

The Drowned Girl

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The Drowned Girl

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Summary

The night Thad is born, Deanna has a nightmare.

For fifteen years, the nightmares never stop.

She was drowning.

At first, Deanna thought the salty fluid in her lungs was just water. Only when she fought against the tide did she realize it was something else. Sticky, mucusoid, like all those nightmares Will used to have, the ones she overheard when his sleeping mind reached out to hers: Armus all around him, seeping into every pore.

But Armus had tasted chemical, bitter, alien. And this water pouring into Deanna's mouth was too familiar. Phospholipids and proteins. She knows this taste because Thad knows this taste. He transmitted it to her when he was still in the womb.

Amniotic fluid.

Deanna woke, gasping for air, to the sound of her newborn baby crying.

When Thad was three – when Kestra was born, and Will liked to sleep with her curled up on his chest – Deanna had the dream again.

It wasn't amniotic fluid this time. It was water, icy-cold and rushing far too fast for her to catch her footing. Gravity tilted as she scrambled for the surface, but just when she thought she could see sunlight, the current spun her out of its grasp.

Her lungs burned. Her throat bulged. Fire snaked into her nostrils as the water dug in deep.

Deanna, said a voice in her head. Sleepy, rough, familiar. Strong fingers closed around her wrist, the grip gentle, and tugged her from the water.

She woke.

"Okay?" Will asked, so tired his eyes weren't even open. He relaxed his grip on her wrist, cradling Kestra to his chest instead. Deanna sat up slowly, her lungs still aching, and reached for the light.

She froze.

There was a figure standing there, beside the bed. A toddler. Thad, she thought. He had a touch of her empathic skills; maybe he could sense her nightmare, same way Will had. But even though the toddler was in shadows, she could see it had long hair; she could see the silhouette of skirts down to its knees, a ruff of tattered lace at its wrists, spilling over chubby fingers. It cocked its head at her, questioning.

When Deanna turned on the light, there was no one there.

She had the nightmare every night that week.

After seven days, Thad's schoolteacher came to her, apologetic, and asked if she could organize a short-term apprenticeship with the exo-linguists.

“Unusual program for a five-year-old,” Deanna said. “May I ask why?”

The teacher hesitated. “Thad’s supposed to be in swim lessons this quarter,” she said, “but he won’t get in the pool.”

In Alaska, every parent teaches their kids to have a healthy fear of water. And in Will’s experience, every kid refuses to be afraid. That was certainly how it went for him. He must have sneaked out to Curtis Creek at least a thousand times, breaking Kyle Riker’s first rule – “Never fish alone” – and usually breaking the second rule too. “Always wear a life vest.”

He was eight when he fell in. The cold water shocked his system and numbed his legs. He had to kick his waders off before they filled with water and weighed him down. On the shore, spluttering for breath, Will stripped free of his clothes – so he wouldn’t freeze to death in them – and made his way back to town. Bare feet sank into fresh snow and burned against the ice. By the time he reached home, naked and shivering, his toes had turned blue.

But Will still liked water. When Thad developed a fear of the pool, it was Will who took the time to coach him. Long hours in the stellar cartography lounge first, where they could switch the gravity off, get Thad used to weightlessness. Because that was why water was so fun, yes? The feeling that you weren’t tied down by anything, no concrete blocks knotted to your feet. Next came a planetside beach, glittering sand and violet water, so pretty it reminded him of Betazed – and something in Thad seemed to feel the same way. Maybe it was innate to his biology, coded in his DNA: some ancestral thread of Deanna’s whispering in his ear. Or maybe he just picked up on it through empathy, but either way, he curled his fingers in Will’s swim trunks and followed him haltingly to the water, wide eyes mesmerized.

“It looked just like Lake El’nar,” Thad said at dinner that night, and Deanna went still. She met Will’s gaze, her eyes wide.

“Lake El’nar?” Will repeated, half-smiling. “Is that in Tarjnas?”

Thad shook his head. “Tarjnas is made up,” he said, like Will wasn’t aware. “Lake El’nar is real. It’s on Betazed.”

Betazed? Cold tendrils of dread crept into Will’s brain, and it took him a moment to realize they were coming from Deanna, not from him. He glanced at her – her feelings were boxed up tightly, her expression serene.

“Thad,” she said, “where did you hear about Lake El’nar?”

He pretended not to hear.

Thad was six when he suffered a head injury.

