

# Shame

By Jessica Rae



He hid his face beneath his cloak, a gentle curtain of black between himself and the world. He walked in darkness, letting his feet carry him through the shadowed places and the realm of the night. Crumpling into a shattered blossom in the corner of his heart, lay the bit of hope that dared to reach for the light. Hope that those who saw his face would not cower in fear that he would rip them apart.

Gentle blue eyes gleamed above a row of razor teeth, a curse that he had not asked to bear. The golden hair that tumbled around his lean jaw hid the light from those eyes and they appeared much darker in the dimness, much like the light of his soul.

*"Shame,"* the shadows whispered - their clawing, reaching fingers like knives upon his dreams, slashing and ripping apart any loveliness of the future for someone of his kind.

He covered into himself, drawing the cloak tightly against the glimmer of dawn's sun.

*"Shame to be dream of being seen in a world of perfect people with such a face as yours,"* the fading shadows whispered, as they vanished with the rise of the day.

The new warmth of another sunrise wove its way around the cloak's great hood and touched the tear that covered the blur orbs with its crystal shine.

He had brought a young woman Below last night. He had found her in the park, alone. Much like he had also been found. Attacked by a merciless mob, she had been left to die. So had

he. Although she had probably been born in the normal middle-class way, in a comfortable hospital Above, he felt as if he himself had been born in pain, somewhere in the shadows, and the shadows had become his mother, much like a duckling imprints on the first thing it sees.

Sure, he had been raised by the kind people below. But the darkness followed his every step, as if it were a part of him.

He had tended to her injuries alongside Father, the leader of the tunnel folk, unsure of the feeling growing inside of his heart. The compassion he felt for her was so deep that it confused him. It was new. It was frightening. The days that followed, as she lay between this life and the next, were filled with turmoil inside of his heart, and he watched shame and hope battle for leadership in his thoughts.

She woke once, and he encouraged her. His gentleness overrode the shame and shushed it into a corner. She needed him right now. In the moment of giving, he forgot himself. He introduced himself as Vincent. She accepted that as the truth. At least she was not alone.

She slept again.

He watched. A broken guardian angel. Content to remain in the shadows that kept him concealed, he watched.

The day came that she woke from the fever, aware of her surroundings.

And she had questions. Questions he hoped he could truthfully answer.

She was an enigma to him. Never had he felt such a connection to someone. Realistically, he knew it was dangerous to bring people from Above down to the tunnels. But as he watched her stir and sit up among the mountain of blankets, that had protected her from tossing herself off the bed in her fevered state, he saw something regal about her. The way she carried herself, although a bit awkwardly from the pain of her healing injuries. She was an independent woman, not easily riled or ruffled. She had been wearing business attire when he had found her. This was a woman of the social life, someone who was making her way in the world. And someone had taken that beautiful progress and ripped it from her with force and crushed her dreams to the ground. He only hoped she was strong enough rise again.

His reverie was broken as she rose from the protection of the bed, feeling her way across the small, candlelit room. Of course, with her bandaged eyes, she could not use their glow to navigate. His heart was filled with compassion again, as she kept bumping into the furniture, trying to determine the layout of where she was.

Suddenly, she paused, as if sensing his presence, and she spoke. "I know you're there. You can come in."

He responded, gently, attempting to quell the panic that he had sensed in her heart, as she realized that she was effectively trapped in this place until the bandages came off.

"I'll read to you..."

She responded, a touch of misery in her tone, but also a dismal acceptance of her fate. "It won't help."

He considered for a moment, reality quite bold in its agreement that it truly would not help the situation, but it might help her nerves.

"It might. We can finish '*Great Expectations*.'" He spoke firmly, hoping that his taking control of the situation would help her feel safe. "Do you remember how it ends?"

She did not respond to this question, recognizing it for the deflection that it was.

"Vincent, I'm frightened -- I'm worried."

Her voice was small in the little room, and his heart ached.

"I know...I can feel it. You're getting your strength back. I'll get you some tea, the herb tea you liked."

"Okay," she conceded, and he quietly left to complete the errand. Once he was gone, she began removing the bandages that concealed her fate. She could wait no longer.

He had gone, moments ago, to send little Kipper on a journey to her world to obtain her favorite herbal tea. He would do anything within his power to alleviate the suffering that he knew she would feel once her condition was revealed to her. Upon his return to the room that she had been given for her recovery, she had discovered the extent of her injuries on her own, thanks to the reflective surface of an old car headlight left lying among the random objects in the eclectic room.

In that moment, he had felt the flood of pain, and shame, and rage that enveloped her with its cruel hands of finality. In that moment of heightened emotion, he had moved toward her, his only intent to comfort and drive the terror from her still-beautiful face. Instead, he had frightened her by his sudden reappearance, and the glimpse of his unusual face, which she had not seen until now. And she had reacted predictably, throwing her makeshift mirror directly at his towering form. He tried to duck, in the split second that he was given, but the metal collided with his head, sending a stab of pain through his skull.

Though unintentional, this caused a bit of a snarl to escape his lips and complete silence followed. Unable to decipher the overwhelming flood of emotions that poured into his empathetic soul, he turned and left the candlelit room. Pain, sorrow, shame – it all washed over him in waves. Drowning the fragile hope that still lay in his heart, a shudder ran through his towering form. So, she too had seen him for the terror that he was.

*Not so*, hope whispered, as it struggled to rise against the emotional deluge. *Not so*.

The sun kissed the golden hair and brushed it aside. The glittering tear left its perch in the blue eye and trickled down the tan face. *Not so*.

He took a deep breath and looked within. In the peaceful light of dawn, the darkness grumbled and snarled, lashing his weary heart with the threat of rejection. Closing his eyes against the light, he examined the flooding sensations.

She was broken. So was he.

She was afraid. So was he.

She was ashamed. So was he.

She was crying.

*So was he.*

His heart told him to return to the little room Below, immediately. His shame told him that she would reject him again, just like everyone else of her world.

*But she needs someone*, his heart argued, defiant against the darkness. *Just like you did.*

He opened troubled eyes again to the light of day. Trembling hands lifted the cloak higher upon his head, enveloping himself fully in its darkness. Turning, he slipped back into the shadow of the tunnel behind him, allowing steady feet to carry his gentle compassion back to the tunnel where his patient sat immobile with grief and fear.

He stood awkwardly in the doorway, for a moment, watching her with a gentle gaze. Weighing out the emotions again, sorting out her feelings and his own, he knew that this someone, whom he was this empathically connected to, had come into his life for a reason. She had no one else in her world, he was sure of that.

*Correction*, he thought to himself, taking a slow step into the room beyond the threshold. *She has me now.*

As she turned to look at him, he opened his mouth to speak.

Eloquence escaped him. Shame, his first mother, spoke for him. Her words, though painful, were the most beautiful introduction she could have chosen.

*"I've never regretted what I am... until now..."*

