

Thorns and Bones

We don't mess with Meg. We don't mess with her bones. We keep them locked away, tightly, securely. Dad has the key.

We don't mess with Meg's bones. Until.

My brother Tom got lost in the forest. He just wandered out of the house one day, without a word. His footprints were found next to a hare's, going into the woods. The wall of thorns guarding where they ended. It was too far for anyone but Dad to go, and even Dad doesn't stray very far. Nor do the hare's come that close, not lately. Tom didn't come back, and the forest's whispers were conspiring. Their mutters blew around us when we're hunting, scaring the few game, and chilling through the fall sun. We go out in pairs now.

Tom didn't come back after three days, so Dad went into the forest alone to talk with it. He packed a needle, scarlet thread, a wooden bowl, and left his key upstairs, in his dresser. His one key. For the one door. I could hear it jingle. Matt was left to take after the house, but he yelled. He locked himself in his room, so I cooked eggs for the twins. There's only two chickens, and the cold's been creeping as the days shorten. My stomach claws at me from the inside. The key claws at my head.

The wind howled outside the door. The twins cried, so Matt yelled at them to be quiet. I snuck into their room and rocked them to sleep. I don't mind the wind as much as they do. It can't hurt you, not like hunger, trees, or bones. As long as the windows are closed, it's nothing more than voices banging on the glass. And the key banging. It keeps shaking around in the dresser drawer. I don't know how to make it stop.

Dad still isn't back. It's been two days, and our garden withered when the thorns appeared. When Dad brought Meg back. Even with the eggs, we have to hunt soon. The gun hangs on our mantelpiece, and Matt had been looking at it. I told him to stay. Dad will be back. None of us have heard his voice join the clamor of the trees yet. He may still come, and if not, won't change for a while yet. Not until the moon comes. Matt glared above his drooping eyes, but he stayed put. Before I went to bed, I looked out my window, and red glints of eyes stared back in the moonlight. They're always worse at night.

Thorns and Bones

The next day, Matt left with the rifle to get game. He left while I was asleep, tired after cooking and cleaning after the twins. The trees were too smug to say anything, but I knew. I was alone in the house. Just the twins, who were hungry. Just me, who was even more hungry. I don't know how he got past the thorns walled around us. I went out and pleaded with them, but they didn't move. Even Dad's hunting knife wouldn't hack through. Dad had been gone for four days. The key was shaking, and my head hurt from the knocking about. The key screams, but the twins are screaming louder.

There were two gunshots during the night.

On the fifth day, I took the keys from Dad's dresser drawer, fed the twins the eggs, and went to the basement. The basement with the one chamber, one key, and one door. We don't mess with Meg's bones, but without them, we'd wither away. Those of us who were left. It was the only thing to do. I took a needle, scarlet thread, and a wooden bowl. And something else.

The sack was large enough for all of her bones, even the skull. I left the house, and marched to the boundary of briars. The wall that had appeared after Dad brought Meg back. The wall that had parted for Tom and Mark, but not for me. I held up the bag, letting the bones clink against each other. The thorns slithered to form a narrow hole. Narrow enough to get through, but not without scratches of blood running down my arms once I was through. Narrow enough that it pulled on the sack, but closed behind me without a whisper.

Meg liked to be in the forest. Bent things attract bent things, I guess. Dad told her not to, but Meg never listened. She disappeared one day. After a month, Dad left with a needle and scarlet thread, and a wooden bowl.

Dad said there was a path of clear earth marking the way. There was a path, but it vanished behind me into nothing but curling roots. He never told me how to return. A vine twisted around my ankles, tumbling me into the ground. The sack fell out of my hand, slipping open to the murmurs of the plants. The vines slithered around my legs, pressing them into the mud. I snatched the sack, and tore off the vines. I tied the sack around my hand with my belt, but the path was lost. Nothing but seething plants.

When I raised a rock to dash against the sack, *they* crawled out from the edges.

Thorns and Bones

Dad didn't like to talk about the red eyes of old, old children with long limbs and blackened teeth glinting through the trees. He never liked them, even before he found Meg. He didn't like to talk about the greedy way they watched him from the shadows, the thorns licking at his heels. He came back with her bones, and old, tired eyes.

The children came in ones and twos, swinging in the trees, sliding in from the faded edges of things. Their eyes alighted to the prize tied to my hand. Their shadows leapt through the trees. While I kept pace, one of the children crunched on something hard. Something thin and white on his black teeth. He had two rifle holes in his chest. The trees opened into a small glade, with a circle of stones in the center. Dad and Tom were inside.

I stood over them, and wept. I bound the bones with scarlet thread. I pricked my finger with the needle, and caught the blood in the bowl. It needed to be done, before their eyes would glow red and their teeth would turn black and their skin would turn cold. As Meg did. There was too little left of Matt to worry. Two sets of bones had been repaid with two sets of bones. A fair trade, considering those of us left were without our guide, without a gun. It assumed we'd petter out soon enough. I emptied the sack, and filled it with Dad and Tom's bones. The children watched from the edges, the first gift of bones in their stomachs. The second set not yet theirs. I bound my finger, stopping the blood. I unbound the bones. I emptied the bowl. Meg stood before me. Bloodless, with a sharp smile. Red, red eyes. Her nails sharpened when I stepped out of the glade. She was very fast.

The forest was not kind to those who needed to leave, tripping desperate feet and whipping at billowing hair. The path was a whisper in the dirt. There was nothing but howling in the trees, and hundreds of chasing, sharp-toothed children. Nothing but shoes torn off in favor of swifter feet, and sweat pouring down. As I neared the wall of thorns, I used the last thing I had brought. The secret thing. At the heat of fire billowing on the torch, the shadows and briars shrank away, twisting. It was not something my father would have done, but I was not him, and my screams in the wind would not haunt the twins. The sack would not be a secret trapped inside the trees.

The cabin was warm, and the twins were asleep. There was still one left unbound and I had the tools to bind her. But there was a rabbit nosing the boundary, the first in months. I had

Thorns and Bones

left breathing, so the forest was bound to our agreement. The forest would not try and trap us. Not for a while yet. No more whispers on the breeze, at least not ones that the twins would hear. No more intrusions, not that the twins would notice the creeping of the roots around the boundary. When they were older, when the forest forgot, I would go out and bind Meg. I would bring back her bones. But not now.

I walked down the stairs into our basement, left the sack on the floor and the key around my neck. One key for one locked door. Before long, only I would remember.

We don't mess with Dad or Tom. We don't mess with their bones. I keep them locked away, locked tightly. I have the key.