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Opening Extract from...

The Monster's Wife

Written by Kate Horsley

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THE MONSTER'S WIFE

Kate Horsley

For my mother, who taught me to tell stories,

and in memory of my father the mad

scientist.

1

Hoy, Orkney, August 1798

Life changed when he came to the island, the foreign doctor from further away than anyone cared to know. The night he landed, a storm rose and blew boats towards the Northern ice floes, swept Dolphins aground to lie panting on the white scythe of beach. New lambs were stolen and hens found with their throats torn out. Kirk-going women left their cooking and ran wild, reeling home soused to take the distaff to their husbands' heads. All were agreed that this pestilence followed the foreign doctor to the island as Hell follows the pale rider.

'All' was counted as the score and ten who lived in Quoy, the only village on Hoy, though that number varied year on year as a fresh crop of bones fell under the hill and new small islanders were born. Nearest the sea was Old Cormick's tumbledown shack, then Neaquoy, then Norquoy. Beyond the Norquoys lived the Kilpatricks. The turf-roofed crofts of more Norquoys plus a rabble of Moodies, Fletts and Umbesetters dotted the greensward up towards the summit of the mountain with its shawl of grey.

Each croft had its byre and barn and fields of oats or barley and this year, as every year, Oona and May offered their help with the harvest, bending their waists to the oats and binding sheaves. People always gave them a pat of butter, smoked fish or a scoop of ground oats for their labour. Ever since the doctor came, people were saying the year would be thin. No rain, poor seed. The moment he landed, oats and barley soured in the ground and the shoots looked mean.

May was in need of money for her wedding, so she went to work in the big house, scrubbing laundry and keeping the fires lit for its new tenant, Doctor Frankenstein.

Oona had it on good authority that he landed at night, somewhere up the coast from Cormick's beach. Stopping by the Smokehouse, she'd heard Cormick saying you could see the furrow where they'd pulled the boat in, and for once, people believed him. He got a free drink out of Big Dod because of it and was happy and said it was a fine thing the laird had done to leave the big house to rot, because strangers could come, strangers who'd buy his fish.

How the doctor got to the big house from Cormick's beach was anyone's guess. Down by the laundry pool, where the women slapped and pounded their men's breeks, they laughed and leaned closer to May, who was sure to know the gossip. And there was always gossip in Quoy, what with Andrew and Stuart smuggling whisky and Margaret Umbesetter's rowdy boys forever in trouble and what everyone knew was a romance between Hamish Yule, the Minister, and Oona's Granny, Mrs Scollay. For slow news weeks, there were oft-told tales, like the time Cormick had kissed a young girl at the Umbesetters' bridecog and was almost tarred and feathered for it. Or the time Oona's father drifted back from fishing in the North waters frozen into a thing of diamond, his hands still clutching the tiller.

Now was hardly a time of slow news, what with Napoleon's ships gathering in the firth, threatening war. But that talk was worrying and doom-laden. It was far more entertaining to hear Fiona babble about how it was a rickshaw the doctor came on, such as Reverend Yule said Indian princes used.

"No, no, a barouche box surely," said Janet of Flett in her haughtiest voice and looked down her long nose at May, who was rinsing out bed sheets upstream from her. For only May had seen him, and yet it had been a full week now and she'd barely opened her lips on the subject.

"Most likely," began May and paused to savour the spectacle of nine women leaning closer to her, "he stumbled through the mud in the pitch dark and could not find the door key and slept that first night with the pigs in the byre." But she said it wryly, as if it might not be the whole truth, and turned back to her sheets.

The other women turned back with a sigh that came from all their lips at once like a chorus. Oona counted herself above idle talk and was ashamed to be seen wheedling for tidbits like everyone else. She needn't have bothered. On the subject of the doctor, May was resolutely silent. Two weeks after she began her labour as a housemaid, all she would say about it was that she was working her fingers to stubs and far too tired to come over late so that she and Oona could pass a clay pipe between them and talk. Nor did she have time to sit on the beach and eat her piece with Oona, or even walk under the stars to listen to the burn rattling out to sea the way they'd always done.

For the first time in her life Oona smoked her clay pipe on the beach in solitary silence. She swigged rough cider, feeling it was more of a sin to do so alone, but caring little. Her thoughts were wilful and returned unbidden to the doctor. She fancied he was tall, thin and exquisitely dressed, a dandy with a strange accent. Now he stood at the prow of a small vessel, his luggage piled high behind him. Now he dined alone at the head of a polished table upon which candles burned in sticks

graven with imps, flickering light upon the frozen snarls of mounted fox and boar and the old, gilt-framed ghosts that lined the walls.

