

Where the Dead Speak

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Summary

They say the soil on Nepenthe is really magical.

It started with a piece of fruit.

There wasn't much left of it. Deanna brought it to him while he was working on the cabin. He clutched it in one hand, wiped the sweat off his brow, sank his teeth into the tender flesh. It wasn't as sweet as Terran fruits – nor as nutritional as the replicated variety. Its meat was tough and mealy with hardly any flavor at all.

He was close to the core when he felt something squirm against his tongue. Will froze. He swallowed convulsively – years of Starfleet training betraying him – and forced his throat to close up, to reject the piece of fruit before whatever living parasite was inside it could enter his stomach. He spat it on the ground and examined the fruit still in his hand.

There. Bisected, dead now, was a Nepenthe worm.

“At least plant it,” Deanna complained when he tossed it away. So Will nudged it into the shallow hole he'd just started digging for a fence post and let the kids cover it up with dirt. It was later, playing one of Thad's fantasy games, that Kestra stumbled over it and kicked the fruit out of the hole again. It thudded against Will's boot.

The worm was still stuck inside. Its open wound had healed over.

It ate its way deeper into the core and squirmed away.

Kestra was always hunting.

It made Deanna uneasy. Betazoids, even moreso than Humans, were vegetarian. They didn't even eat replicated meat – and if that was what the children craved, then they could have it. The emergency replicator could synthesize food just as well as clothes. But it was part of their stories: ever since Thad first got diagnosed, they'd play it.

He was the cursed king who couldn't hurt any living thing, or else he'd die. Kestra was the Wild Girl of the Woods who tempted him into fun. Violent fun.

“Kids are little sociopaths,” Will reasoned when he saw the corpse. “Everyone knows that.”

“Maybe Human children,” Deanna said. She poked at the dead animal with a stick. It had been sliced open from the base of its throat all the way down its stomach, its thin weasel-ish body split in two. Internal organs had been snatched out, and Will could see a gory stain on a nearby boulder where Kestra and Thad must have crushed them one by one. “Did you ever do anything like this as a child?” Deanna asked.

Will chewed the inside of his cheek. “I fished,” he said. “Hook a living creature by the lip, torture it for a little while, let it go again ... it doesn't get much crueller than that.” He snatched a pair of broad leaves from the nearest tree and used them to cover his hands as he shuffled the weasel's body into a hole. “There. Out of sight, out of mind.”

Deanna closed her eyes. She inhaled deeply. Half-smiling – but palely – she said, “I can still feel their bloodlust.”

In the morning, on his walk, Will saw the earth tremble. The hole the weasel had been in exploded. A familiar scarred head poked out. One still-healing eye swiveled around to stare at him, and then – stitched up, internal organs back in place – the weasel darted away.

Will slowed. He eased the tip of his walking stick into the hole, probing for remains. It had to be a different weasel, he decided. Maybe they were cannibals. It had eaten the corpse of its little friend and scuttled away the moment it smelled Humans. He was still trying to convince himself when Thad and Kestra caught up with him and grabbed ahold of his elbows, both of them swinging from his arms.

“Did you take your hypo?” Will asked Thad.

“Yeah.” Thad wedged his feet against Will’s hips and tried to climb up his dad’s body. “Can we play hunters?”

Will started to say ‘no.’ His tongue was pressed to the roof of his mouth when he hesitated.

“Actually,” he said, eyeing the empty grave, “let’s try a little experiment.”

Deanna caught them on their fifth try.

It was a bird this time. Thad had caught it – stunned it, really, with a pebble from his slingshot. The bird’s beak was cracked now, its left eye swollen shut. Blood streaked its feathers, not just on its face, but on its wings where Will had clipped them, and on its chest where Kestra had pragmatically scanned it with a tricorder and stabbed her climbing pick straight into its heart.

They would keep this one, Will said, to make sure there was nothing wrong with it. In the morning, they found it thrashing in the shallow grave where they had left it, clods of dirt weighing down its wings. He scooped it up in both hands, gentle, rubbing his thumb along its chest to soothe it. The scar was still there. The wound had healed.

