



T. KINGFISHER

NETTLE

&

BONE

“Pure delight. T. Kingfisher uses the bones of fairy tale to create something entirely her own.” **Emily Tesh**





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&  
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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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*dedicated to Strong Independent Chicken, a bird in a million*

# Chapter 1

The trees were full of crows and the woods were full of madmen. The pit was full of bones and her hands were full of wires.

Her fingers bled where the wire ends cut her. The earliest cuts were no longer bleeding, but the edges had gone red and hot, with angry streaks running backward over her skin. The tips of her fingers were becoming puffy and less nimble.

Marra was aware that this was not a good thing, but the odds of living long enough for infection to kill her were so small that she could not feel much concern.

She picked up a bone, a long, thin one, from the legs, and wrapped the ends with wire. It fit alongside another long bone—not from the same animal, but close enough—and she bound them together and fit them into the framework she was creating.

The charnel pit was full, but she did not need to dig too deeply. She could track the progression of starvation backward through the layers. They had eaten deer and they had eaten cattle. When the cattle ran out and the deer were gone, they ate the horses, and when the horses were gone, they ate the dogs.

When the dogs were gone, they ate each other.

It was the dogs she wanted. Perhaps she might have built a man out of bones, but she had no great love of men any longer.

Dogs, though ... dogs were always true.

“He made harp pegs of her fingers fair,” Marra sang softly, tunelessly, under her breath. “And strung the bones with her golden hair...”

The crows called to each other from the trees in solemn voices. She wondered about the harper in the song, and what he had thought when he was building the harp of a dead woman’s bones. He was probably the only person in the world who would understand what she was doing.

*Assuming he even existed in the first place. And if he did, what kind of life do you lead where you find yourself building a harp out of corpses?*

*For that matter, what kind of life do you lead where you find yourself building a dog out of bones?*

Many of the bones had been cracked open for marrow. If she could find two that went together, she could bind them back to wholeness, but often the breaks were jagged. She had to splint them together with the wires, leaving bloody fingerprints across the surface of the bones.

That was fine. That was part of the magic.

*Besides, when the great hero Mordecai slew the poisoned worm, did he complain about his fingers hurting? No, of course not.*

*At least, not where anyone could hear him and write it down.*

“The only song the harp would play,” she crooned, “was O! The dreadful wind and rain...”

She was fully aware of how wild she sounded. Part of her recoiled from it. Another, larger part said that she was kneeling on the edge of a pit full of bones, in a land so bloated with horrors that her feet sank into the earth as if she were walking on the surface of a gigantic blister. A little wildness would not be out of place at all.

The skulls were easy. She had found a fine, broad one, with powerful jaws and soulful eye sockets. She could have had dozens, but she could only use one.

It hurt her in a way that she had not expected. The joy of finding one was crushed easily under the sorrow of so many that would go unused.

*I could sit here for the rest of my life, with my hands full of wire, building dogs out of bone. And then the crows will eat me and I will fall into the pit and we shall all be bones together ...*

A sob caught in her throat and she had to stop. She fumbled in her pack for her waterskin and took a sip.

The bone dog was half-completed. She had the skull and the beautiful sweep of vertebrae, two legs and the long, elegant ribs. There would be at least a dozen dogs in this one, truly—but the skull was the important thing.

Marra caressed the hollow orbits, delicately winged in wire. Everyone said that the heart was where the soul lived, but she no longer believed it. She was building from the skull downward. She had discarded several bones already because they did not seem to fit with the skull. The long, impossibly fine ankles of gazehounds would not serve to carry her skull forward. She needed something stronger and more solid, boarhounds or elkhounds, something with *weight*.

There was a jump rope rhyme about a bone dog, wasn't there? Where had she heard it? Not in the palace, certainly. Princesses did not jump rope. It must have been later, in the village near the convent. How did it go? *Bone dog, stone dog ...*

The crows called a warning.

She looked up. The crows yammered in the trees to her left. Something was coming, blundering through the trees.



She pulled the hood of her cloak up over her head and slid partway down into the pit, cradling the dog skeleton to her chest.

Her cloak was made of owlcloth tatters and spun-nettle cord. The magic was imperfect, but it was the best she had been able to make in the time that she had been given.