Thad was seven when he got diagnosed.

Will started having nightmares, too.

He dreamt that he was drowning.

On Nepenthe, the earth had healing properties. If Beverly were here, she’d tell them the potential benefits were fairly low. Long-term citizens reported stronger teeth, high-quality sleep, good skin. They lived longer than the average Federation citizens, and Federation citizens already lived pretty long. But the soil of Nepenthe wouldn’t dig into the fragile cap of Thad’s skull and heal his brain.

On Nepenthe, there was a forest that smelled like cedar, like the cologne Deanna’s father used to wear. On Nepenthe, there was a lake, clear and calm, and Will would wade in up to his thighs and cast a fishing rod, and Thad would stay onshore heckling his dad’s technique, refusing to get in the water.

On Nepenthe, Deanna fell asleep faster and stayed asleep longer.

She dreamt of drowning.

“Just call me something else,” Kestra said.

“But that’s your *name*, Little One,” Deanna said, exasperated. Over Kestra’s shoulder, Will gave her an amused, pointed look, and Deanna caved. “Don’t you like your name?” she asked.

“No,” said Kestra stubbornly.

“Don’t you think it’s pretty?”

Kestra leapt on that. “I don’t *want* to be pretty,” she said, stomping her foot. “I want to be *feral*.”

Will choked on a laugh.

“You *are* feral,” Thad said, using his spoon to launch a glob of scrambled eggs at her.

“Kestra,” said Deanna patiently, “if you don’t want to be called ‘Kestra’, what do you want to be called?”

“Skelegore,” Kestra proposed. “Like ‘skeleton’ plus ‘gore.’”

“Ooh,” said Will approvingly.

“Why is always skeletons and gore with you?” Deanna asked.

“You should be Snotrag,” Thad suggested.

“Yeah! Snotrag!” said Kestra instantly, changing her mind.

“What about something more dignified,” Will said, “like Elbowcheese or...”

Deanna sensed what he was going to say before he said it. “No,” she said firmly.

“Fartley,” Will said, voice bright.

Kestra cheered. “I’m gonna spell it P-H-A-R-T-L-E-I-G-H,” she said happily, digging into her eggs. “Just in case there’s another Fartley at school. I want to be unique.”

“There isn’t going to be another Fartley,” said Deanna. She topped off Thad’s so-called ‘orange juice’ (really, it was from a fruit that shaded more toward pink, and tasted like bananas). “How about we put a stopper in the name-game for now and think on it some more? In the meantime...”

She glanced at Thad. Always quicker with empathy than Kestra, his eyes widened, like he knew what she was thinking. He nodded.

“Wild Girl of the Woods?” Deanna suggested with a smile. “Like in your brother’s stories?”

Kestra beamed. She twirled her fork through the scrambled eggs, thinking it over. “I am pretty wild, huh?” she said proudly. “Okay. I like it.”

“How come you always take your mother’s suggestions over mine?” Will asked with a fake pout. He pointed at Deanna with his fork. “The next kid is going to be Fartley. Mark my words.”

You’re sleeping on the couch tonight for even suggesting that, Deanna sent him. She was so focused on not laughing at his crestfallen expression that she almost didn’t hear what the Wild Girl of the Woods said next.

“I just hate to share my name with someone else who lives here.”

Thad laughed and nodded, unperturbed. But Will blinked, and Deanna studied Kestra’s face, trying to determine if this was some joke.

“Who else on Nepenthe has that name?” Deanna asked.

“Lots of people,” said Kestra with a shrug.

“Who?”

Neither child answered. Thad stared out the window, daydreaming as he chewed his food. Kestra pushed her eggs around the plate and fidgeted, eager to go play.

“A neighbor girl?” Will pushed, his voice casual.

“Someone you play with?” Deanna asked.

No response. Slowly, Will’s broad palm, open on the table, curled into a fist. He shot Deanna a wave of reassurance, the emotional equivalent of ‘it’s probably nothing.’ And aloud, always cheerful, he said,

“Well, if you see her again, invite her over for dinner, okay? Maybe we can convince her to change *her* name to Fartley.”

Thad laughed. Kestra didn’t.

“She doesn’t eat,” she said.

Thad was thirteen when Deanna woke up and vomited freshwater over the side of the bed.

