

THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN

Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick is, according to *Locus*, the all-time leading award winner, living or dead, for short fiction, most of which has appeared in *Asimov's*. His recent books include *Starship: Flagship*, *Hazards*, *Stalking the Dragon*, and *Dreamwish Beasts and Snarks*. His remarkable new story may forever shift your perception of a certain cultural icon.

A*pril 4:*

What am I doing here?

We have no servants, we never go out, we never have company. The furniture is all decrepit and ugly, the place always smells musty, and although the rest of the village has electrical power, Victor refuses to run it up the hill to the castle. We read by candlelight and we heat with fireplaces.

This is not the future I had envisioned for myself.

Oh, I know, we made the usual bargain—he got my money and my body, and I got his title. I don't know what I thought being the Baroness von Frankenstein would be like, but this isn't it. I knew he owned a centuries-old castle with no improvements, but I didn't think we'd live in it full-time.

Victor can be so annoying. He constantly whistles this tuneless song, and when I complain he apologizes and then starts *humming* it instead. He never stands up to that ill-mannered little hunchback that he's always sending out on errands. And he's a coward. He can never just come to me and say "I need money again." Oh, no, not Victor. Instead he sends that ugly little toady who's rude to me and always smells like he hasn't washed.

And when I ask what the money's for this time, he tells me to ask Victor, and Victor just mumbles and stammers and never gets around to answering.

Yesterday he sent Igor off to buy a generator. I thought he'd finally realized the need to upgrade the castle. I should have known better. It's in the basement, where he's using it for one of his simple-minded experiments that never brings us fame or fortune. He can use the generator's power to make a dead frog's leg twitch (as if anyone cares), but he can't use it to heat this drafty, ugly, boring castle.

I hate my life.

M*ay 13:*

"My creature lives!"

That's a hell of a scream to wake up to in the middle of the night. Of course his damned creature lives. The little bastard nagged me for money again today.

M_{ay 14:}

Well, finally I saw the results of all those months' work today. Victor was so damned proud of this hideous monster he'd created. Let me tell you: it is ugly as sin, it can barely speak, you'd need a microscope to find its IQ, and it smells worse than Igor. *This* is what he's been spending my fortune on?

"What is it?" I ask, and Victor explains that it isn't an it, it's a he. He is sitting on the edge of a table, just staring stupidly at a wall. Victor takes me by the arm (he always has chemicals on his hands; I hate it when he touches me) and pulls me over toward the creature. "What do you think?" he asks. "Do you really want to know?" I answer, and he says yes he really does, so I spend the next five minutes telling him exactly what I think. He doesn't say a word; he just stands there with his lower lip trembling and the same expression on his face that my brother had when his puppy drowned all those years ago.

The creature makes a soothing noise and reaches out to Victor, as if to comfort him. I slap his hand and tell him never to touch a human. He whimpers and puts his hands in front of his face, as if he expects me to beat him. I wouldn't even if I could; this blouse is hard enough to clean without having to wash any disgusting monster yuck off it.

"Don't frighten him!" snaps Victor.

Which is a perfect example of how out of touch with reality he is. The creature is about six football players and a weightlifter all rolled into one, and I'm just a helpless woman who spends an inordinate amount of time wondering why she didn't marry Bruno Schmidt. All right, he's bald and fat and his teeth are rotting and he's got a glass eye, but he's a banker, and his house doesn't have a monster in the basement.

M_{ay 25:}

I went fishing in the stream today, since Victor is too busy making notes to notice that we're almost out of food. (Of course, we wouldn't run out so often if we had a refrigerator, but then we have no place to plug it in anyway.)

So I'm standing there in my rubber boots, fishing rod in hand, and I hear a noise behind me, and I turn to look because a woman alone can't ever be too careful, and what has happened is that Victor has let the creature out for some exercise, or air, or whatever hideous eternally damned creatures get let out for.

When I turn to face him he stops and stares at me, and I say, "You lay a finger on me and I'll scratch your eyes out!"

He kind of shudders and walks around me in a huge semi-circle, and winds up about thirty yards downstream, where he stares at the fish. Somehow they seem to know he's not trying to catch them, and they all cluster around his ankles when he wades into the water, and he smiles like an idiot and points to the fish.

"Fine," I say. "You catch four for dinner and maybe I'll even cook you one."

Up to that minute I would have sworn that he didn't understand a word, that he only reacted to tones of voice, but he leans over, scoops up four fish, and tosses them onto the grass where they start flopping around.