*From dawn to dusk and back again, with an awl made of thorns—yes, I'd like to see anyone do better. Even the dust-wife said that I had done well, and she hands out praise like water in a dry land.*

The cloak of tatters left long gaps bare, but she had found that this did not matter. It broke up her outline so that people looked through her. If they found some of the bands of light and shadow lay a little strangely, they never stayed long enough to puzzle out why.

People were remarkably willing to dismiss their own sight. Marra thought perhaps that the world was so strange and vision so flawed that you soon realized that anything and everything could be a trick of the light.

The man came out of the trees. She heard him muttering but could not make out the words. She only knew it was a man because his voice was so deep, and even that was guesswork.

Most of the people of the blistered land were harmless. They had eaten the wrong flesh and been punished for it. Some saw things that were not there. Some of them could not walk and their fellows helped them. Two had shared a fire with her, some nights ago, although she was careful not to eat their food, even though they offered.

It was a cruel spirit that would punish starving people for what they had been forced to eat, but the spirits had never pretended to be kind.

Her companions at the fire had warned her, though. “Be careful,” said one. “Be quick, quick, quiet. There’s a few to watch for. They were bad before and they’re worse now.”

“Bad,” said the second one. His breathing was very labored and he had to stop between each word. She could tell that it frustrated him, trying to speak between the pauses. “Not ... right. All ... of us ... now”—he shook his head ruefully—“but them ... *angry*.”

“It doesn’t do any good to be angry,” said the first one. “But they won’t listen. Ate too much. Got to like the taste.” She cracked a laugh, too high, looking down at her hands. “We stopped as soon as there was something else, but they kept eating it.”

The second one shook his head. “No,” he said. “More ... than that. Always ... angry. Born.”

“Some are born that way,” Marra agreed, nodding to him. She knew too well.

*Some of those people are men. Some of those men are princes. Yes, I know. It is a different kind of anger. Something darker and more deliberate.*

He looked relieved that she had understood. “Yes. Angrier ... now. Much.”

All three of them sat in silence around the fire. She stretched her hands toward the flames and exhaled slowly.

“Mostly they kill us,” said the first one abruptly. “We can’t always run. Things get confused—” She sketched a gesture in the air above her eyes that Marra could not begin to understand, although her companion nodded when he saw it. “We’re easy to catch if it’s like that. But if they see you, they’ll try for you, too.”

The fire crackled. This land was very damp, and she was grateful for the heat, and yet— “Aren’t you worried that they’ll see the fire?”

The woman shook her head. “They hate it,” she said. “It’s the punishment. The more they eat, the more they fear it—they do not cook the flesh, you see...” She rubbed her face, obviously distressed.

“Safer,” said the man. “But ... can’t burn ... all the time.”

They leaned against one another. She bent her head down against his shoulder and he reached his arm across his body to hold her close.

A few days ago, Marra would have wondered why they did not leave this terrible land. She no longer did. They might not be sane, as the outside world understood it, but they were not fools. If they felt that they were safer here than they were outside it, it was not her place to tell them otherwise.

*If I had to explain to everyone I met what had happened to me, have them judge me for what I’d had to do—no, I might think a land with a few roving cannibals was a small price to pay, myself. At least here, everyone understands what’s happened, and they are as kind to each other as they can be.*

As a girl, she would not have understood that, but Marra was not the girl that she had been. She was thirty years old, and all that was left of that girl now were the bones.

For a moment she had envied them, two people punished through no fault of their own, because they had each other.

Now, as she sat in the pit of bones, the skeleton cradled against her chest twitched.

“Shhhh...” whispered Marra into the skull’s openings. “Shhhhh...”

*Bone dog, stone dog ... black dog, white dog ...*

She heard the footsteps as he approached. Had he seen her?

If he had, then he, too, dismissed it as a trick of the light. The footfalls skirted the edge of the pit, and the sound of breathing faded away.

“Probably harmless,” she murmured to the skull. Even if he were not, she would be a difficult target.

The other, gentler folk in here were uniquely vulnerable. If you had learned not to trust your own senses, you might wait too long to run from an enemy.

Marra was no longer as sure of her own perceptions as she had once been, but the edges of her mind were only slightly frayed, not blasted open by furious spirits.

