickness of his clothing because the night did not hold a lot of warmth. It was only the hardy or the well-liquored who did not feel the deepening chill.

His brow furrowed as he remembered earlier in the evening, when he had told Father of his plans. He knew his parent would express his usual deep resistance.

"You're determined to go up there and ignore me, then?" Father had huffed. "Despite all my warnings and sound advice. I do wish you'd reconsider."

Vincent had sighed. "Father, surely on this night among all other nights, I can walk among the Topsiders in safety. They will see my face only as a mask, nothing more."

"Vincent, Vincent..." Father had shaken his grey head. "There *cannot* be any safety up there. Not for you or anyone else. Evil comes in many guises."

"I know..." His son had nodded gravely, acknowledging the sad truth of Father's statement. "But, Father..."

"But you're still determined to go." Jacob had frowned, shaking his head in helpless surrender. "Very well, go, then. If you're so set on it. Obviously, there's nothing I can do or say, to stop you."

Vincent didn't reply, as he'd collected his cloak from a nearby chair, and had started for the door of his father's chamber.

"Vincent..." Father had called after him. "Please, be careful. I couldn't bear it if...if you..." He'd drawn a ragged sigh. "What will they do to you, if they catch you up there?"

Vincent had returned to him, leaning down to kiss the old man's bearded cheek.

"Don't worry," he'd admonished. "No one will see me. I will be careful. But, Father, it's nineteen-eighty-six, not sixteen-eighty-six. There are not more monster hunts or witch trials." He'd straightened, quickly leaving the chamber before his agitated parent could delay him further.

"People often become monsters when they're confronted with something they don't understand," Father had whispered raggedly. "Please, be careful."

He'd listened to his beloved son's fading footsteps. Slumping wearily back in his chair, he'd heaved a long sigh. He'd done his best but it had turned out not to be good enough.

He'd turned his head to stare at the chessboard at his elbow. The game had been left, half-played. He'd wait until the pipes signalled his son's safe return. It was all he could do, now...

"I will be careful, Father..." Vincent murmured, as he eased his way along the street. "I promise."

The most recent squall of rain had passed. He walked the streets of the Upper West Side, studying the elegant brownstones that lined both sides of the road. Many were shuttered and dark, but others celebrated the festival with lanterns and lights, gaudy pictures and plastic skeletons dancing ghoulishly in the wind.

One house, in particular, suddenly caught his wandering attention. Just as he passed on the other side of the street, the front door swung open slightly, a sudden flaring of flickering light spilling out onto the stoop. With the light came a tumbling of notepapers.

They floated and danced, stopping just short of the edge of the rain shadow from the porch above. The pages floated down to lie still as if waiting for the wind and rain to move them on. Or a willing hand to gather them in and return them to the safety of the house.

Vincent looked up and down the street. There was no one in sight beyond a large group of noisy revellers, making the most of the gap in the rain to go from door to door, seeking to make raucous trouble for the residents. Chattering and laughing, they slowly made their way down the street in Vincent's direction, banging on doors and making themselves unwelcome.

He debated the far safer option of slipping away into the shadows and leaving the papers to their fate, against gathering them and putting them inside the door. Father's words of deep concern echoed back to him and he turned to walk away.

In that same moment, the papers rustled again before lifting into the air, seeming to be calling back his distracted attention. Behind them came the haunting sound of someone playing the piano with extraordinary skill.

"Beethoven's Piano Concerto, Number 5..." Vincent breathed, identifying the tune instantly.

He'd often spent hours listening to such works being played in the park, from the comfortable nest he'd created at the end of a concrete culvert beneath the sound stage. But he'd never heard anyone play it with such incredible virtuosity.

The swelling sound of the music sought to dull his usually deep sense of caution, warming his chilled extremities. As the noisy crowd of Halloween revellers drew nearer to him, he made a rash decision. Crossing the road quickly, he hurried up the steps, bending to gather the loose papers together.