He tucked it into a cage in the workman’s shed. For three days, he monitored it, taking careful logs. The kids got bored. They wandered off. They searched for new experiments. But Will stayed, his back aching, his eyes itchy, and recorded its birdsong, every minute movement, every minor dysfunction as it pecked at a peanut log with its cracked beak.

Did the birdsong sound a little strange? Arrhythmic? He knew the birds of this forest. He’d always had a pet interest in birdsong – he could whistle along with all the native avians of Alaska; he’d listened to Messiaen as a youth, all but memorized the books of David Rothenberg. The variations of rhythm, the changing pitch, all those unique melodic contours of a song – he wasn’t an ornithologist. He couldn’t listen to this little thrush sing and pretend to know that it sounded wrong. Maybe it had always been a little off-key. Maybe the thrushes he’d heard before had all been chirping out a mating call, and this was something else – a cry for help. Will bowed his head and scratched at his scalp, his stylus tucked behind his ear, that scratchy, rough new birdsong worming along the coils of his brain.

“Will,” said a tight voice behind him.

His heartbeat slowed. He turned to face her, and he knew his mask had cracked. All those years since Thad’s diagnosis, every line of stress and age, it was showing now, around his eyes, in the hollows of his cheeks. And he could see it in Deanna’s face, too. She hesitated. Her gaze flicked to the caged bird.

“Can you feel it?” Will asked, his voice rough.

Deanna’s lips thinned.

“Is it alright?” Will asked, pleading with her with his eyes, with their bond, every part of his soul begging her to say yes. Outside, Kestra squealed as Thad chased her through the garden, both of them dwarfed by the tomato plants and the long, sharp leaves of sweet corn stalks. The sound of Thad’s laughter struck them both, made Deanna flinch away.

She eyed the bird. Her face drew tight at the sound of its warped song.

“Promise me you won’t do this again,” she said.

He promised.

He held a funeral.

He squeezed Deanna’s hand. He held Kestra on his hip. He watched as Thad’s casket was lowered into Nepenthe’s rich soil. Nothing they had buried in a box had ever come back. Maybe the wood protected it until it was too late – until time had rotted the body so much that even Nepenthe couldn’t help it.

Will threw the first handful of dirt.

He bore the questions from their friends. He smiled and shrugged one shoulder when Jean-Luc asked why they didn’t cremate their son. He drank with them; accepted their hugs; embraced them; waved goodbye to their shuttles; tucked Kestra into bed and wiped the tear tracks from her cheeks.

Alone together, he and Deanna sat by the kitchen window, where they could see Thad’s grave. She was the one who broke first.

“Get him out of there,” she said.

He kissed them on the lips when he came back, not on the cheek. Thad had stopped doing that when he was ten. Even when the

meningitis closed his eyes, even when the fever took over, Deanna and Will had only ever kissed him on the cheek.

Death changes people, Will thought as he inhaled the scent of death on that kiss. *That's all it is.*

And he brushed the dirt from Thad's dark hair and held him tight.

He caught Thad standing silently in the door to Kestra's room.

He served old favorites for every meal. They went uneaten.

He found Deanna with her face buried in her pillow, fully-clothed, plugging her ears like that would block the aura their son was putting out.

A knife was missing from the kitchen drawer. Thad was staring out the window at his empty grave.

Will sat with him and held his cold hand.

"There are voices in the water," Thad told his sister.

She couldn't be sure, but she thought it was one of his games. One of his old games, the type they hadn't played since before the funeral. She sat on the dock, her feet dangling in cold lakewater, tendrils of slimy seaweed catching between her toes.

"What do you mean?" she asked him. "Like sirens?"

"Sure."

"Or like the fish are talking?"

He shrugged. His movements were different now. Slow and careful. He walked on silent feet.

"Tell me what you mean," Kestra said shortly, looking away. "I don't feel like playing guessing games."

The deck creaked beneath his weight. Her shoulders tensed. If he stopped behind her – it was stupid, but if he stopped behind her, she was going to run. She could almost picture his fingers trailing through her hair where it fell against the back of her neck, the brush of his skin against hers, the flash of a knife blade as he cut a lock away, just to be mean. Because Thad had always loved experiments, but he'd never been like this before: mean.

She'd heard him calling Mom names. She'd seen him trampling the garden, cutting Dad's plants out at the root. She knew he'd stomped on Dad's old combadge and ground its circuits into dust.