When the footsteps had been gone for many minutes and the crows had settled, she sat up again. Fog lined the edges of the wood, hanging in low swirls over the meadow. The crows cawed together like a disjointed heartbeat. Nothing else moved.

She bent back over the bone dog again, fingers moving on the wires, hoping to finish her task before darkness fell.

★ ★ ★

The bone dog came alive at dusk. It was not quite completed, but it was close. She was bent over the left front paw when the skull's jaws yawned open and it stretched as if waking from a long slumber.

"Hush," she told it. "I'm nearly done—"

It sat up. Its mouth opened and the ghost of a wet tongue touched her face like fog.

She scratched the skull where the base of the ears would be. Her nails made a soft scraping sound on the pale surface.

The bone dog wagged its tail, its pelvis, and most of its spine with delight.

"Sit still," she told it, picking up the front paw. "Sit, and let me finish."

It sat politely. The hollow eye sockets gazed up at her. Her heart contracted painfully.

*The love of a bone dog*, she thought, bending her head down over the paw again. *All that I am worth these days.*

Then again, few humans were truly worth the love of a living dog. Some gifts you could never deserve.

She had to wrap each tiny foot bone in a single twist of wire and bind it to the others, then wrap the entire paw several times, to keep it stable. It should not have held together, and yet it did.

The cloak had gone together the same way. Nettle cords and tattered cloth should have fallen apart, and yet it was far more solid than it looked.

The dog's claws were ridiculously large without flesh to cloak them. She wrapped each one as if it were an amulet and joined them to the basket of thin wires.

"Bone dog, stone dog," she whispered. She could see the children in her head, three little girls, chanting to each other. *Bone dog, stone dog ... black dog, white dog ... live dog, dead dog ... yellow dog, run!*

At *run*, the little girl in the middle of the rope had jumped out and begun to run back and forth through the swinging rope, the only sound her feet and the slap of the rope in the dust. When she finally tripped up, the two girls on the ends had dropped the rope and they had all begun giggling together.

The bone dog rested his muzzle on her forearm. He had neither ears nor eyebrows, and yet she could practically feel the look he was giving her, tragic and hopeful as dogs often were.

“There,” she said, finally. Her knife was dulled from cutting wire and it took her several tries to hack the last bit apart. She tucked the sharp end underneath the joint where it would not catch on anything. “There you are. I hope that’s enough.”

The bone dog put its paw down and tested it. It stood for a moment, then turned and sprinted into the fog.

Marra’s fist clenched against her stomach. *No! It ran—I should have tied it. I should have thought it might run—*

The clatter of its paws faded into the whiteness.

*I suppose it had another master somewhere, before it died. Perhaps it’s gone to find them.*

Her hands ached. Her heart ached. Poor foolish dog. Its first death had not been enough to teach it that not all masters were worthy.

Marra had learned that too late herself.

She looked into the pit of bones. Her fingers throbbed—not in the horrible stinging way they had when she pieced together the nettle cloak, but deeper, in time to her heartbeat. There was redness working its way up her hands. One long line was already snaking through her wrist.

She could not bear the thought of sitting down and sculpting another dog.

She dropped her head into her aching hands. Three tasks the dust-wife had given her. Sew a cloak of owlcloth and nettles, build a dog of cursed bones, and catch moonlight in a jar of clay. She’d failed on the second one, before she’d even had a chance to start the third.

Three tasks, and then the dust-wife would give her the tools to kill a prince.

“Typical,” she said into her hands. “Typical. Of course I’d manage the impossible thing, then not think that sometimes dogs run off.” For all she knew, the bone dog had caught the wisp of a scent and now it would end up a hundred miles away, chasing bone rabbits or bone foxes or bone deer.

She laughed into her swollen hands, misery twisting around, as it so often did, into weary humor. *Well. Isn’t that just the way?*

*This is what I get for expecting bones to be loyal, just because I brought them back and wired them up. What does a dog know about resurrection?*

“I should have brought it a bone,” she said, dropping her hands, and the crows in the trees took up the sound of her laughter.

Well.

If the dust-wife had failed her—or if she had failed the dust-wife—then she would make her own way. She’d had a godmother at her christening who had given her a single gift and smoothed her path not at all. Perhaps there was a debt owing there.

She turned and began to make her way, step by dragging step, out of the blistered land.