

Where the Walls Grow Thin

A *Classic* Beauty and the Beast Story

By TunnelsOfTheSouth

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"Do I believe in ghosts? I'm Irish. How could I not?"

Edward Mulhare

"Absolutely *not!*" The end of Father's walking stick struck the floor with sufficient force to make the teacups tremble.

Mouse caught one before it reached the edge of the council table. "Got it. No problem."

"There is very plainly a problem," Father said. "In fact, there are several. They are seated around this table pretending not to hear me."

William folded his arms across his chest. "We hear you. Half the tunnels hear you. Even Lady May heard you in her living room."

Father stared at him over the rims of his spectacles. "Then perhaps the other half will have the sense to agree with me."

Catherine hid a smile behind her hand. Beside her, Brigit O'Donnell sat with perfect composure, though the amusement in her eyes was unmistakable.

Vincent occupied the chair between them. A year earlier, the arrangement had only been a subject to be handled carefully. Brigit had asked to become a Helper for the world Below, and Father had been consulted for his permission.

The old man had allowed that she had been quite useful throughout the previous year. Hampers of food and sensible items had been delivered. William had been enthusiastic when he saw what could be purchased from his long lists of things he often needed and couldn't source.

Now Brigit had been approved and knew the nearest safe entrances. She understood the messaging of the pipes and how to make herself useful to the world Below.

"Jacob," Mary said patiently. "No one is proposing that we send this Mr Mulhare a map to where we live."

Father turned to her. "I should hope not."

"He already knows an entrance," Cullen reminded him.

Father turned upon Vincent. "Which is precisely the point."

"He knows one route from the basement of the theatre," Vincent replied. "He has never used it without my invitation."

"And he has kept our secret for nearly a year," Catherine added. "And asked for nothing in return."

"Keeping a secret is the minimum requirement, not evidence of sainthood."

"No one said he was a saint," Brigit observed. "He's an actor."

William gave a snort. "Worse. That's not much use to us, down here. We need food, not sonnets."

On the table before Father lay Brigit's formal request that Edward Mulhare be recognized as a Helper to the world Below. Beside it sat a list in Vincent's careful hand.

Six boxes of discarded theatre cloth. Two coils of hemp rope. Three cases of books from a closing rehearsal library. Lantern glass, copper wire, tools, candles, boots, winter coats and blankets.

"And they're the good ones," Mouse pointed out as he tapped a fingertip to the list.

Every item had arrived over the previous eleven months by way of different donors, different vans and different Above addresses. Only recently had they learned that one quiet hand had arranged them all.

Father lifted the list. "Why the secrecy?"

"Because he understood our need to remain apart," Vincent said.

"Or because men accustomed to applause also become accustomed to intrigue."

Brigit leaned forward. "He told no one because he wished to help, not to be thanked. That ought to count in his favour. He is a very private man."

"I see..." Father removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "But we are discussing more than gratitude. A Helper knows routes, signals, sometimes names. Such trust cannot be granted merely because a man has been useful."

"Then grant it because he's trustworthy," Catherine said. "The play he's starring in is now a huge hit on Broadway."

"Fame doesn't impress me," Father said darkly, as though fame were contagious. "I gather you are seconding this request?"

Catherine nodded. "I am."

"You investigated him as I asked?"

"Very thoroughly. He has made a long career of being visible without making his private life public. He understands boundaries better than most. No one had a bad word to say about him and many had a great deal of good."

"Then he may be too busy for us," Father countered.

"Only famous Above," Mouse said. "Down here, not much chop."

Everyone looked at him.

Mouse shrugged. "Below, he's just Edward. Very tall. Got lots of good rope."

Brigit's smile softened. "There, Jacob. Mouse has settled it."

"Mouse has not settled anything."

"Could do," Mouse offered.

Vincent reached for the list. "Father, when I met Edward, I asked him for nothing beyond silence. The next week, a stagehand left two boxes of books with Peter. A month later, costumes came to Sarah's shelter. Heavy wool, not finery, because Edward had asked what would be useful. He never came Below. He never presumed. He waited."

"For what?"

"To be invited," Brigit said.

Father looked around the table. "And if I remain unconvinced?"

"Then he will remain Above and continue helping," Vincent replied. "He knows that."

The answer displeased Father because it removed the satisfying possibility of the candidate being ambitious.

He put on his spectacles and examined Brigit's letter again. "You are prepared to sponsor him?"