He was always lonely in her imaginings, that brave and chivalrous man, Doctor Frankenstein. So that, before she ever laid eyes on him, Oona dreamt of a life by his side. Keeping him company as he strained his eyes over medical journals, long after midnight rang out on the grand Swiss clocks. Bidding the maid light the tapers. Sitting at the fireside to embroider. Wearing the fine silks and satins befitting a gentleman's wife.

She skimmed stones, seven, ten, thirty of them, one for each humdrum person in Quoy. Not one of *them* worth daydreaming about. Not one of them as dear to her as May was, damn her eyes.

2

Oona fancied that the three long days and nights Jonah spent in the belly of the whale were neither as dark nor as foul as her week had been. No May to divert her and nothing but jobs to do for Granny. Now, when May finally had time to spend with her, she found herself on a beach that stank of carrion and was quite as dark as a sea monster's guts, abroad in a storm, with sideways rain burning her cheeks. As for Jonah's self-sacrifice, it was nothing to hers. For she had put aside her quarrel with May to follow her to the brink of the raging sea on some mysterious errand and a thankless task it was, too.

"See there?" May pointed into the darkness.

"That black shadow in the black night sky?"

"No! That jagged trench, hare-brain." The wind whisked the last word away from them.

Oona strained her eyes. She could just make out the lone candle burning in the window of Cormick's dwelling. It cast enough light to expose a shadowy darkness on the sand in front of the shack. It seemed to be the trench May spoke of. "It's no more than a noust, May, such as the fishermen build for their boats in winter." Even as she spoke the words, though, she thought this one looked rougher than usual.

"That's where the doctor landed according to Old Cormick. He was beside himself."

"Cormick's always beside himself and he's always beside some ale. That's why he tells so many tall tales."

“I believe this tall tale’s true.” May tugged her sleeve. “Come on.”

Oona rolled her eyes, knowing the gesture would be lost in the darkness. "So you led me here at the witching hour to prove that old drunk's story? I thought you knew more about how the doctor arrived here than anyone."

"Ruffled you, did it?” May laughed. “Well, perhaps if you do as I say tonight, you’ll discover more."

“Don’t care to!” Oona retorted, yet she found herself following May's footsteps across the wet rocks.

The sea spewed freezing water at them. It was hard to stay upright, let alone move forward, so they went slowly, picking a toehold here, bending there to stop from slipping.

Clouds parted and the moon shone. All at once the beach lay before them like a picture in Reverend Yule’s storybooks. Perhaps Jonah had felt this way when the whale finally puked him out from the darkness.

Rocks red as skinned things were splayed out in front of them. A white crescent shivered in the tide. Oona thought it was the moon reflected in the water, but when they came nearer to it, she saw a small eye, the dark gouge of a mouth.

It was another dead dolphin. They had been washing up for two weeks now, making a cold pilgrimage ashore. There were five tonight. Oona ached to see their gleaming bodies laid out like a path to the shack. The way they smiled at their deaths was the saddest thing of all.

At the edge of the jagged hole, they stopped and looked down. Bobbing in the tide was a fishing boat loaded with crates. The word Elver was licked round the

prow in white. The name and a strange head, half girl half seal, whittled into the prow, told Oona that the old tub was one of Cormick's vessels, heavy with his catch by the smell of it. A rope leading up from it was pinioned to the land above with a slab of rock.

Oona pressed her shawl to her nose. "Foul!"

"Oh quit your carping. You put on airs for no better reason than that your Granny taught you letters. A stranger would think you weren't come from fisherfolk." May jumped down with a splash and clambered in to the boat, beckoning. "Come on. We've crates to sink."

"You've lost your buttons May Edith Norquoy!"

"You promised, Oona. Please?" May beamed up at her.

Oona crossed her arms. "You've cut me this fortnight past and barely spoken five words to me since the doctor arrived. But now you want help, you're all smiles." She wouldn't be gulled this time.

"Suit yourself." May wound up the anchor. "As you see fit." Her face was set, eyes on the water, mouth turned down the way it did when she was displeased.

Oh, suit yourself yourself, sulky minx, thought Oona, glancing wistfully back at the candlelit windows of Quoy, soft constellations of warmth and sleep.

Her feet betrayed her first, falling into the trench, then her hands, lifting her drenched skirts round her waist, and finally her mouth. "You row and I'll push it out." Her head stayed loyal to her heart, though, and firm in its knowledge of May's foolishness.

