

The Music of the Heart

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

The sound of the rapturous applause was still ringing in her ears. The stage was already empty by now, though; the lights were on everywhere around her. The audience was slowly clearing their way out to the exits.

Catherine, sitting in her comfortable seat at the glorious historic Majestic Theatre, had her eyes glued to the scene before her, still entranced by what she had just seen in the previous almost three hours. Wiping away the tears still running down her cheeks, she couldn't take her eyes off the glorious, golden, intricately carved angel hovering above the stage. The memory of the imposing globe lights chandelier crashing down at the end of the first act sent another shiver down her spine.

"Well, that was pretty spectacular, wouldn't you say, Cathy? I should have known from the title already that it would be - *The Phantom of the Opera*..."

Charles Chandler looked at his daughter by his side, who was lingering in her own world. He noticed her tears and took her hand in his.

"Oh, daddy...", Catherine breathed when she recovered. "Thank you so much for taking me to see it! It was..." She was searching for the right words but failing big time.

"Magnificent?" Charles tried to help her with a satisfied smile.

"Soul-stirring...", Catherine replied, gazing at the angel again.

Charles chuckled and stood up from his seat, ready to leave.

"I'm glad I convinced you to find the time to come with me. I do think it was a very enjoyable production." He turned to his daughter with a mischievous smile.

"Besides, any excuse for a nice dinner and catch up with my only child is more than worth the effort."

Catherine laughed heartily, finally regaining some composure again, and stood up as well.

"You don't need excuses, Dad. I love spending time with you; you know that."

"I do," Charles replied and raised his eyebrows. "But I also know that your work is making it much harder for me to make those excuses work."

The beaming smile on Catherine's face faded a little bit.

Not only work, Daddy...

"I'll try to be better in the future," she said, settling for a mild compromise.

They shared a warm smile, both knowing that she was not likely to stick to her promise so easily. But it was enough for the moment, and arm in arm, full of glorious impressions, they set out to leave the theatre.

The cab drive back to her apartment was long; the streets of New York were always busy, but on Friday nights, the congestion was even worse. Everybody was eager to socialise after a hard-working week.

It didn't bother Catherine, though. Her mind was wandering in the incredible, almost surreal place of the story she had watched unravel that night in the theatre. The music touched her deeply. However, it was the tragic story of an unlikely hero, who almost lost all of his humanity for the sake of love, that really struck a chord with her. Too much resemblance with her reality...

Of course, the man she loved so deeply was not Erik. Yes, they shared similarities in having a face that would scare or disturb people who didn't look at others with their hearts. They both had to hide from the world for the sake of their own protection. They both lived underground, in a magical place that no one above could even imagine. Neither of them knew motherly love; they both struggled deeply with their limitations and the fact that nothing could ever change that...

Yet Vincent was gentle, kind, polite and empathic and would never harm innocent people. There must have been a time when Erik was like that, too. However, the cruel experiences in his later life pushed those qualities into the most hidden place of his heart, breaking through only occasionally. They were hidden, never erased, though.

Vincent, too, was deeply in love; Catherine was as sure of that as that the sun rose every day. He was proving it to her every single moment they were together. But she was certain that he would never go to such terrible lengths just to keep her love. Her happiness was what he cared about the most. Something that took Erik a long time to understand with Christine.

Catherine spent the whole journey in contemplation and was surprised when the cab halted at her apartment block. Absently, she paid the driver and entered the building.

A little while later, already in her nightgown and wrapped in a nightrobe, Catherine opened the glass door on her vintage bookcase. Her hand reached for an old leather-bound volume that she hadn't read for years. The red and golden writing on the spine read, "*Gaston Leroux: The Phantom of the Opera*".

The memory of when she read the book for the first time crossed Catherine's mind. She had loved the story even back then, but seeing its musical version and re-living the emotions of the heartbreaking tale anew, touched her deeply. Besides, she hadn't known about a subterranean world existing below the streets of New York before. Especially about one of its inhabitants...

Her long contemplation suddenly sparked an idea in her mind. Excited, she closed the bookcase, still holding the volume in her hand. When she entered the bedroom and put it on her nightstand, Catherine couldn't wipe a smile off her face. The following day was Saturday, and there was only one place she wished to go...