He straightened to stare down at them. They were all incredibly detailed drawings of fantastical machines and intricate plans for buildings that seemed too improbable to be real. It was almost as if they'd been penned from an insane mind.

The haunting music continued to play, drifting out from behind the half-closed door like waving tendrils, reaching for him, winding their way around his heightened senses like a warm, comforting wave.

"*Vincent...*" The glorious notes seemed to murmur his name, tugging at the edges of his mind, lessening his wary resistance.

Inside the music, the echoes of a man's deep voice whispered his name again. It was astonishingly beautiful with an extraordinary resonance and depth of timbre that seemed otherworldly. The incredible sound impelled Vincent closer, almost seeing to take his hand to draw him inside.

"I don't understand..." He shook his head, even as he took two more steps up toward the door, the papers grasped in one hand.

"*Vincent...come inside...warm yourself by my fire... You will be safe here...*," the beautiful voice invited softly. "*They cannot hurt you...*"

Vincent advanced further, drawn both by the music and impelled by the sound of the large group of Halloween revellers moving ever closer to him. He'd delayed too long and now there was nowhere to go but inside, unless he wished to be confronted by the approaching crowd who seemed to be well-liquored and determined on some mischief. The decision seemed simple enough to make.

He stepped up to the half-open door, pushing it further ajar and looking inside. Candles flickered from a large sconce on the wall, but the rest of the narrow hallway was hung with gloom and dancing shadows.

An indefinable scent filled the air, sweet and intoxicating. Along with the music, that had now changed to Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto, the very air seemed to twine around his senses, making him feel drowsy and warm.

His boot fell on the doorsill and he crossed onto the black and white chequered tiles of the foyer. The sound of the revellers came ever nearer, the strident sound of their merriment beginning to swamp the beauty of the music.

As Vincent cleared the door, it swung gently shut behind him. Even to his wary mind, there was no sensation of imprisonment, only a feeling of shelter from imminent discovery.

"*They will soon pass. Then you can be on your way. Won't you come into the parlour, Vincent...?*" The swelling sound of the music seemed to beckon.

"Who are you?" Vincent turned his head from side to side, trying to pierce the shadows with his keen vision. "Where are you?"

He knew he should wait in the foyer for the revellers to pass. The front door was not locked, he could retreat at any moment. But something more than the music or the drifting scent in the air impelled him toward the closed double doors that lead into a large room to his left. A deepening curiosity took hold of him and did not allow him to detour from the path already set.

*"Yes... come inside. Enjoy my fire... It is long since I have had such I have entertained such interesting company..."* The music swelled and changed, running beautifully into Mozart's Twentieth, one of Vincent's favourite pieces.

*"Ah, you like this one..."* the voice in his mind pounced immediately. *"It is a pretty piece, made for lovers... Are you a lover, Vincent?"*

"I love beautiful things..." Vincent replied cautiously. "I try to see beauty in all things."

He dropped the papers on a nearby table before reaching up to draw his hood further over his face.

*"Bravo. What I find intriguing is your instinctive understanding of the piece,"* the impossible voice inside the music replied softly. *"That is a rare gift in any man."*

Vincent put out both hands to impel the doors open. They swung inwards without a sound, revealing a large, ornate room with heavy, dark furnishings that could have been set anywhere in the mid-nineteenth century. In the enormous marble fireplace, a roaring fire added light and heat to the cavernous space.

To his left, in the deep window embrace overlooking the street, stood a large grand piano, gleaming in the flickering firelight. Behind it, a man sat at his ease in the smothering shadows, playing effortlessly even as his dark eyes studied Vincent with a direct, unblinking stare.

"Welcome to my home," he said simply. "I do not often entertain visitors. But you intrigued me."

"Who are you?" Vincent remained by the door, watching him warily. "Why did you bring me here?"

