

## The Sacrifice

liz sheldon

**E**lizabeth found herself uneasy as she carefully changed out of the wedding dress, unable to keep her thoughts from racing as she undid the troublesome buttons that Victor should be helping her with—where was he? Why had he dismissed her in so strange a mood, and with that pistol that he thought she had not seen? She had seen it, of course, for how could she miss the peculiar hardness amidst the softness of his shirt, just as she had not missed that horrible anxiety return to him, which she had hoped was gone. His face had been white as bone when he suggested she retire early, his eyes wild and full of fear as he asked her to wait for him in their room. She acquiesced; even as old doubts began to rekindle. Was it that other woman Elizabeth was certain had caught his heart, had cast that first distance between them? His letter had assured her otherwise, but Elizabeth had seen that awful faraway gaze more than thrice over the last week as they prepared for the wedding, even as he reassured everyone with gaiety and smiles. But surely, he did love her, she thought, as she pulled on the nightdress, or he would not have married her. She had given him every opportunity, but here they were, and she was Mrs. Frankenstein.

Perhaps, she wondered as she moved to pack away the gown, it was that strange secret that weighed on him that he would not tell. She did not understand his secrecy at first, but as the day he had promised to reveal all got closer and closer, Elizabeth felt herself getting more and more wracked with nerves. Perhaps he had indeed killed poor Henry? She hadn't believed the rumours, but all this misery he dragged 'round with him... Or perhaps not as dire—a child somewhere, maybe Ingolstadt or France. She could handle that, but she was unsure if it warranted such dread in his fevered eyes whenever he looked at her with those put-upon smiles. Or had he some debts—yes, perhaps this was it—and a debtor had followed them here. That could explain the gun, maybe, or at least his dismissal of her.

That dismissal. Once she would have gone easily and sat in this room perfectly happily, but now... Elizabeth felt all those emotions Caroline had said were unladylike and uncouth. She was frustrated and tired, and wanted to just yell as loud as she could. She was supposed to be happy, everyone said she would be. This was her purpose in life, to be married to Victor. So why did she feel so drained and unhappy? That little voice that sounded like some perfect version of herself said, It's because he is unhappy and distracted that you are too. You are just a good wife. But that wasn't entirely true. It didn't feel honest. It felt like what was expected. And nothing had been going as expected. On her wedding day, she had thought she'd be happy—told she would be. Caroline had always said her wedding day was the best of her life, but when the day had arrived for Elizabeth—had it only been a few hours?—she felt nothing but a strange fear and melancholy. Alphonse had said it was normal for a bride to feel this way, and she wondered then and now why that was if this was supposed to be a woman's happy purpose. Shouldn't she feel satisfied, complete? Victor had seemed to be, and when they were at the altar, his eyes had shone so full of joy as never before. It seemed everyone was happy, but Elizabeth could not muster it. She still could not move past that other, sinister voice that had begun to whisper the moment Victor had returned that there was no happiness on the horizon.

She shook her head and let it fall in her hands for a moment before composing herself once more. Victor would be displeased to see her as such, and it would surely ruin what joy there was left to be found in the night. Elizabeth allowed herself one more sigh, then moved to survey herself in the mirror, to put eyes on this new Mrs. Frankenstein. She should look her best for when he returned, to salvage what happiness could be had for the rest of this night. But her best did not seem to be there, for her reflection was wan and gaunt—gaunter than she knew he liked. His expression had said as much when they reunited those eleven days previous, and she had felt that little twinge of annoyance as she read in his eyes that sour flash of momentary distaste with her grief-struck frame. Never mind that Victor had looked substantially worse, no matter that she had lost a dear friend in Clerval just as he had, there was still that surprised distaste, even as he had pretended it was not there and said what a beautiful bride she was. Still, Elizabeth frowned at herself in the mirror as she took in the intricate hair and the lace nightgown that was rubbing uncomfortably at her collarbone and shoulders. She missed the soft cottons of her childhood garb, unassuming and straightforward, allowing for movement, which she had been barred from wearing once she had turned thirteen. Now there was this, but—

