

# DEEP BLUE JUMP

Dean Whitlock

**Dean Whitlock's first professional sale, "The Million-Dollar Wound," was included in Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction, Fifth Annual Collection*. His last appearance in this magazine, "Iridescence" (January 1989), was a finalist for our Readers' Award. Since then, Dean has published six novels (*Finn's Clock* won First Place in the young adult category for the 7th Annual Writers Digest Self-Published Ebook Awards), along with several other well-received short works released here and abroad. His latest book is *Iridescent Dreams, 20 tales of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. It includes, he says, "every worthwhile story I had written." The author has since produced another worthwhile story, about a very ugly practice that "goes on all the time in many forms in every country with people of all ages." It's a poignant tale that explores the type of courage, compassion, and help its victims need to endure.**

Po arrived on the back of the west wind, in the back of a gray pickup, on a day when the noon sun could have killed her. It was Po's good fortune that the worst of the trip was made in late afternoon and, Kim thought, that she wore a white hoodie—dirty, thin, but still a shield. The other newcomers were parched. Two had fainted from too much sun and too little water, faces hot and red but dry as paper, not a single drop of sweat left to sweat. The boss foreman gave the driver hell for that. What good was a dead picker, yeah? While he was shouting, a couple of the bigger boys came out from the shipping shed to carry off the limp ones. The others followed slowly, stumbling, with the fear-filled, famished gaze they all came with.

Po came off last, and as soon as Kim saw her, she hated the little girl. Little ones meant anxious work, and Po was the littlest to come in a while, probably the youngest, too. Her small heart of a face was streaked more with tears than sweat. Her eyes were dark, wide, suspicious, as though the very next step could lead over a cliff. They were all bruised, outside and in, but she was shattered, the grief so raw it knocked Kim back to herself, seven years back, six years old, crouched in the hot metal bed of a pickup crossing the hardpan desert under a midsummer afternoon sun, barely a day since her parents had sold her and Kyle to the growers. They'd promised them ice cream if they went with the man; what they got was desert. Kim

pushed away the memory, refused the tears. They'd all been sold, and so what? They were here to pick, and the smaller they were the longer they'd pick, unless they tumbled or took a blue jump or were pretty, like this small newcomer. The little ones were just plain hard.

But when the boss foreman herded the new ones into the shade on the east side of the meal shed to get a drink of water, Kim went up to him and said she'd take the little one.

A frown creased his already wrinkled face. "You always want the little ones," he said. "Haven't you had enough?"

"I know how to teach them," Kim said. "She'll pick more sooner."

"Yeah, but your team's full. Gail and Wei both lost one to the shipping shed. Saro had a blue tumbler. Tommo gave up two keepers just last week."

"None of them are here asking."

He laughed once. "'Cause they don't give a damn, and neither should you."

She returned to the only argument he'd listen to. "My team always makes quota."

"Who you willing to trade?"

So it came down to business, as always. She had seven girls and two boys on her team. She'd had each of them since they'd arrived. Not all for the same time; they'd been sold at different ages, arrived in different seasons, filling gaps when earlier kids left. Or were taken. One way or the other they went, no matter how hard she tried to keep them. Kim gritted her teeth and ran their faces through her mind. Who could take a move and not tumble? Who would be leaving soon anyway? Who would leave the smallest gap in the team?

She hated Po even more for having to choose.

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Now Kim had eight girls and one boy. Arni had been the oldest and getting bigger; he'd be going to shipping soon anyway; he'd always been a bit clumsy; and twice she'd caught him slipping a berry into his mouth. More important, nothing ever seemed to bother him, even without the berries. When she told him he was going he just shrugged, which helped her pretend she'd made the better choice. There was never a right choice.

Po came with her without a word. The rest of the team had already eaten, and the sun was setting beyond the far rim of the canyon, so Kim sent them to the bunk shed with Mira, the oldest after herself. She waited with Po while the newcomers were fed. Most of them were able to eat. The ones who wouldn't were forced to choke down a few bites anyway. What good was a weak, hungry picker, yeah? Po managed to nibble a bit, which Kim took for a good sign. Better than she herself had managed on her own shattered first day. She hadn't eaten right for months then; everything tasted like dirt. Anyway, it was more important to make sure a girl that little got enough water into her. The air was getting cool, but it was still dry enough to suck every drop out of you.

When the newcomers had finished eating what they could, the boss foreman gave his usual dire warning.

"Don't even think about going outside before the sun comes up. That drive you just took almost killed you, yeah? Imagine how long you'd last on foot. Even worse, you just might stumble over the edge, into the vines. You don't want to do that at night. That's when the snakes and lizards come up from the bottom, hunting. They don't eat the berries, you know. They eat warm things. They catch birds stupid enough to roost in the vines at night. They catch the big rats that live in the holes in the side of the canyon. They catch bats right off the wing. And some of those bats, they're vampire bats—you heard of them, yeah? And the snakes are poisonous, and the lizards, they're bigger than a big dog." He pointed at Po. "As big as you."