"I am nothing more than a man." His host shrugged. "A man like any other and I mean you no harm. But I understand more than you think."

His effortless playing changed again, lifting into an elegant waltz Vincent did not know. As before, the music and the softly-scented air wound around his senses, soothing and comforting, allaying his fears.

Outside, in the street, the crowd of revellers finally reached the house. They ran up the front steps to pound on the door. They called and heckled, daring the occupants to come outside.

Vincent remained silent, watchful and waiting. There was much discussion from the crowd, dares and shouted comments made with raised voices before they moved noisily on, seeking easier victims.

"They would seek to harm you, Vincent. I would not," the man behind the piano said. "I have been starved of decent company these past few years, and when I sensed your presence outside, I confess I was intrigued by the depth of your mind. I would ask for the pleasure of your company, for a little while."

He stopped playing, resting his fingers on the keys. "Do you know what Halloween truly means, Vincent?"

Vincent shrugged. "It was originally celebrated as the Celtic festival of *Samhain*. The one night of the year when the walls between this world and the next grow thin and allow the spirits of the underworld to walk the earth. A night for masks and signal fires, when anything may almost seem possible..."

"Well said," his host approved. "You know your history. But do I look like a spirit or a ghost to you?"

He stood as he spoke, walking slowly forward into the firelight to reveal himself to be very tall and almost skeletally thin. He was clad in an elegant, but severely cut suit of funerary black, from head to foot, except for a fine white linen shirt that gleamed at his neck and thin wrists.

"You do not look as if you belong in this century," Vincent replied cautiously.

"I could say the same of you," the other man pointed out softly, looking Vincent over with keen interest. "I suppose we are both destined to live in a world apart from others."

"*Touché*..." Vincent watched him warily.

The man's long, thin face looked ordinary enough. To Vincent's critical eye, his appearance seemed at odds with his beautiful voice, which should have echoed from someone who looked more like an angel, or a devil.

"I sensed you were preceptive," his host replied genially. He held out one hand. "My name is Erik. I am very pleased to make your unexpected, but welcome, acquaintance."

Vincent frowned at him warily, but sensed the man meant him no harm. He grasped the long, thin fingers and was surprised by the sudden strength of Erik's returned grip and its unusual coldness.

"Will you not reveal yourself to me, Vincent?" Erik asked softly, indicating his hood. "There will be no harm or judgement between us."

"I should go..." Vincent forced his mind away from the warmth and the scented air. He turned to leave.

"You may depart at any time of your choosing..." His host waved one long, thin hand toward the open doors. "But first I would ask you to take a glass of Madeira with me, as a gesture of friendship, before you leave. We could sit and talk for a while. I would like that."

Erik's pale hand indicated a small table on the near side of the fire where a large crystal decanter of dark red liquor sat on a silver tray, with two cut crystal glasses beside it, gleaming in the firelight.

Vincent studied his calm face, finding no judgement in the other man's level gaze. "You seek only to talk with me?"

"I desire nothing more than to know you." Erik shrugged. "It has been a long time since I have sensed a mind such as yours. Such a thirst for knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of our very human existence."

"I have long sought to understand many things which confound me..." Vincent paused, considering him closely. "Many answers which have always eluded me."

"Ah, the eternal question of why..." Erik's thin shoulders lifted. "If we sought all the answers to that singular question, we could live ten thousand years and come no closer to the truth of it."

"Yes..." Vincent's mouth curved with resignation. "There you have the essence of it. I fear there are no answers to my many, troubling questions."

"Will you not reveal yourself to me, Vincent?" Erik asked again softly. "I promise you I am not a man who is easily shocked. I have been to many places and seen... much. Perhaps, too much to take fright at the sight of another's man's unusual face..."

Vincent hesitated before raising his gloved hands to his hood, drawing it slowly back from his hair before dropping it behind his head. He straightened to his full height, meeting Erik's curious gaze squarely with his own.