"I wish you could have seen it, Vincent... It was so beautiful!"

Catherine couldn't mask her enchantment from her experience the night before - and the sadness that the man she loved couldn't have shared that special moment with her.

A small smile hid Vincent's brief moment of melancholy.

"I could feel how deeply it touched you," he said. "The waves of thrill and elation, mixed with sadness and deep compassion... You brought me on the journey with you."

Catherine shook her head in wonder, smiling.

"The way you turn every weak point into something positive is remarkable, Vincent," she noted with respect. "I've always admired your ability to do that. It's so... inspiring."

The man next to her lowered his eyes humbly.

"I had to learn that from very early on. Life had dealt me a hard blow upon my birth, yet it had gifted me with so much good since then. The home I have, the people who love me..." His look into her eyes was eloquent. "The people I love..."

There is only so much one can express with a look. But what Vincent saw in Catherine's eyes after his words was indescribable - the word 'love' wouldn't be enough to cover it.

After a few beats, Catherine recovered and lowered her eyes. With a big smile, she reached for her handbag and took out the book she had re-discovered the night before. Suddenly, her smile faded, and her look froze on the leather-bound volume in her hands.

“What is it, Catherine?” Vincent asked, concerned, seeing and feeling the shift of her mood.

“I...” She sighed. “I brought you the book, the original story that was the base for the musical. I’ve had it for some time but completely forgot about it until yesterday.”

She looked at him hesitantly.

“I thought you would love the story, it’s so moving; but now... I’m not so sure...”

“Why, Catherine? What concerns you so?”

Suddenly, she didn’t know where to look, her voice very careful.

“The main character, he... has a face different from other people...”

She couldn’t bring herself to use the word ‘disfigured’ for she had never looked at Vincent as at a disfigured man. To her, he was beautiful.

The look in Vincent’s eyes softened; his smile was encouraging.

“So does Quasimodo, and I loved *his* story.”

Losing the awkward feeling, Catherine gasped quietly. She was unable to say anything; Vincent’s calm and perfectly rational attitude amazed her. To show her acknowledgement, she nodded and smiled.

Vincent took the book from her hands. He admired the cover at first, then started flipping through the pages, stopping briefly every time he saw an illustration. His blue eyes filled with wonder; an almost excited smile settled on his face. Every time Vincent came across a book he hadn’t read before, his natural passion for the written word awakened anew.

“Thank you, Catherine; I shall read it with great pleasure.” The enthusiasm in his voice was genuine. “And thank you... for your care,” he added, making her smile. The relief was visible on her face.

“I think I noticed the title once in Father’s library, many years ago, but the next time I looked, it was gone. I have never seen it there since,” Vincent remarked - finally understanding the possible reason now, though he still knew so little about the story he was about to read soon.

“I guess Father didn’t want to hurt your feelings,” Catherine explained with care in her eyes. “Besides, the character I’m talking about is way different from Quasimodo. He’s a bit... complicated...”

“Father has always been very protective of me in that aspect; he still is,” Vincent elaborated. “And as for complicated,” he paused, “I think I am more than familiar with that...”

Catherine’s compassionate eyes studied his profile as his eyes lingered on the cover of the book in his hands. The melancholic expression on his face didn’t go unnoticed by her. Unable to find the right words, she did what seemed the most appropriate thing to do - her hand travelled to his shoulder, her thumb gently caressing it.

I’m here for you, Vincent; you don’t have to carry the burden alone anymore, however heavy it is...

Vincent looked back at her, appreciating her silent care.

“I know I will enjoy it, since you have,” he said with a convincing voice, and the warmth in his eyes reached Catherine deep inside, making her smile.

“But I’m afraid it will have to wait.” Vincent returned to reality and put the book carefully on the table. “Father will be waiting with tea.”

He stood up and offered his hand to Catherine, smiling. She didn’t need convincing. Hand in hand, enjoying each other’s nearness, they left for visiting with the founding father of the tunnels.

The mellow orange and yellow glow of the candlelight was very soothing and inviting that night. A perfect occasion to sit down and get swept away by a good story.