But he didn't stop behind her. He paced a little, and when Kestra glanced up, his eyes were distant, fixed on the far side of the lake. Watching the wind blow ripples across its surface and fracture the reflection of the trees.

"What kind of voices?" Kestra asked.

Thad's gaze shifted. "The voices of the dead." He glanced at her. "The drowned.

He smiled.

"Aunt Kestra drowned," he said.

Will searched the forest until, stumbling, he fell to his knees. The other searchers caught him. They were smaller men; his weight, his height, dragged them down – and they had no choice but to kneel there, holding uselessly onto his arms like Thad and Kestra used to do when they were young, while he shouted his throat raw. He insisted on calling the spaceports. She'd been uneasy. Most likely, she'd run away. She was smart enough to steal a ship, he'd taught her so well that she could probably break into Starfleet if she wanted to. That's what he told himself. And every shuttle missing from its port was a spot of hope, at least until morning, when all the logs were checked and every shuttle was accounted for.

When they guided Will back home, he found Deanna's door locked and Thad sitting alone in his sister's room, examining an empty bird cage like he had a fun new story brewing in his head.

It never occurred to Will to check the lake.

He found the neighbors' cat that weekend.

He found the neighbors next. Their bodies lay on hardwood floors, one tiny layer of insulation to protect them from the dirt. Will closed the front door so wild animals couldn't reach them.

He walked away. At the lake, humming a discordant tune, Thad was fishing. He hooked each fish by the rubbery lip. He slipped his fingers into their bloody gills and held them up so the sunlight sparkled off their scales if they were silver, and off their flat tinfoil eyes if they were brown. Some of them had been caught so many times that their lips were scarred. One had an old hook growing through his flesh; it had escaped so long ago that the hook turned rusty. As he watched, Thad took that hook between two fingers and wiggled it gently, patiently, until it ripped right through the fish's skin and came loose in his hands.

Will walked away. He found Deanna in the kitchen, blinds drawn.

"I hear it everywhere now," she said grimly.

Will froze in the doorway. "Hear what?"

Her lips thinned. "That old birdsong. The one that came back wrong."

Scarred beak. Bloody eye.

"I remember," Will said. He cocked an ear, but all he heard was the hum of the generator. "What do you mean, you hear it?"

"Everywhere," she said. "I thought it was just the bird, but it's not, Will. It's in the woods. It's in the lake. It's in the dirt. Our garden. Our crawlspace. I think even the worms are singing it."

Will sat down next to her. He took her hand, dwarfed it in his own. He kissed her knuckles and tasted blood, studied the raw skin, realized she'd been biting at them. Gnawing her own flesh, like a nervous dog.

"What are they singing?" he asked.

Down at the lake, Thad baited his hook with an off-key hum.

They said the soil on Nepenthe was truly magical.

The moon shone bright over the rows Will had hoed in his old garden. There were no sprouts yet. Just seeds. Grass would grow along those rows with time. Weeds, too, and pale round flowers that attracted all the local insects – beetles crawling up the stem and lepidoptera lighting on its petals, cicadas burrowing up through the dirt to emerge at last and sing.

In that moonlight, Thad killed his mother. She let him do it. Just for a second, before she died, she joined him, humming that discordant song. And in that moonlight, Will caught his son's wrist and squeezed until he had to drop the knife.

There were no other weapons. There was nothing Thad could do. He could kick all he wanted. He could try to bite. But as Will pinned his son – scrawny and short, underweight, underdeveloped – he thought what he had thought the same night Thad died: Christ, he's only fifteen.

He held the hypospray to Thad's neck. He kissed him, not on the lips, but on the cheek. The way he used to like it. He didn't try to hum that song. He rocked the shell until the singing stopped and the lungs froze in his chest. Until the thready heartbeat, with its uneven pulse, almost a rhythm, stopped for good.

Will sat among the bodies of the dead. He looked at the moon over the lake. He looked at his dead son. He looked at his Imzadi, took her hand, felt for their broken bond inside his mind, where every time he reached for her, he could find a golden light. A warmth. An understanding.

Promise me you won't do this again, she said.

Will Riker stared into the garden, at Thad's empty grave, and kissed his dead wife's hand.

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