The other man's dark eyes studied him calmly, without a trace of fear or anger. "What an extraordinary face...", he mused. "You are magnificent."

"It is the one I was born with," Vincent returned guardedly.

"Oh, I am well aware it is not a Halloween mask." Erik waved a dismissive hand. "Come and sit down, please. Let us sample this most excellent Madeira."

He indicated a pair of large red, buttoned leather couches set at right-angles to the fire. Vincent followed him warily, watching his host closely. The man moved with incredible grace, almost gliding across the thick Persian carpet.



Vincent lowered himself onto one of the couches, accepting the glass of wine his host passed to him before he too sat on the opposite couch.

Erik raised his glass. "To all things that are known and unknown. May the later reveal themselves to us, only when we are mature enough to understand the truth."

"To knowledge." Vincent followed suit before raising his own glass to his lips.

The Madeira slipped easily down his throat. He doubted he'd ever tasted anything as fine. Its warmth spread throughout his body, loosening further his need to be gone from this surreal room.

"You have no need to fear me." Erik watched him over the rim of his own glass. "I have already said you are safe here. A little of your time and your company is all I ask. You will be gone well before dawn and I will be content I have finally met a man close to my equal."

"You have known me only a scant twenty minutes," Vincent contradicted him. "How can you be so certain?"

"I have known many men in my time. Many of them hide away in plain sight, for reasons far less complex than your own. I have learned to look beneath the surface."

"I must hide myself away from a world that cannot understand me. Halloween is the one night when I can walk abroad, unchallenged."

"I understand better than you know, my friend." Erik sipped his wine. "Once it was my fate to hide away from the world which would rather have seen me dead than befriend me. I learned very early how to hide myself in plain sight and pretend to be other than who I was. Back then, I was forced to wear a mask." He passed a hand over his face. "Times, thankfully, have changed. I am as you see me, now."

"I must go..." Vincent drained his wine before getting up to replace it beside the decanter.

"Do you love, Vincent?" Erik asked quietly, watching him. "Do you *have* a love?"

"That is another of those unanswerable questions," Vincent replied softly, shaking his head. "It seems destined not to be. Not for someone like me."

"Ah, I once thought as you..." Erik rose from his couch, putting aside his glass on the silver tray. "And then I found my Christine. '*Every woman has the power to make beautiful the man she loves...*' he quoted softly.

He smiled, shaking his head. "With her unswerving love, she changed everything I thought had been set in stone. We have been together now, for many more years than I care to remember."



"Then I salute your good fortune." Vincent bowed his head quickly.

"What I am saying, my friend, is that there will be someone out there for you. Someone who will look beyond your outward appearance and see into your great heart. I speak from vast experience. You must believe me. That is where true salvation lies when all else seems to have failed."

Vincent looked into his eyes for a long time, seeing the shadows of remembered pain and calm acceptance.

"You have killed?" he finally asked in a certain tone.

"Yes..." Erik nodded. "But I have only killed those who would seek to destroy me or to harm those I love. As you have done."

"Then you do understand me..." Vincent shook his head in wonderment.

"I understand you more than you will ever know..." Erik placed a hand on his shoulder, impelling him gently back toward the couch. "Stay. Sit. Tell me more of your world..." He inclined his head. "All I have now is time..."

Vincent sank back onto the leather, accepting the crystal glass his host handed back to him. He filled it to the brim with the excellent wine.

He sat on his own couch, raising his glass in salute. "To our mutual understanding..."

"To a most unusual evening..." Vincent began to feel the effects of the wine.

Erik settled back, a slight smile playing across his mouth. "Let us talk about the things that we love and ignore the world for a while..."

"If only we could..." Vincent responded quietly, raising his own glass.

"Tell me, Vincent..." Erik looked up keenly. "Do you by any chance happen to play chess?"

He indicated a chess set that occupied a small table beyond the fire. A table Vincent had not noticed before.