There was a slight movement in the corner of the room, by the door. Elizabeth could not make out anything more in the mirror, and she turned, opening her mouth to greet her new husband, when—nothing escaped her but a gasp, pushed from her like a sharp blow to the stomach. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. The creature before her eyes—for she could not yet identify it as anything else, her mind wouldn't allow her—loomed taller in the doorway than any man she had ever seen, which it had just gently shut. Its hair was a black mane, its skin taut to its skull as if

horribly dehydrated and starved all at once. Its lips were blackened, its eyes a strange, electric glow, and her numb mind took in the hints of careful but crude stitching that laced the skin at the joint. It took a step towards her, and she drew in a breath to scream when suddenly, a voice emanated from the creature and arrested her. It was melodic, a deep and masculine voice, and to her utter confusion, it was tinged with earnestness.

“I do apologize for intruding, but it was time. May I?” Elizabeth stared a moment, then her gaze dropped to the hand he offered. She took it on instinct, thoroughly numb in fear and shock, and he almost recoiled in what she vaguely discerned was surprise, before leading her to one of the chairs by the window. He took the other and moved it across the room before settling into it himself—for he was a man, she could see that now. He watched her steadily, and after a moment, her voice returned, though faltering.

“What... do you want? Who are you?” She could not take her eyes off him, and she watched as his brow jumped once more in surprise before resuming the hard stare, full of rage and sadness, yet a strange peace as well that kept her from falling apart for a reason she could not understand.

“I am making good on my promise; he imposed himself upon what should have been my nuptials, and I told him I would return the favour.” He watched her carefully, and though Elizabeth could not make sense of this at first, a realization then hit her like a lightning bolt: this must be the secret. Nothing else could be as upon his mind than this creature, so clearly full of anger towards Victor. For he was angry at Victor—she could see it in the curl of his lip. She looked away then and felt a manic sort of calm fall over her like a snowfall, cold and quiet.

“This was not a secret to keep, Victor,” she murmured to herself, and the being before her leaned forward, head cocked like the puppy she had once had. She met his gaze again. “Tell me. Please.”

And so, he told her, and she listened in near disbelief as this creature told her of his creation and immediate abandonment, his attempts at good and kindness, and the rejection he faced. She felt horror at his tentative relaying of the tale of little William and poor Justine, and disgust at both this creature and Victor, who knew—he knew and said nothing! She heard tell of his pact with her husband, and her husband’s breaking of that vow. She shuddered at the destruction of ‘Eve,’ as this creature called her, and felt her face blanch at the admittance of guilt for Henry’s death. He told her of his threat and then simply watched her with baleful eyes. Elizabeth sat in silence long afterwards, absently picking at the skin around her fingernails and watching the storm outside, which drew ever closer to that small window. Finally, as the creature began to rise, she held out a hand. Wait.

“You gave him this warning, that you would be here on our wedding night?” She watched carefully as he nodded, still inching forward at a snail’s pace. “Stop. Those

words?” He did stop, and she took that opportunity to rise and move back to the mirror. She had done this as a child, until Victor had caught her and laughed; she had watched her expression, not out of vanity but out of study, in an effort to control her face. It was pale just now, and she saw two ugly spots of red rise in her cheeks. “He knew this, and he is not here? He left me on my own, knowing you were coming? I don’t understand.” She turned sharply to the creature, who had frozen, seeming rather at a loss. “What, did he think you were coming for him?”

How? Why would he even marry me, either way?”

“Love?” the creature offered quietly, apparently unsure of what was happening.

Elizabeth heard herself laugh, a bitter and high-pitched sound she did not recognize.

“No. that is not love. Love would have been letting me go, facing whatever fate he believed was coming to him. That is not love. It is selfish. Ha!” She watched as the creature sat back down, and she began to pace, her hands mechanically flexing and then closing into fists. “Always so selfish, but I ignored it because he was brilliant and because I was supposed to—do you know, they took me in to be his wife? Did he ever tell you that?”

The creature shook his head and looked as confused and curious as one could with skin so taut and inflexible. “I was an orphan, maybe three years old, and the Frankensteins took me in. Never their daughter, always their daughter-to-be. I was never even able to call them mother and father, those who raised me—no! They were not mine, but I was his. And when she died, then I was her. Everyone looked to me for comfort, care, and parenting—Alphonse was right there! And I was so young, and still ill with the last of the fever, but I was mother now. Victor went to school, on his quest for glory, and I was a mother to those I wished to call siblings, caretaker for a man who should have cared for me. All my life! Victor got to leave, and I watched those I love suffer and drop like flies. All my life, for other people.