"Not bad," I admit. "Now kill them and we'll take them back to the castle."

"I don't kill things," he says in a horrible croaking voice, which is when I discover he can speak.

"Okay, eat yours while it's alive," I say. "What do I care?"

He stares at me for a minute, and finally he says, "I am not hungry after all," and he begins wandering back to the castle.

"Fine!" I shout after him. "There will be more for us!"

If there's one thing I can't stand, it's an uppity creature.

M_{ay 27:}

"Don't you realize, my dear," says Victor, his narrow chest puffing out with pride, "that no one has ever accomplished this before?"

"I believe it," I say, looking at the creature, who seems to get uglier every day. "But that doesn't mean it's anything to brag about."

"You just don't understand," says Victor, and he's pouting now, like he does whenever I point out the obvious to him. "I have created life out of the disparate pieces of the dead!"

"I understand perfectly," I say. "Who do you think's been paying the bills for all this?" I point at the creature, who is busy staring off into space. "That left arm should have been my new stove. That right arm is my carpet. The left leg is my automobile. The right leg is a central heating system. The torso is my new furniture. And the head is indoor plumbing that works."

"You are being too materialistic, my dear," says Victor. "I wish I could make you see that this creature is of inestimable value to science."

I look at the mess my husband has made of his laboratory. "If you're going to keep him," I say, "at least give him a mop and teach him how to use it."

J_{une 1:}

I am sitting on a chair I have dragged out to the garden because I can't stand the smell of Victor's chemicals, and today I am reduced to reading *Life* and *Look*, because the Bavarian edition of *The Wall Street Journal* is late again. I had to sell all my stocks to pay for Victor's endless experiments, but I still follow them and compute how much I'd be worth if I had just married Bruno Schmidt, or maybe some doctor who, if a patient died, let him *stay* dead.

Anyway, I have dragged a small table out to hold the magazines and my iced tea. I could have asked Igor to do it, but I'd sooner die than ask him for a favor. So I am sitting there reading, and I hear an earth-shaking *clomp-clomp-clomp*, and sure enough it is the creature, out for his daily airing.

"Good afternoon, Baroness," he croaks.

I just glare at him.

He notices my magazines. "Are you reading?" he asks.

"No," I say coldly. "I am speaking to an animated nightmare from the deepest pits of hell."

"I don't mean to distress you," he says.

"Good," I said. "Go halfway around the castle and try not distressing me there."

He sighs and walks away, and I go back to reading. After a few minutes my magazine is covered by a huge shadow, and I look up and the creature is standing next to me.

"I thought I told you to—"

His hand juts forward with a delicate golden flower in it. "For you," he says.

"Thanks," I say, taking it from him and tossing it onto the ground. "Now go away."

Maybe it is the way the sun hits him at just that moment, but I could swear a tear trickles down his cheek as he turns and walks away.

J_{une 3:}

Today I caught him in the wood-paneled library that should have been my pride and joy but is now just my daily escape from the boring reality of my life.

"What are you doing here?" I demand as I enter.

"I was bored, just sitting around," he answers. "I asked permission to go into town, but the Master"—that's Victor—"doesn't want anyone to see me yet. He told me to read some of his books instead."

"Can you read?" I ask.

"Of course I can," he replies. "Is it so surprising?"

"Fine," I say with a shrug. "Go read. You'll find Victor's scientific books on the other wall."

"I have no interest in them," he says.

"That's not my problem," I say. "I can't help but notice that you're standing right next to a row of romances by Jane Austen and the Brontes. They'll be wasted on you."

"I think I would like romantic stories," he says.

"That's disgusting!"

"Do you really think so?" he asks curiously.

"I said so, didn't I?" I reply.

"Perhaps that is why the Master spends his nights in the laboratory," he says.

I pull a thick book off the shelf. I feel like pummeling him with it, but I don't think he feels pain, so finally I just thrust it in his hands and tell him to get out of my sight.

June 4:

He lumbers up to me while I am outside reading the *Journal*, which has finally arrived.

"What is it now?" I demand irritably.

"I have come to thank you," he says.

"For what?" I ask.

"For *this*." He lays the book on the table. "I read *A Christmas Carol* last night. It was very uplifting." He pauses for a second, staring into my eyes with his cold dead orbs. "It is comforting to know that even Scrooge could change."

"Are you comparing me to Scrooge?" I ask angrily.

"Certainly not," he answers. Another tiny pause. "Scrooge was a man."