"My father has taught me the finer points of the game."

"Then we shall play together and talk." Erik stood to carry the table over, setting it between them.

The evening passed, unmarked because of the struggle for dominance of the chessboard by two men of excellent and equal talent. As they talked and played, the level of the wine in the decanter slowly lowered to well below half-full.

After the tenth game, Vincent could feel his eyes becoming grainy and his attention wandering to the world beyond the room. His inner clock had

unconsciously marked the hours and he knew he must soon leave, or be caught above ground by the dawn.

"Sit back and rest, my friend," Erik encouraged. "I shall play for you one last time before you go."

"I must be gone...," Vincent told him, trying to shake off the sudden lethargy of his limbs.

"One last tune..." Erik murmured, getting up to cross the room to the piano. "Indulge me, please..."

"Very well..." Vincent sighed, nodding as he leaned back.

Erik sat behind the piano, resting his fingers upon the keys for a moment before he began to play Mozart's Requiem with all the incredible skill at his command. The music rose, filling the room with sound.

"How beautiful..." Vincent closed his eyes, swept away on the tide of soaring of raw emotion.

The sound of the piano became one with his heartbeat. He laid his head back on the couch, listening to the music and the crackling of the fire. He had never felt so at peace or as comfortable in a very long time...

"Sleep, my friend..." Erik whispered. "Sleep and dream of better days to come..."



Vincent awoke with a start. For a moment he could not place his surroundings, and then he remembered. He sat up quickly to look around the room.

Everything was as before. The placement of the piano in the window and the couch on which he had been half-reclining. But everything in the room was now shrouded in dusty muslin covers. The room was cold because the huge marble fireplace was empty and swept clean.

The stale air hung close with dust and the smells of long inoccupation. There was no evidence anyone had lived in the house for many years.

Except for the quarter-filled decanter of Madeira on the silver tray and two empty crystal glasses. Beside it lay a chess set of exquisite ivory beauty, the pieces set and waiting for the players to begin again.

Beyond the house, the sun's rays were just starting to crest the horizon. Vincent rose to his feet, bemused by the unusual evening he'd just spent in the company of a man he must assume to be a spirit, after all.

"Halloween..." He shook his head, reaching back to draw the hood of his cloak up over his hair. "I have no idea how I'm going to explain any of this to Father." It was time to leave this house of mysterious enchantment far behind.

He walked toward the front door. The drawings he'd collected the night before were still lying on the hallway table. On impulse Vincent picked them up and tucked them into his cloak pocket.

He removed the set of keys that hung from the back of the lock before opening the door and stepping out onto the stoop. The crisp morning air cleared his head of the last of the scented cobwebs fogging his thinking. He turned to lock the door behind him, pushing the keys back through the mail hatch.

"Goodbye, Erik. And thank you..." he whispered before he turned and quickly disappeared into the fading darkness of the early dawn.

Erik materialised at the window to watch his new friend melt away. "Goodbye, Vincent, and thank you for a wonderful evening. I shall never forget you..."

A beautiful young woman with long dark hair appeared at his side. "You made a friend tonight," she whispered, entwining her fingers through his long thin ones before bringing them to her lips. "I'm glad for you."

"I like to think so, Christine," Erik whispered, turning to press a lingering kiss on her forehead. "I love you, my beautiful wife."

"You know he took your drawings."

"I intended him to do so. That is why I left them there. As a farewell gift."

"Can we finally leave New York now and go home?" Christine sighed, resting her head against his shoulder. "I want to go back to Paris. I long to see the Opera House again. It has been too long since I walked out onto the stage where you first heard me sing."

"I fell hopelessly in love with you that day. Whatever you wish, my love..." Erik placed his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close to kiss her lingeringly on the lips as they slowly dissolved together into the light of the rising sun...



*“The farther we’ve gotten from the magic and mystery of our past, the more we’ve come to need Halloween...”*

*Paula Curan*