"I am."

"And accept responsibility for his conduct?"

"Within reason. He is from Cork, after all."

"What has that to do with anything?"

"A great deal," Brigit replied. "If you're from Derry."

Catherine bent her head. Vincent's mouth curved beneath the fall of his hair.

Father regarded them all with the expression of a man abandoned by civilization. "Very well," he said at last. "He may be brought to the outer chambers. No further. I will speak with him there."

Brigit poured herself another cup of tea. "I knew you'd see sense."

"I have agreed to an interview."

"Of course."

"Not his admission."

"Naturally."

"And you may stop looking triumphant."

Brigit smiled at him. "I'm Irish, Father. This is merely my face."

"A point that also needs to be put forward, Father," Vincent said softly with a slight smile. "Mr Mulhare *is* an actor, we all know that."

He looked around the assembled company. "But he did tell me he trained in London under the likes of Olivier, Gielgud and Richardson. He knows his Bard better than anyone else I have ever met."

"Olivier, you say..." Father stroked his chin thoughtfully. "And Shakespeare..." A long silence ensued. "A proper actor, then..."

Then he sat up and frowned. "I do hope you don't think that such information may influence my decision?"

He looked around at the assembled faces. Everyone managed to look innocent of the accusation, though several telling glances were exchanged and heads nodded.

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Samhain came to New York City wrapped in mantles of fog.

It softened the towers, blurred the lamps and turned the city's hard edges into suggestions. Children in masks hurried along the pavements with paper bags and plastic pumpkins. Above them, office windows floated like squares of gold in the mist.

Brigit waited at the side of Edward's theatre, her coat collar turned against the cold. The stage door opened precisely at eleven. Edward emerged carrying a leather case in one hand and a parcel wrapped in brown paper beneath his arm.

"You're late," Brigit accused softly.

He consulted his wristwatch. "Only by fourteen seconds."

Brigit smiled. "Cork time."

"If I were on Derry time, I imagine the appointment was yesterday."

Brigit laughed. "Last Thursday."

"Come on..." Edward offered his arm for her to take.

They walked east, passing costumed children and late-night revellers. Edward wore a dark overcoat and hat, the useful uniform of a man who preferred not to

be recognised. Even so, two women outside a restaurant turned to look after him and fell into whispers and giggles.

"Does that weary you?" Brigit asked.

Edward looked down at her. "Being seen?"

Brigit shook her head. "Being seen as someone else."

He smiled faintly. "Sometimes the someone else is useful. A mask may hide a man, but it may also give him room to breathe."

"And when you take it off?" Brigit asked softly.

Edward looked all around at the great city that rose on all sides. "One hopes somebody remains."

She heard the levity in the words and the truth beneath it. Edward himself had needed those masks. The captain, the gentleman, the urbane adviser, all the polished men whose certainty allowed the private one to pass unexamined.

"Would you like them to like you as you?" Brigit asked.

Edward glanced at her. "A dangerously theatrical question."

"That is not an answer."

"No," he agreed. "It is not."

At the next corner he paused, looking up through the fog at the vertical immensity of the city.

"I landed here and never looked back," he said. "Not truly. I returned to Ireland, of course. To visit and to work. But New York..."

"Caught you?"

"Recognised me before I had decided who I was. She took me in and cared for me."

Brigit nodded. She knew something about cities that named their children by accident.

"Come on, then," she said. "There's another part of New York waiting to meet you."

At the basement of a shuttered costume warehouse, Catherine stood beside an iron door. Vincent waited beyond it in the first darkness of the tunnel.

Edward greeted Catherine warmly. To Vincent he offered no handshake this time, only a look of quiet pleasure.

"My elusive critic."

"Your grateful audience," Vincent replied. "I have enjoyed our exchanges regarding the Bard."

Edward handed him the brown-paper parcel. "For your library."

"Thank you," Vincent said as he accepted it.

"It's a collection of Irish plays," Edward replied. "Oscar Wilde and G.B. Shaw."

"These were yours," Vincent said perceptively.

"They were." Edward smiled. "Books love to find new homes and fresh pairs of curious eyes."

"Father will agree with you there."

"Then I shall enjoy meeting him."

Catherine and Brigit exchanged a glance.

"What?" Edward asked.

"Nothing," Catherine said. "Do hold on to that optimism. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Shall we...?" Vincent turned and indicated the great iron door that gave every appearance of being locked and barred.