I stand up and lean forward, bracing my hands on the table and glaring at him. I am about to give him a piece of my mind, to explain that I'm going to speak to Victor and insist that we donate him to some university, when a big hairy spider appears from nowhere and races across my hand and starts crawling up my arm. I scream and shake my arm, and the spider falls to the ground.

"Kill it!" I yell.

He kneels down and picks the spider up in his hand. "I told you the other day," he says. "I don't kill things."

"I don't care what you told me!" I snap. "Stomp on it, or crush it in your hand—but just kill the damned thing!"

"I have *been* dead, Baroness," he replies somberly. "It is not an experience I would wish upon anyone or anything else."

And so saying, he carries the spider about fifty feet away and places it on the branch of a young sapling.

I don't even notice when he comes back to pick up the book. I am too busy thinking about what he said.

June 7:

The next day it is *Wuthering Heights* and then it's *Anna Karenina* and finally he reads *Gone With the Wind*, which is making so much money in the bookstores that even Victor couldn't run through the royalty checks.

"You're developing quite a taste for romance," I say as I find him in the library again. It is the first time I've initiated a conversation with him. I don't know why. I suppose if you spend enough nights alone you'll talk to *anyone*.

"They are heartbreaking," he says with a look of infinite sorrow. "I thought romances had happy endings, like *A Christmas Carol*, but they don't. Heathcliff and Catherine die. Anna and Vronsky die. Scarlett loses Ashley, and then she loses Rhett."

"Not *all* romances end unhappily," I say. I think I am arguing with him, but I wonder if I am not trying to comfort him.

"I remember, as though through a mist, the story of Arthur and Guenevere." A body-wrenching sigh. "It ended poorly. And so did Romeo and Juliet." He shakes his massive head sadly. "But it does explain a lot."

"What do a bunch of tragic romances explain?" I ask.

"Why you are so bitter and unhappy," replies the creature. "The Master is a wonderful man—brilliant, generous, thoughtful, and he is constantly saying that he is very much in love with you. Clearly you must feel the same emotions toward him or you would not have married him, and because all such romances end in tragedy, you behave as you do from resentment at what must be."

"That will be quite enough!" I say. "Take whatever book you want, and then keep out of my sight for the rest of the day."

He picks up a book and walks to the door.

Just before he leaves, I ask: "Did Victor really say he loved me?"

June 8:

The toady brings me my breakfast on a wooden tray while I am still in bed. I stare at his misshapen body and ugly face for a moment, then have him set the tray down on my nightstand.

"What is this all about?" I demand.

"The creature is afraid that he may have hurt your feelings," answers Igor. "I tried to explain that it is impossible, but he insisted on preparing your breakfast. Then at the last minute he was too frightened of you to bring it here himself."

"What do you mean, it's impossible to hurt my feelings?" I say.

"I have never known it to happen, Baroness," he answers, "and I have been with the Master longer than you have."

"Maybe we'll have to do something about that," I say ominously.

"Please don't," he says so earnestly that I stop and stare at him. "You have abused me, physically and verbally, since the day the Master brought you to the castle, and I have never complained. But if my services are terminated, where is an illiterate hunchback who left school at the age of eight to support his ailing mother to find employment? The townspeople laugh at me, and the children tease me and make up terrible songs about me. They even throw things at me." He pauses, and I can see he is struggling to control his emotions. "No one in the town—in *any* town—will ever give me a job."

"You're still supporting your mother?" I ask.

He nods his head. "And my widowed sister and her three little ones."

I just stare at him for a minute. Finally I say, "Get out of here, you ugly little wart."

"You won't speak to the Master about terminating me?" he persists.

"I won't speak to Victor," I tell him.

"Thank you," he says gratefully.

"He probably wouldn't have listened anyway," I say.

"You are wrong," says Igor.

"About what?"

"If it comes to a choice," says Igor with conviction, "he will always side with the woman he loves."

"If he loves me so much, why is he always working in that damned laboratory?" I say. "Perhaps for the same reason the creature did not bring you the tray himself," says Igor.

I am still thinking about that long after he has gone and the eggs and coffee have both grown cold.

June 9:

Today is the first day that I willingly go down to the laboratory since the day after Victor created the creature. The clutter is awful and the stench of chemicals is worse.

Victor looks startled and asks me what's wrong.

"Nothing is wrong," I say.

"The townspeople aren't coming to burn the castle down?"

"It's an eyesore," I agree, "but no, no one's coming."

"Then what are you doing down here?" he asks.

"I thought it was time you showed me what you've been doing day and night."

Suddenly his whole homely face lights up. "You mean it?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" I say.