And yet, when they were through the shallows and Oona had dragged herself aboard, slick as a seal and shivering, and they had an oar each and were slicing the rumpled water, she grew giddy and her belly flailed. She stifled a laugh, imagining Cormick twitching his rags of curtains, seeing his boat gone. How May devised this scheme she could not guess. Perhaps she'd coaxed Cormick into *giving* her the boat. That was the truth about May. She was eternally making people pander to her. *The gift of the gab*, everyone said, an angel's face and the Devil's tongue.

Out at sea, where the earth and sky joined, lightning cracked. Three, five, ten and the thunder rolled. Oona thrilled at the sound, pushing her numb face towards the wind that pinched her cheeks. Then the lightning again and the taste of rain filling the clouds' grey bellies.

She looked at May, whose hands on the other oar were as thin and white as claw bones and she felt them, the invisible wires that had strung them together since they were small.

The wind flung May's voice at her, fine and tight, pushed through the sieve of stormy air. "I'll wager if we row far enough, we'll see tall ships out in the firth—"

"Sailing to France!" Oona finished.

"Or to us *from* France."

Squinting into the blackness, sharp with cold, Oona imagined a convoy of square-rigged frigates slung low, peppery with sulphur, the upper deck gun-laden. French sailors veered larboard and starboard, dancing the tune of the waves. The captain in his blue and gold and black tricorn, stood stern and stiff on the

quarterdeck. A lad in the crow's nest used his eyeglass to search out English land, Scottish land, territory. And somewhere in a distant country where they ate raw onions and chopped each others' heads off, Napoleon gave orders - to kill and conquer, to rule the seas. She knew all this from Hamish Yule's confidences to Granny - he always had a broadsheet from the mainland, sour with ill tidings.

"D'you think they'll land here, take us prisoner?" May's arms tensed on the pull back, sinewy and pale in the light of the full moon. "Some nights when I hear cannons, I fancy they'll row onto the beaches, thrash us while we sleep."

Oona pulled a face. "You never have heard them."

"You know, you may be bookish, but it doesn't follow that the rest of us are simpletons." May arched her swan neck, frowning. "The cannons crack loud as thunder some nights."

"That's nothing more than your Da's farts. One of these days a cannon ball will shoot from his bum and amaze us."

May's face split in a grin. "Aye, it reeks some nights, stuffed in that room with the four of 'em when we've had neeps. Don't have brothers, I say, and don't share your kitchen with pigs."

Oona grinned back. "Same thing."

"Two brothers, one sow and her farrow. Comes to nine. The swine makes ten. Can't wait 'til I'm berthed with Stuart, bless his breeks."

Oona's smile faded. Something about May being a married woman, stowed away in the Flett croft, sat uneasily with her. "*He* likely farts too."

May shrugged. "He can snore buckshot and fart cannonballs for all I care. One's still better than nine. And when I'm a wife—"

Oona sighed. "How far are we?"

May's oar stilled. She looked over her shoulder to the endlessness of dark sea. White knives jabbed the sky and vanished on the horizon. Hoy was small now and the yellow nubs of kitchen fires and candles were tiny points, mirroring the shape of slain Orion who sprawled in the sky, his bragging cut short by the scorpion's sting.

The sky blanched. They both cowered, silently counting the thunder's rebuke. They had roamed too far to swim home if things got rough and the boat capsized. The clouds split and spilled their bellies' weight of water. Icy fine points drove into Oona's lips and eyelids. Their vessel seemed to droop, as if it had sailed this far on a last rush of strength and now felt the heft of its cargo of crates. Oona's back ached from rowing now they'd broken off and her gut tightened on sharp things, a growing bellyache, a sense that things were about to turn rotten.

May drew her oar in and dropped it, flapping her hands. "It’s ill news when you don't feel the chilblains any more." She pulled her blue lips back in a shamming sort of smile, showing her teeth as she never did. She must see it too, that fearful cast to the moon now the storm had hit. And she knew as well as Oona the folly of being out in it.

Another flash, dazzling and eerily silent.

Oona pulled in her oar, dropped it into the murky water that sloshed with the boat's hip-sway. The oars rolled together, like boats themselves on a rough inner tide. "Why are we gallivanting here?"

The thunder again.

“D’ye reckon its cannons?" May slicked her wet hair back from her face. “The Sassanacks brawling with the Frogs?”

Oona's body braced for the next crack. She shook her head. “Cannons don't hum like that. What mischief is this, May?"

With a shaking finger May tapped her nose, turned her eyes to the sea in that skittish way she had. It was maddening, when Oona knew all of her twitches and looks and could read between the lines, could see, now, May’s hand skimming the top of the uppermost crate contemplatively. It was closed but not secured with rope or nails.