Po just stared back, and Kim wondered if she'd heard a word he'd said.

It was already dark when they went to the bunk shed. Kim kept her hand on Po's shoulder, but Po didn't stumble or even look around to see if any of the boogey-man animals were creeping in the shadows. She was still too shattered.

Teams slept together, in groups of bunks separated by thin board partitions staggered along a center aisle. Kim's team had a good spot, not too close to the latrine. The doors and windows were covered with heavy screens; the windows were high up to keep people in and let out heat. Nights could get downright cold, and the blankets were thin, so team members usually slept two to a bunk. Kim preferred to sleep alone. As team boss, she got a second blanket. She showed Po where the latrine was and how to open and close the dump chute and the lid. Then she shifted Mira and Nico to the upper bunk that had been Arni's and put Po beneath. She pointed to her own bunk, a row over, ground level.

"I'm there if you need anything," she said, "but it better be important."

She didn't get much sleep that night. There were the newcomers and more than the usual flurry of night sounds: leaves rustling, animal calls, hissing, even a gunshot and a wail that could have been human. But before any of that started, Po began sobbing; faint, choking, beneath the thin blanket, but too loud to ignore. Kim lay there, wishing she could put Po up with Mira. Mira was good with little ones; she was a good size for a big sister. But Kim knew Nico still needed Mira. And they all needed sleep.

Po made the decision for her. She was suddenly there at Kim's bunk, lifting the covers, climbing under; not clinging, but curling up close, back-to, warm and blessedly quiet.

"Just tonight," Kim said. "And don't wipe your nose on my blanket."

Po nodded and used her sleeve.

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At first light, Kim woke Po and took her to the edge of the canyon. They waited in silence as the sunlight slanted higher, slowly pushing the shadow edge of dawn down the far lip of stone, a full half-mile away across the canyon, till it reached the top-most crown of vines. Po gasped at the first flash of color: large patches of small pale-rose blossoms, large patches of berries in all shades from white to indigo, large many-greened patches of leaves, an undulating plane accented by shadowed gaps. But for the scattered gaps, vines filled the entire maw of the canyon, from end to end and lip to lip. Birds circled overhead in the cloud-barren sky, swooping in and out of small holes just beneath the lip, or skimming the tops of the flowers for tiny insects. Their wings made a faint sound, like breeze through a screen. The insects made a constant hum. Behind them, people made new-day noises, punctuated now and then by the clatter of pans in the meal shed. The smell of cooking drifted by.

"It's . . . It's pretty," Po whispered, wide eyed. "I didn't think it would—"

"Don't," Kim said. "Don't think it. It's only skin deep. Beneath the skin, well, the foremen'll tell you there ain't a bottom. That's crap—all plants have roots—but it might as well be truth. Those gaps just go down to another layer of vines, and then another, and who knows how many others. Too far to fall, too thick to climb through, those are your choices, them or stay on top and pick. That's why we're here, to pick bluedream. The berries. And this is where we do it. That's all these vines are for. That's all we're for." She gave Po a moment, to let it sink in a bit, then turned half away. "Come on. It's time for breakfast. Then we go out on the vines."

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Po hesitated at the lip, staring down at the split-toe mesh slippers Kim had just given her. Newcomers all paused the first time. The rest of the team stepped right out onto the vines, even little Nico.

"Go ahead," Kim said. "Anything fatter than your big toe will take your weight. They all hold each other up."

Po looked at her suspiciously. "Promise?" she asked.

Kim shrugged. "I've seen pickers get clumsy and tumble. I've never seen a vine break yet."

"Okay," Po replied. A moment longer she took her first step. The vines barely sagged, and the second step came without pause. Kim watched from the lip, noting the way Po swayed into the swing of the vine, using her toes to keep from slipping. She had a natural feel for it. She'd do all right. Then she reached for a young shoot that rose from the crown to head height, arching under the weight of near-ripe berries clustered along its length.

"Stop," Kim said. "Don't grab that shoot." It was time to start teaching.

First rule: Never touch a berry you aren't going to pick. Second rule: Never pick a berry that isn't ripe. Third rule—the rule that mattered most to a picker: Never eat a berry. Ever.

"Why?" Po asked.

Kim pointed back at the towers set every hundred yards along the near lip of the canyon. "Because the people up there, the slappers, they'll shoot you."

Po studied the towers. "Why?" she asked.