There follows one of the most boring afternoons I have ever spent in my life, as Victor proudly shows me every experiment, failures as well as successes, plus all his notes and all his calculations, and then explains in terms no one could possibly understand exactly how he created the creature and brought it back to life.

"That's fascinating," I lie when he's finally done.

"It *is*, isn't it?" he says as if it is some great revelation.

I check my wristwatch. "I have to go upstairs now."

"Oh?" he says, clearly disappointed. "Why?"

"To make you your favorite dinner."

He smiles like a child looking forward to opening his Christmas presents. I try to remember what he likes to eat.

June 14:

I encounter the creature in the library.

"Igor thanks you."

"It was nothing," I say.

"By raising his salary, his mother can now remain where she is. *That* is something."

"I looked over the ledgers," I answer. "He went fifteen years without a pay raise."

"He is very grateful," says the creature.

"If I fired him," I say, "Victor would just go out and find an uglier, clumsier assistant. Handling money and running his life in an orderly fashion are not his strong points."

"He seems much happier this past week."

"He is obviously pleased with the results of his experiment," I say.

The creature stares at me, but doesn't respond.

"Have you found any happy romances yet?" I ask.

"No," he admits.

"Then since the tragic ones upset you, why keep reading?"

"Because one must always have hope."

I am about to say that hope is a greatly overrated virtue. Instead, much against my will, I find myself admiring him for clinging to it.

"For every Romeo, there must be a Juliet," he continues. "For every Tristan, an

Isolde.” He pauses. “There are those who say we are put on this Earth only to reproduce, but the Master has shown there are other ways to create life. Therefore, we must be here for a higher purpose—and what higher purpose can there be than love?”

I stare at him for a moment, and then find myself pulling *Pride and Prejudice* off the shelf. I hand it to him, and do not even shudder when his fingers touch mine. “Read this,” I say. “Not every romance ends tragically.”

I wonder what is happening to me.

June 16:

Victor looks upset as he sits down at the table for dinner.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

He frowns. “Yes. Something is missing.”

“From the table?” I ask, looking around. “What is it?”

He shakes his head. “No, not from the table, from the laboratory’s office.”

“Has someone stolen your notes?” I asked.

He looks confused. “Stranger than that,” he says. “My cot is missing.”

“Your cot?” I repeat.

“Yes,” he replies. “You know—where I sleep when I finish working late at night.”

“How odd,” I say.

“Who would steal a bed?” he asks.

“It seems very strange,” I agree. “Fortunately there’s another bed in the castle.”

He looks confused again, and then he stares at me for a long moment, and then, suddenly, he smiles.

July 2:

“Are you sure?” asks Victor.

“We can’t turn him loose in the world,” I say. “What could he do to support himself? I joked about it with him this afternoon and said he could always become a wrestler, that he looks the part of a villain.”

“What did he say?”

“That he wants to be loved, not feared—and that he doesn’t want to hurt anyone.”

Victor shakes his head in amazement. “What kind of brain did Igor bring me, I wonder?”

“A better one, I think, than you had any right to expect,” I say.

“Almost certainly,” says Victor. “But that will have no effect on the way people will react to his appearance.”

“It could destroy him,” I say.

“Literally,” agrees Victor.

“If we want him to stay,” I tell him, “then you know what we have to do.”

Victor looks at me. “You are quite right, my dear,” he says.

July 3:

I find him in the library, where he spends most of his time these days. He is sitting on the oversized chair that Victor and Igor constructed for him, but the second he sees me he gets to his feet.

“Have you spoken to the Master?” he asks nervously.

“Yes,” I say.

“And?”

“And he has agreed.”

His entire massive body seems to relax.

"Thank you," he says. "No man, no *person*," he amends with a smile toward me, "should live his life alone, even one such as myself."

"She won't be pleasing to the eye," I warn him. *Or the ear, or the nose*, I want to add.

"She will be pleasing to *my* eye," he answers, "for I will look past her face to the beauty that lies within."

"I'm surprised you want this," I say. "I'd have thought all those tragic romances would discourage you."

"It may end unhappily," he acknowledges. "But that is better than it never beginning. Would you not agree?"

I think of Victor, and I nod my head. "Yes," I say. "Yes, I would agree."

Then there is nothing left but to send Igor out to start visiting the graveyards again.

I hope Victor finishes work on the new project by Christmas. I can hardly wait for the five of us to sit around the tree, a happy family unit. Maybe it won't end well, but as my new friend says, that is no reason for it not to begin.

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