Once Vincent parted with Catherine that night, after a beautiful afternoon spent together, he returned to his chamber elated, in a dreamy mood. His heart was filled with tranquillity, contentment and love, making him feel like walking on air.

Passing the circular table, he spotted the book Catherine had brought him earlier. His smile widened. It was a perfect way to end a lovely day - with a good story.

He took the volume and stretched on his large bed, making himself comfortable. At first, his eyes admired the ornamental cover, but soon, curiosity got the better of him, and he opened the book. For the next few hours, his mind was transported to the city of lights and love, to Paris, and Vincent immersed himself in the dazzling atmosphere of the Opera and the mysterious and dramatic events surrounding it.

The poignant story of the disfigured yet exceptional man, haunted by his cruel fate and his own obsession with the woman he desperately fell in love with, touched Vincent very deeply. With each page he felt closer to Erik, seeing his own pain and torture in the Phantom.

Apart from knowing very well what it was like having to hide his face from the world to survive, he also saw the merciless truth haunting Erik - the fact that he could never taste the blessed feeling of being loved by a woman. For many years, Vincent was convinced that would be his fate as well. And then he crossed paths with Catherine...

He paused the reading for a moment, his hand reaching for the pouch around his neck, taking the small white rose out of it and caressing it gently. Closing his eyes, Vincent contemplated his blessing, imagining the face of the woman who was brave enough to fight the conventions and fall deeply in love with an outcast.

A whirlwind of emotions filled his heart. Erik's grudge against the world that treated him with such disgrace was something Vincent could sympathise with. Although he was blessed with the gifts of family, friends, home and love, the world Above would always remain a forbidden place for him - a place where small men saw only ugliness in his face.

Vincent's mind was preoccupied with his thoughts, and soon, his consciousness slowly drifted away into the place where anything is possible...

When he opened his eyes again, he had to strain his sight to break through the darkness. He found himself surrounded by bluey light; his sensitive nostrils sensed moistness in the air.

After his eyes finally focused on the space around him, Vincent recognised the place from his memory - *"a lake, whose leaden waters stretched into the distance, into the darkness..."* (1)

He was standing on the edge of the underground lake under the Paris Opera...



Vincent didn't have much time to ponder about his discovery. All at once, the sound of unfamiliar voices in the distance broke the silence. One of them was the voice of a man, a raised voice that sounded very urgent and agitated. The other voice belonged to a woman, desperately pleading with the man, whose nerves were stretching to the limit as it seemed.

"I never do anything like other people... But I am getting very tired of it! I'm sick and tired of having a forest and a torture-chamber in my house and of living like a mountebank, in a house with a false bottom!... I want a nice, quiet flat, with ordinary doors and windows and a wife inside it, like everybody else! A wife whom I can love and take out on Sundays and keep amused on weekdays!... My dear little Christine!... Tell me you love me!... No, you don't love me... but no matter, you will! Once, you could not look at my mask, because you knew what was behind... And now you don't mind looking at it and you forget what is behind! One can get used to everything... if one wishes..." (2)

The voices were getting louder; obviously, the man and the woman were arguing. Mad, spine-chilling laughter of the man followed. And then suddenly, the voices died, and utter silence fell upon the underground.

How can this be? Those are the words I was just reading... Am I dreaming?

The sound of hasty footsteps interrupted Vincent's contemplating. Before he managed to hide, the infamous Phantom of the Opera himself arose before him from the shadows - he was veiled in a long black cloak, accentuating his height, wearing a black hat on his head and a mask, covering his face.

Vincent was unable to move, fascinated by the vision of Erik, the Opera ghost, by his imposing but almost skeletal figure, which was noticeable despite his cloak. The burning eyes were staring at him from behind the black mask; the man's undeniable presence left a great impression on the leonine man.

Erik observed Vincent with equal interest - he had never seen a man with the face of a lion, and the clawed, furry hands hadn't escaped his notice either.

It seems nature loves playing cruel tricks with the innocent ones...

However, he didn't feel anything but curiosity coming from the mysterious man before him, who like himself, was wrapped in a dark cloak.