Thad was fourteen when Kestra said she had insomnia; Will made a nightlight for her, animal hide over a soft orange lamp, the perfect comforting glow for a wild girl who woke up at night, heart racing.

And Thad was fifteen when Will sat bolt upright in bed at Deanna’s side and started sobbing.

“Will!” she said, startled awake. The full force of his emotions had hit her before she even woke up. Dream worlds fractured into the darkness of their bedrooms, the alien, ragged noises squeezing out of Will’s chest. He kicked the blankets off him, gasping for breath, then felt her hand against his arm and clutched her tight.

“Shit,” he said into her hair, voice breathless. “Deanna?”

She hugged him as close as she could, heart hammering. “What is it, Will? What’s wrong?”

She had never seen him cry before. Not like this. Silent weeping the night his father died, when he thought she was asleep; he’d buried his face in his pillow so even if she woke, she couldn’t see. And he teared up whenever she did, and his eyes had glittered when the kids were born, but never this. Never sobbing, uncontrolled and fearful, like a child.

“Will,” said Deanna, her voice low. She rubbed his back. Tightness crept into her chest. Cold water froze her lungs. She tried to take a deep breath, but couldn’t manage it. “Will,” she said, “did you dream that you were drowning?”

He buried his face in her shoulder. “Not me,” he said.

The storm clouds break. The rain on Nepenthe hits harder than the rain on Earth. It fills the dips and valleys in their yard; it creeps up to the cabin’s steps; it floods the river, smashes the pier to pieces.

In his dream, that’s where he and Thad are fishing.

“Come on,” he’s saying. “It won’t kill you to have some fun.”

Thad takes a tentative step forward. “It’s not fun, though,” he complains.

“Well, consider it research,” Will says, handing Thad a hook. Is Thad fifteen, or is he eight? One moment he’s as tall as Will, a scrawny beanpole scowling at the water. The next, his chubby fingers are struggling with the hook, and Will is helping him hold it still. “When you write a character who has to fish for his food, you’ll thank me,” Will says.

“I will never write a story where there’s fish,” Thad swears solemnly. “I’ll just make sure none of my planets have fish in them.”

Will laughs; they bait the hook; they cast it in; that’s when the storm clouds gather.

It only takes seconds for the flood to rise. The wooden dock breaks in two. Cracks form under Will’s feet, swallow him up. He hears Thad shout, sees him tumble into the water – fifteen years old, head cracking on the lake-bottom rocks; Thad is six, an explosion knocking him sideways, his head striking the titanium bannister on the Titan’s walls.

No.

Will finds him. He reaches into the rising water. He pulls his son free. He sees the crack in Thad’s skull, the swelling brain spilling out onto his forehead, the blood that streaks his face. He hears Thad’s wheezing cries, sees the dullness in his eyes, knows the way that dreamers always do that there’s no saving him. That he will die here, slow and painful, if Will doesn’t help him. And there’s nothing Will can do.

Drowning is painless, whispers a voice in his ear.

He almost feels her. A little girl leaning on his shoulder, warm breath tickling his hair. There’s no one there.

Drowning is painless, she says. And Thad is choking on his own blood, spluttering, crying, suffering—

And so Will covers his son’s nose, his mouth, and pushes him beneath the water to die.

Kestra was pensive. Will had dark bags under his eyes. Deanna was eating less and less.

On a warm night in late fall, all three of them dreaming of drowning, tiny bodies weighed down by a heavy dress, childish hands scrabbling futilely for purchase. The next day, when the birds started singing, Deanna’s sleeping mind stretched out to her family members one by one.

She sensed Will’s fading nightmare. She sensed Kestra’s exhausted slumber, like she’d only just fallen into REM.

And she didn’t sense Thad at all.

They buried him in the tradition of Will’s family. Just like his mother had been buried, rather than cremated, and his father’s body had been consigned to the earth of the war-torn planet where he died. Will dug the hole himself; he built the casket; he lowered their son’s body into the ground. Forearms flecked with dirt, hair disheveled, he took his spot by Deanna’s side.

Their daughter didn’t cry. Will’s jaw was tight, eyes dark. Deanna, feeling both their pain and both their futile efforts to cover it up, let her gaze drift to the forest, where Thad had loved to play.

She saw him there, six years old again. He held hands with a toddler she thought she knew. A girl she almost recognized, who smiled at Deanna and led Thad to the water.

In the treeline, where the woods became the lake, Thad and Kestra disappeared.

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