“And now I still am. I don’t even get to be what they procured me for, not a wife to this man who I so long believed was good—you have shown me he is not, have you not? No. All I am, and am doomed to be, is the sacrifice for the gains of others. For Victor’s happiness. Your revenge. For the sake of the Frankenstein children, for Alphonse, who I know loved me, but still, I could not call him ‘father’. Only a pawn, when the only thing I had to look forward to was being the queen.” She pointed suddenly to the creature, who appeared enthralled.

“I wanted to go to school once, you know. Henry had wanted to study literature, and the two of us had fancied I would join him. But Victor and his parents laughed. Henry forgot about literature in favour of the colonies, and I was without hope. I was entrenched in this life chosen for me by others.” She collapsed into the chair again, all at once feeling quite drained. “I have been good, done as I was asked, done what was expected. Now, I am doomed to die because of someone else’s choices. I suppose my

only value was as his object.”

Silence followed, then she heard that beautiful voice, inconsistent with the face Victor had bestowed, speak ever so gently.

“I understand.”

She raised her head to look and considered him critically, looking for something in the dull glow of those yellowed eyes.

“Yes. Yes, I suppose you do. You can see. I’m a sort of corpse, too, then. Victor’s own corpse bride. But do not equate yourself with me. You cannot.” She glared at him, and he seemed uneasy with the comparison between him and his maker, grimacing painfully. “No.

You are not any better, hurting others out of selfishness. William, Justine, Henry. Me. You take and give nothing. Maybe you could have been better, I can see that, but the fact that you are here.... You are no better. Your pain does not equal mine. Equate yourself with him, not me.” She looked for any anger in response, but he bowed his head and turned from her to look out the window behind her, which she realized he had been doing since he had arrived. She turned to follow his gaze and distantly saw Victor, who looked out from the front door into the darkening night before returning to the inside of the house. She turned back to her husband’s counterpart, who caught her gaze.

“He’s looking for me. He has been looking since he left you, but I have been here before you both. He will look still in vain.” He gave a small shrug, and his eyes held a warning Elizabeth knew better than to ignore. But she saw something else in his eyes, which lit a tiny spark in her—hope.

“You want to hurt him, yes? Let me leave him instead, abandon him as he abandoned you! Surely that would hurt more than my death, knowing that I left him? Let me have my life, and you can have each other.” She waited with bated breath, and her heart seemed to shudder as he considered carefully. But when he spoke, it dropped.

“Would you come away with me, be my new Eve? I would love you as you deserved, and you would want for nothing—”

“NO!” She felt the word escape her body without prompt, and her stomach twisted at the anger that flashed her way. She desperately tried again. “I wish to be free of ownership, do you not see? To trade one for the other would surely destroy me, nonetheless, render me nothing more than flesh. All I have been intended for is to procreate and rot. Can you not let me have the happiness you were denied? Could you find the kindness I know you sorely desired, and have it for someone else?” She looked again for that inkling of what had given her hope, but it was gone. He shook his head.

“He must know it was me, and you would certainly return to him. You are a woman, after all.” He began to move towards her again, and she bared her teeth, letting herself

feel the full extent of the rage she had been taught so long to ignore.

“Then you are a monster. You both are, cursing others because you have been cursed, unfeeling for those other than yourselves. Well, I curse you.” She spat at his feet, and he paused. “You men, who think you have the right to rule, render those around you as you see fit, while we must turn ourselves mindless and pleasant for nothing more than your letting us exist. Sink us lower while raising yourselves. I wish I had never been found by the Frankensteins. I wish I had died with my mother. I wish you had already killed him and would just let me be.” She stopped, breathing heavily, and reached blindly—her hairbrush—and threw it as hard as she could at him. It bounced off his chest, and he looked at her with that pity that sickened her now where it had given some sliver of optimism not moments before. She met his gaze, resolved.

“I will give you two options, madam. Accept, or do not.” He looked at her without guile, and she took a deep breath, eying him and the door he blocked. She would never get past him. She clenched her jaw, let her hands curl into fists. She would not go quietly.