“Those crates give off a putrid stench. What’s in ‘em?”

May shrugged. “Bits and oddments from the big house. Rags and old trash I must get rid of.”

“Whatever could you need to jetsam at this hour, at sea, in a storm?”

May swayed with the rough clash of waves that pitched the boat to and fro, steadying herself on the stack of crates. "This is rough work. It needs both our strength.”

“Here to serve, am I?" She threw the words off lightly, however piqued she was.

May touched her arm. “I wanted to see you. Only I—“

Oona nodded, shrugged, looked away. She saw how it was. Swaying, her hands slippery and stone cold, she lifted the edge of a crate and peered inside. It was heavy and the bottom was slimy. The innards stank. “For God’s sake, May, these aren’t rags!”

May shrugged. “I don’t know what they are. All he said was ‘throw ‘em in the sea’.”

“Who said?”

May cast her a heavy look. "Frankenstein."

In Oona’s mind's eye was the man her fancy had painted, his silhouetted figure pacing the gallery of the big house, lamp held high. Settling to a medical book for a while, turning the pages impatiently before throwing it down to stare out of the window. Tall and aquiline of nose, with that slimness of throat and wrists only mysterious foreign aristocrats possess, he seemed to her a dark prince travelling under a curse.

"Is he in hot water?"

May frowned. "Not if we shift these crates."

"Is it the French?"

"God knows, perhaps someone is hounding him." The wind whipped up her hair. The lightning cracked again. "Help me?"

With a weary groan, Oona jammed her hands under the crate. May took the other side and lifted. The boat rocked beneath them, sickeningly hard. They hefted the crate between them and heaved it over the side. It hit the water's rough silk with a crash, spraying their lips and eyes. Oona mopped her face with a sleeve that had grown a stinging pall of ice. The boat pitched. May grabbed her arm and pulled her close.

"Ow." Oona snatched her arm back, chafing the hurt with stupid fingers that hardly felt.

"You almost went overboard. The storm's roughening." May nodded at the next crate, shoved her hands under it. "D'you have it?"

They hauled it up and slung it far as they could, and the next after that. Every one splashed hard and sunk deep, leaving a gob of cuckoo-spit in its wake. With each crate, Oona thought of the pranks they'd played, the hidings they'd had in all their years of friendship. She'd thought it was over, that soon-to-be-married May was too prim and ladylike to come be a tomboy with her. She looked at May over the swing of a fetid crate, the way the glare of the moonlight caught her high, pinched cheekbones. Her eyes, narrowed to slits, seemed utterly black. Her arms worked fast, filled with demon energy. Her brows, drawn into each other, were arched, wicked,

wrinkling the flesh of her nose and forehead like a dog's growling snout. When they tossed the last crate, May's lips flew open and the top one snagged on a sharp eye tooth. She was as fierce as ever and twice as wild.

Silver bubbles broke the blackness below them. The moon threw shards of their reflections around the froth. It looked like they'd been smashed, that the crate had hit and broken them and now their fragments bled together in the water, a shimmering whole, as deceitful as any undertow. Wicked girls. The stench of what they'd done still thickened the air. Oona had grown accustomed to it and could now name the component scents: chamber-lye, mingling with putrid offal. A pail of rank slops left in the sun.

Out where the sky hung low, a soundless fist of whiteness struck, bleached it to ash and lime and left a blood tinge to the world. Then the low brrrr of a drum, sea spirits belting heavy barrels towards the clouds. The world blurred. Surely she'd been dreaming this whole night. They sat. Without a word, they turned the boat about and pushed the oars down hard. The rhythm was hypnotic, inevitable, like the push and pull between May and Oona, the flush of nearness – stifling. The ache of running away.

Oona was so cold that the raindrops warmed her. She looked over her shoulder. Hoy was tall, peaked, an old volcano sleeping. Above it, a hole gaped in the storm clouds like shocked lips parting. As they neared the shore, she could see that no rain fell on the island. Dark lashes of grass fringed the ragged cliffs. The crescent beach was licked over with silver. Her neck ached. She turned back. May's mouth moved in silhouette, but the squall was too loud to hear what she said. And

besides, Oona was too tired to listen. The water softened, lightened, the sand underneath shining through it. May stood and jumped down. Oona followed and they guided the boat back into its sandy womb.

“Whossere?" The voice above their heads was gritty with hate.

They crouched low. A scarecrow teetered on the brink of the noust, face black against the moonlight.