"Are you a ghost?" Erik asked in awe. "A creature from the Greek myths? Or the demon of my evil deeds?"

Vincent's eyes filled with compassion.

"I am no demon. I am no ghost either." He sighed. "And I could only dream of sailing with Theseus..."

Erik tilted his head.

"Then you are real?"

"As real as you are," Vincent replied calmly, silently amazed that he was talking to someone who stepped out of the book pages he had been reading only moments before.

The masked man started slowly and very carefully circling around Vincent - in many ways like a wildcat observing its prey. He studied the tall and strong-built figure of the leonine-faced man with a curiosity that crept right into Vincent's bones.

"How did you find the way down here?" Erik asked, his voice revealing suspicion.

"That is a question for which I cannot give you an answer," Vincent replied honestly. "I am as surprised about being here as you are. But I believe it was your voice that drew me here," he added. "Yours and that of someone else. She sounded in distress..."

The Phantom stopped pacing around the leonine man and straightened himself up. His eyes were like yellow flames, burning into the sapphire-blue sea of the eyes of his unexpected guest.

"It is none of your business who is in distress in *my* world! You are an intruder and have no place here!"

"I mean you no harm," Vincent countered calmly. "It is an honour for me to speak with the greatest legend of the Paris Opera."

He outstretched his hand towards Erik. The gesture took the Phantom unawares. The flames in his eyes lost intensity, and slowly and with unusual hesitation, he accepted the offered hand.

As he did so, Vincent felt the bony and cold but also strong grip of Erik's hand.

"I am not used to people wishing to shake my hand," Erik remarked, still a bit startled. "They rather call me a monster instead..."

"Perhaps you haven't met the right people yet. Those who judge a man by his character rather than by his appearance," Vincent replied knowingly.

Erik sighed and walked to the edge of the lake, veiled in a mist, rising above the water surface. "I have learned a long time ago that learning to be lonely was the best thing I could do. At least, that is what I thought, until recently..."

"Loneliness can be crushing," Vincent countered with a hint of melancholy. "One can learn to live with it, but there is no consolation in it."

The masked man eyed his companion curiously.

"Have *you* met such people?" he asked.

Vincent smiled and nodded. "Many of them."

"Then you are the luckier one of us, my friend," Erik remarked, with sadness in his voice for an unguarded moment.

"It is not too late; it can still happen to you. The world holds surprises on every corner. It surprised *me* when I expected it the least and brought someone into my life... Someone who ended my aloneness." A heartfelt smile appeared on Vincent's face.

Erik didn't miss the gentle tone of his companion's voice at his last words.

"A woman?" he asked incredulously, tilting his head.

"Yes..." came the soft, gravelly reply.

Unable to comprehend the unbelievable truth, there was only one thing the Phantom could have asked.

"*How?*" he whispered.

Vincent sighed. "She looked *behind* the face... and saw the *man*."

For a moment, Erik felt a sharp stab of jealousy at his heart. His hand grabbed his chest as if trying to stop the pain.

"No one ever saw the man behind *my* face," he hissed and started pacing, putting more stress on each word. "Scholar, architect, musician, inventor... No one saw that. For them, I was a freak of nature. To prove their point, they put me in a cage!"

He turned sharply to Vincent, his eyes ablaze in the semidarkness. "A freak exhibit, with my hands and feet bound to the cage bars, only to prevent me from hiding my face! I was not nine years old yet!"

His look turned into one of deep pain, his voice almost whispering.

"No kindness... no compassion anywhere... Why??"

The grief in those words and the desperate uncomprehending look that briefly met his own almost broke Vincent's heart. Seeing the unusual yellow of the eyes behind the black mask glisten, the recollection of his own imprisonment behind cold bars resurfaced painfully. *Why indeed?*

"Do you think it pleases me to frighten people? To shock them, disgust them in ways they never dreamed about even in their worst nightmares??" Erik continued. "That is why I built this tomb for the living when I was helping with the Opera construction. I wanted a sanctuary, a place where I had no need to hide my face behind a mask; a place where human cruelty and lack of mercy would not trespass and judge me!"