He reached up and found a hidden lever and pulled it down. The door barely groaned as it swung inwards to reveal the shadowed darkness beyond. They all walked into the tunnel and the door swung closed behind them.

Edward had expected to find tunnels. He had not expected them to have voices.

Messages travelled along the pipes that ran along the walls beside them, tapped in rhythms he could not yet understand. Distant hammers answered. Water whispered somewhere beneath the stone. From an opening far below came the

faint laughter of children. And there was the constant sound of the subways that were now running above them.

The city he knew had always spoken with horns, brakes, bells, shouted bargains, the mutter of millions behind walls. This was different. It was the sound of a hidden body aware of his arrival and speaking in whispers and taps.

"They know I'm here," he said.

"They know someone is coming," Vincent replied. "The sentries are passing the message along."

"Father knows precisely who you are," Catherine added.

"And does he approve of me?" Edward asked.

"Only on principle," Brigit replied. "And on the strength of your knowledge of the Bard."

"Ah, I see..." Edward smiled. "It seems my reputation goes before me."

They entered an outer chamber lit by candles and two glass lanterns. Father stood beside a long table. Mary and William were with him, as were Cullen and Mouse, who had plainly been ordered to remain elsewhere and had plainly misunderstood.

Edward removed his hat. "Dr Wells." He bowed his head.

Father gave Brigit a suspicious glance. "You have been well briefed."

Edward shook his head. "I was told your name. Brigit declined to provide the questions."

"I have been accused of many things," Brigit said. "But never of spoiling a performance."

Father gestured to a chair. Edward remained standing until Mary and Catherine were seated. Father noticed.

"You understand what is at risk here?" he began.

"Lives. Children. A sanctuary which could not survive public curiosity."

"And you wished to become a part of it. To see what we have built down here."

"I wished to be of use to it. Seeing it was not a condition."

Father paced once around the table. "You are a man whose profession depends upon being observed."

"My profession depends upon directing attention. That is not the same thing."

Father stopped.

Edward continued, "An actor may stand in full light and reveal nothing he has not chosen to reveal. Your people live in shadow and have entrusted me with something true. I know the difference."

The answer struck very near Father's central concern. He disliked this and respected it in equal measure. "Why do you wish to help us?"

Edward looked toward Vincent. "Because a man I had never met listened to my work from an empty box and spoke to me afterwards as though the work mattered. Because Catherine trusted me with the shape of her happiness. Because Brigit asked nothing for herself. And because, once one learns there are children beneath one's feet needing winter coats, it becomes difficult to enjoy an overfilled wardrobe and a full plate of food."

William grunted. "Good answer."

"No one asked you," Father said.

"Still good."

Father studied Edward for a long moment. "Do you believe in ghosts, Mr Mulhare?"

The chamber went quiet.

Catherine looked at Brigit. Brigit's eyes gleamed.

Edward did not hesitate. "I'm Irish," he said. "How could I not?"

Father's mouth twitched. It was not a smile. Father would later insist upon that point.

From behind Cullen came an excited whisper. "Knew it."

Mouse stepped into view. "Met one?"

Edward regarded him gravely. "Several. I worked with one professionally for two years. He was also a man of his word, and the sea."

Mouse's eyes widened. "Good ghost?"

"A sea captain. Temperamental, vain and inclined to walk through walls without knocking. He liked to voice his opinions on everything."

Mouse grinned. "Useful, then."

Edward laughed softly. "Occasionally."

Father closed his eyes. "Mouse..."

"Going. Need tell Jamie." He darted into the passage, calling, "Actor knows ghost captain!"

Laughter followed him down the tunnel. The interview, though Father refused to admit it, was over.

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Brigit had said that at Samhain the walls between worlds grew thin. Below, no one found the thought peculiar.

The children had decorated the Great Hall with paper leaves, candle lanterns and pale shapes cut from scraps of theatre muslin. Sarah had turned one bolt of Edward's donated cloth into a silver-grey river flowing down the centre of the long tables. At its head stood a small wooden boat made by Cullen.

"For the dead," Brigit explained when Edward looked at it. "Not to summon them. Just to remember that love doesn't end because a journey does."

She placed a folded scrap of paper in the boat. Ian's name was written upon it.

Edward did not ask. He stood beside her while she watched the candle flame catch and steady.