Erik started pacing, his cloak flapping about him like black wings. His long strides were getting quicker, as if he was chased by some invisible enemy, haunting him to no end.

In contrast to the Opera ghost, Vincent stood firmly on his spot, watching Erik roaming about the chilly, blue space. Before he could reply, the Phantom's resolved words echoed around them like a threat.

"But this time, I will *not* be broken or pushed to the shadow of my lonely exile! If she doesn't want to love me, I will make her..."

Vincent shook his head.

"You can't *make* someone love you... Love cannot be forced; it can be given, accepted, but never forced..."

"Oh, don't I know that!" Erik hissed again, suddenly stopping and piercing the other man with his fiery stare.

"My own mother hated me from my birth... Resentment, imprisonment, humiliation... That's the treatment I was getting! She pretended it was for my own good, but I knew better. When she couldn't rid herself of me, she hid my face behind a mask, forcing me to wear it night and day! Not even the fact that I was her own child could awaken some pity in her heart to show me love and affection at least a little..."

"We can't choose what family we are born into, but we can always find a new one," Vincent remarked calmly. "A family that will appreciate us for who we are."

"I've tried!" Erik cried, glancing at the other man with anger. "Every single attempt at reaching out to others in friendship ended in humiliation, or betrayal, sooner or later!"

Suddenly, the flame in his eyes faded. "Apart from one..."

"The Persian?" Vincent asked knowingly.

The masked man's look softened and wandered into the distance. "The only man ever who saw something else than a monster or a freak of nature in me..."

"And yet, you are holding him in captivity..."

Erik's brief moment of calm vanished as quick as lightning.

"He should not have come here, I warned him!" He started pacing again. "Besides, he's helping that... that... wretch of a being calling himself a gentleman who wants to steal Christine from me! I shall kill him, kill them both!"

His bony hands inadvertently mimicked the pose of strangling someone.

"Raoul may be a man of impulse, not always rational, but he is only doing what he thinks it's best for her," Vincent intervened. "He doesn't *know* you. You should give him a chance to do so..."

Erik stiffened, piercing the other man with his stare, when reason suddenly alerted him that something was amiss here.

"How do you know his name? And the Persian?" He asked with a strained voice filled with suspicion, the yellow fires in his eyes rekindled. "You have come for *him*, to help him to destroy me! Nobody appears here without wanting to harm me... *nobody!*"

It happened quicker than Vincent could have expected and gave him no chance to reason with the lord of the underworld. The Phantom flung himself at his throat, gripping it with incredible strength and pushing them both over the edge right into the lake with a big splash.

While paddling in the surprisingly warm water, Vincent tried to push Erik's hands away from his throat. It was not the first time he had to fight for his life. However, very soon, he understood that his opponent could easily physically overpower him. The almost skeletal body was hiding almost superhuman strength. The Phantom's black cloak was floating above him like a dark shadow, a foreboding of death itself.

As the long seconds were passing, Vincent, being held underwater, was getting desperate for air. His mighty muscles were stretching to their limit, furiously attempting to shake off his attacker,

fighting to stay alive. And yet, despite the effort, his strength was slowly deserting him. His clawed hands were somehow unable to strike Erik from the side and make him loosen his deadly grip.

Suddenly, a ray of light from a torch on the wall nearby illuminated Vincent's face. His oxygen-deprived body started drifting into unconsciousness, balancing on the thin thread between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

As if realising there was no way out of this struggle, his limbs relaxed, and he let go of Erik's arms. His eyes remained open, though, and were looking right into the eyes of the Phantom, who was still holding him under the water surface. Looking but not seeing...

Although his body was dying, his mind was as clear as it had ever been, full of images all at once - in a quick succession of flashes from his memories, Vincent saw his whole life pass through in a few seconds. And then suddenly, one image remained still, burning bright in front of his mind's eye like the sun.

Catherine...

All at once, Vincent felt his body being dragged out of the lake, quickly and desperately. Barely conscious, he started coughing and spitting water that had filled his lungs in the time he was underwater. Rolling over, he waited until the coughing fit passed and gathered all his remaining strength to push himself up from the floor. What he saw when he finally looked up almost broke his heart.

The Phantom of the Opera, the man with almost superhuman powers of all sorts, was huddled against the wall like a scared child, staring at the lion-faced man. The hands, that only a few moments earlier were ready to kill, were clutching the fabric of the shirt covering his chest in anguish. Vincent couldn't see his eyes properly, but he didn't need to. The sight of the most powerful man in Paris was more than eloquent - and heartbreaking.

"The face..." Erik whispered with a shaky voice.

Vincent, still breathing heavily, tilted his head, puzzled.

"Who is she?" the Phantom inquired, astonished, his voice barely audible.

It took only a few seconds for Vincent to understand who Erik was asking about.

Is it truly possible? Could he have really seen Catherine's face reflecting in my eyes when my death was near?

A quiet gasp escaped his throat, there was only one answer he could have given.

"Catherine..." he breathed, so tenderly that the man huddling on the cold stony ground felt as if the spoken name was floating in the air.

Erik lowered his head, and a painful sigh escaped his throat.

"I would have done anything for Christine," he whispered with a broken voice, defeated. "*Anything* for her love..."

For the first time during their whole encounter, Vincent moved forward to approach the man who only minutes ago attempted to drown him. Erik's suffering resonated too much in his own soul, for he too had killed for love. And yet...

"To kill for love is only justifiable when we kill to *protect* from harm the one we love," he spoke softly, with conviction, though. "No love justifies taking someone's life for revenge."

Very slowly, Erik lifted his head and looked into the blue eyes of the man towering above him. Those eyes in which he had seen the smiling face of a beautiful woman when he was trying to strangle him. Only now he noticed how kind, how warm they were. He shook his head in shame.

"Forgive me... Please... Forgive me..."

He dragged himself up from the ground, grabbing the wall for support, and before Vincent could react, the Phantom hastily walked away and vanished into the darkness.

"Erik!" Vincent cried, but the name vanished without response in the mist surrounding him.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes, desperately hoping the man behind the mask would find peace with the world and himself one day.

He felt exhausted; his body started shaking from cold; the soaked, heavy cloak hanging from his shoulders felt like heavy armour. Without a thought, he wrapped it tighter around him.

The mist over the lake suddenly reached right up to Vincent and everywhere around. It was rising higher and higher, until all he could make out was the flickering light of the torch on the wall in front of him. When even that vanished in the haze, his eyelids suddenly felt like lead, and he closed his eyes. The face he saw at death's door appeared in his mind's eye again...

"Catherine!"

Vincent's cry resounded in the chamber as he sat up abruptly on his bed. His eyes were searching the space around him, and when his look fell on the book lying on his lap, he understood immediately.

Leaning back against his pillow, he stared into the mellow orange and yellow glow penetrating the fan window above his bed...

"It felt so real... I thought I was living my last moments," Vincent said quietly, looking into the distance. "My strength was deserting me, my life was hanging on a thread, but in that last moment, I didn't feel fear or panic. All I could think of... was you..."

He lifted his eyes to look into hers, seeing the reflection of himself in those green pools. Catherine was sitting next to him at the small table in his chamber the following day, listening to him with keen interest. Amazement and compassion were written all over her face.

"It was that moment when he decided to let me live. There, in the most outrageous state of his mind, he found his humanity again at last. It saved my life."

She smiled and covered his hands with hers.

"It wasn't humanity that saved your life, Vincent," she spoke quietly. "It was love..."

There was no denying the fact, and he knew better than to contradict her. A dream or not, some truths are universal in all worlds where our minds exist.

"Have you finished the book then?" she asked.

"No," Vincent admitted quietly. "I was deep in thoughts about what had happened and shortly after, I fell asleep again."

"I think it's time you read the end of the story now," she said, smiling. "I'll wait until you finish."

Catherine leaned back at her chair, her eyes lingering on the face of the man she loved so dearly. Vincent smiled at her before opening the book again and finding the page he had read last. He was more than eager to discover how the Phantom's story unravelled.

It didn't take a long time until he closed the book and leaned back on his vintage, padded chair. The expression on his face was a mixture of relief and wonder.