Around them, the community gathered. Some carried names. Some carried flowers. Some came with empty hands because their memories were too old or too painful to be written.

Vincent and Catherine entered together. They did not touch, yet the space between them seemed alive.

Edward saw Brigit notice them.

"His lady," she murmured, as she had on the empty stage a year before.

"And he is hers," Edward said.

"Aye, he is."

Father approached, leaning upon his stick. In his other hand he carried a small brass token worked into the shape of a candle flame. "Mr Mulhare."

"Doctor."

"It is customary for a new Helper to be given this." Father held out the token. "It identifies no entrance and opens no door. It is simply a promise that, should you send word, we will answer if we can."

Edward looked at the token but did not take it immediately. "Then you have decided?"

"The council has been consulted."

"And you?"

Father's brows rose. "I am part of the council."

"A masterful evasion."

"Please take the token, Edward."

He did. Father had used his Christian name. Both men were too courteous to mention it.

"Thank you," Edward said. "I shall keep it safe." He tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

Father smiled. "You may regret it. Mouse intends to hear every detail of your ghostly acquaintance. He was impressed with the whole idea."

"I have survived interviewers with less discipline. I have very fond memories of that particular sea captain. For two years, that company was a true family."

Father nodded. "And families are to be treasured."

After the meal, the children demanded a story. Edward protested that he had not prepared one. Geoffrey produced a crown made from gold-painted

cardboard. Samantha brought him a cloak. Mouse arrived with a length of rope, three pulleys and no explanation whatsoever.

"You see?" Brigit said. "Your public awaits."

"My public usually permits rehearsal."

"Then tonight you can be yourself. There is no need for masks here."

The words stopped him. He frowned as he assessed them.

Brigit met his gaze. "Would they like you as you? There's only one way to learn."

Edward looked around the Great Hall.

No one here knew the elegant master of a haunted house, the stern director of a secret foundation or the innumerable gentlemen whose composure had paid his rent. A few knew his name from old programmes Catherine had brought Below.

To the children he was the tall man who knew a ghost. To Mouse, he was the source of good rope. To Father, he was an unanswered question wearing an excellent overcoat.

He set the cardboard crown aside. "Very well," he said. "But no king tonight."

He sat on the edge of the fountain and began without scenery, costume or borrowed voice.

He told them of a boy from Cork who believed the River Lee ran beneath every river in the world. The boy crossed an ocean and came to a city of towers, where he learned that home was not always the place behind him. Sometimes it was the place that recognised him before he recognised himself.

He told of masks that could imprison a man, and masks that could set him free. Of a hidden kingdom beneath a noisy one. Of a lion-hearted guardian who feared he was a monster until a woman taught him the difference between a face and a soul.

At that, Vincent lowered his head. Catherine's eyes shone.

Edward told of a Croppy girl from Derry who carried peace into rooms where hatred had grown comfortable. He did not name Ian, but he gave the girl a lamp which no death could extinguish.

Brigit turned away for a moment.

Last, he told of an old scholar who guarded a door so fiercely that he sometimes forgot a door was also made to open.

Father glared while everyone else laughed. "Defamation," he muttered.

When the story ended, the children applauded. Their hands made a bright, unruly thunder beneath the stone.

Edward bowed from where he sat. This time he was not embarrassed by their warm affection.

Later, when the candles burned low, Vincent found him alone at the edge of the Great Hall. The brass token rested in Edward's palm.

"You were right," Edward said. "Our difficulties meet in the same place."

Vincent waited.

"Above, they see me and do not know me. Below, they do not know me and somehow see me."

"Perhaps because no role brought you here. You came as a simple man with open hands and an open heart."

Edward closed his hand around the token. "Brigit brought me down."

"And what she saw in you."

Across the Hall, Brigit stood beside Catherine. They were lighting one final candle for all the names no one had been able to write.

"She sees clearly," Edward said.

"She has known darkness."

The pipes began to sound the midnight message. One chamber answered another, the rhythm passing outward through the tunnels beneath Manhattan.

Edward listened. "What does it say?"

"Welcome," Vincent told him.

The word travelled beyond them, through stone and shadow, beneath theatres and towers and streets shining with fog. It reached toward the city Edward had

chosen and the misty green island he had left, toward the living and the remembered.

Brigit looked up as the pipes spoke. At Samhain, the Irish said, the walls between worlds grew thin.

But perhaps they had been wrong about walls. Perhaps, in the right hands, they became doors.

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