"So she *did* see behind the face..." Vincent whispered with a smile, deep inside grateful for the outcome of the incredible story. "In the end, she managed to show Erik what even his own mother wasn't able to."

"Pity?" Catherine asked.

"Kindness," Vincent replied, looking into her eyes. "Compassion. And in her own way, love...The knowledge that no one in the world is alone, as long as they know any kind of love, at least for one, brief moment. For no matter what happens after, love never dies..."

There, the truth beyond knowledge, shining brightly again. Catherine's beaming smile was her only reply. The universal truth was a perfect conclusion to the extraordinary experience Vincent had gone through in his dream. Presuming it was one...

"Thank you, Catherine. You were right; the story was very beautiful, very moving... for many reasons," he said with a quiet but grateful tone in his voice, passing the book back to Catherine.

"Keep it," she gently stopped him. "So you can return to your new friend whenever you like."

Vincent's smile reached his eyes, and after a long beat, he looked at the fascinating book in his hands again. For a moment, his mind wandered back to the mysterious blue light at the underground lake, the rising mist and the chilly breeze. And to the master of that world, who despite the known story ending, may have still been roaming in it, composing his magical music and dreaming of a life filled with the most human need of all - love.

The late summer air was pleasant and not too hot that evening; a mild breeze, picking up every now and then, was cooling - the first unmistakable sign of the slowly approaching autumn in New York.

"You haven't told me yet what classics are we going to listen to tonight, Vincent. I thought we were going to that secluded spot in the park, where we can hear the music from the open stage," Catherine remarked curiously, as the man in question was leading her through the long-forgotten tunnels. It was a part of the underground she was not familiar with.

"It's not classical music this time," Vincent replied with an enigmatic smile. "But I am sure you will not regret it..."

Catherine raised her eyebrows but didn't press on him. She was more than obliged to follow him wherever he was leading them, since she'd become very fond of the concerts they have been irregularly "attending" throughout summer.

Finally, they reached a broken-through opening in the brick wall ahead of them.

"I discovered this place only a few days ago, when I looked at Father's maps of the tunnels," Vincent remarked. "The entrance was sealed, but I managed to... open it."

Catherine chuckled at his expression, making him smile. She could very well imagine his process of 'opening' - smashing that part of the wall to pieces, with bricks and dust flying everywhere. Usually, she would have had great respect from his extraordinary physical power. But at that moment, she couldn't suppress her amusement.

Vincent outstretched his hand towards her, inviting her inside of the small, narrow chamber behind. Catherine eagerly accepted it.

"I'm sorry; it's only a small space," he apologised, but noticed that she didn't mind at all.

The chamber was just about large enough for two people to sit in it. Vincent had made an effort to make it more cosy when he had brought several cushions earlier and fitted them on and against the cool stone floor.

But Catherine was even more impressed by the few candles she spotted in the corner. He lit them, before carefully taking his place on the cushions by her side. Her eyes twinkled with almost childlike excitement.

Feeling his physical presence so near, she couldn't be happier about having to sit close to him for a couple of hours.

"Where are we?" she asked curiously.

"Somewhere with great acoustics," he replied with an enigmatic smile on his face.

Suddenly, they heard voices speaking some lines from a distance above them. Catherine realised they must have been sitting somewhere under a theatre stage. She couldn't understand every single word, but still, the context sounded familiar to her.

Then, the first booming sounds of an organ echoed in the space around and above them, making her eyes grow wide in recognition and astonishment. She could feel the beat of the music vibrating deep inside of her.

"If we can't watch it together, at least we can listen to it together," Vincent said, smiling, seeing her reaction.

The Phantom of the Opera...

Catherine, instead of replying, smiled widely, her eyes filled with tears. Unable to resist, she laid her head against his chest and let out a sigh. Vincent dared to put his arm around her - slowly, gently, before leaning his cheek against the top of her head.

For the following almost three hours, words become superfluous. They dived into sweeping emotions and divine chords, touching them in the deepest parts of their beings - listening to the story of the man who had a heart that could have held the empire of the world, yet only asked to be 'someone', like everybody else...

"No, he is not a ghost; he is a man of heaven and earth, that is all."

- Gaston Leroux