"Because these are dreamberries," Kim said. "If you eat them you won't want to pick. You'll slow down, you'll get silly, you'll get clumsy. And if you do, they'll shoot you. If they see you eat a berry, they'll shoot you right off. If you slow down, they'll shoot the leaf right by your head. If you don't speed up, if you try to jump, even if you start to tumble, they'll shoot you."

"Why?" Po asked again.

"Because dreamberries are worth more to them than you are."

"Why?"

"They can sell the berries. If you don't pick, you're just a mouth to feed."

That was the last question Po asked for a while. She looked back at the nearest tower, but not before Kim noticed the sheen in her eyes and the way she tried to hide it when she reached up to wipe the tears before they could fall.

"You've seen dreamberries before, Po, haven't you?"

Po nodded, still turned away.

"Yeah," Kim said. "Most of us had before we got here." She put her hand on Po's shoulder. "Come on, let's get picking. I'll show you what you need to know."

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Dreamberry was the street name, also bluedream, highberry, laughberry, dopeberry, doomberry, or simply the Deep Blue Berry. It was a hybrid, an odd mix, as though wild blueberry and Afghan poppy had been grafted onto a Kiwi vine, the product of a subtropical Mendel, perhaps, abetted by an Amsterdam chemist. More likely it was a complicated accident of fruit miscegenation, melded for a generation or two in the crucible of climate change. It grew in only two places, about ten miles apart, both of them high desert canyons, with no obvious entrance or egress except from the edge. The berries were tart, just sweet enough to bear. Harvesting meant climbing out on the vines, hardly worth the effort—or so it seemed at first. The locals knew better. When picked at the cusp of ripeness, a dreamberry is just that: a tiny, indigo begetter of dreams. Waking dreams that overlay the dreamer's reality like a soft, warm blanket on a chill and cheerless day. They were almost always pleasant dreams, gentling whatever went on around the dreamer. You wouldn't want to drive, but one or two a day and hard times come again no more. Besides, you didn't need to go anywhere anyway, yeah?

The word got out of course, and almost at once chemists extracted the component compounds, none of which, alone or in any combination except the whole, would produce a single good dream. Drying them, freezing them, mashing them—all had the same effect: no dreams at best, very bad dreams most often. But no one died from

eating plain, whole, ripe dreamberries. Not directly at least. There were side effects—nightmares, delusions, paranoia, addiction, suicide—but the majority of users were fine and willing to risk it. The market grew. Botanists took cuttings, but the vines would never grow anywhere else. Others attempted to climb down into the canyons, to dig up a vine in a ball of the canyon soil, only to discover that the canyons narrowed to rock slits barely wide enough to fit a child, slits that were blocked with thick, tough vines, with no room to swing an axe or draw a saw. Only one vine was ever cut down there, a failed attempt to see what lay below. Its leaves, flowers, and berries wilted within hours, leaving a random pattern of death across the entire canopy. Widening the gaps.

By then, the market for blue dream was so established that corporate growers moved in and took over. They built a compound along the southern approach to each canyon, put up their fences and towers, and made sure no one would ever dare risk another vine just to expand the plant's range. They bought politicians, paid off inspectors, and settled into a steady two-sided agricultural practice, harvesting berries with small pickers, harvesting children from the cities where the berries sold best.

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Kim took Po out toward the center of the canyon, where her team was assigned for the day. As they went, she pointed out the different hues the berries went through as they ripened: bone white, pale rose, lavender, violet, plum; then, suddenly, in a wash of new hue, the color shifted to something akin to grape.

"But that's not it yet," Kim said. "Look here, at the end of the berry, opposite the stem. What do you see?"

"Points," Po said. "A circle of rosy points."

"That's the crown," Kim said. "It's what's left of the flower bud. What color again?"

"Rosy."

"That's right. Not red, not yet."

They went farther out, to the patch where the team was picking.

"What color are the berries now?" Kim asked. Po hesitated. She looked around. "Deep blue?" Kim asked. "Dark purple? Black, even?"

Po shook her head.

"It's called indigo," Kim said, "and it's all of those. But look at the crowns now. What do you see?"

"Red," Po said, with no hesitation.

"Red like what?"

"Blood."

"You got it. Indigo berry, blood-red crown. This is what you pick. Any other color, berry or crown, leave them. Don't touch them. Got that?" Po nodded. "Tell me."

"Indigo berry, blood-red crown. Pick just those."

Kim made her repeat it three times, then gave Po a smile. "You got it, little girl. You're gonna be fine, yeah?" Po gave her a faint smile back. "Good. Now pick that berry. Be firm but gentle, just hard enough to pull it off. If the berry feels too soft—like the skin could break—leave it. Good. Now the next one. Good. Now keep going: indigo berry, blood-red crown, firm but gentle, firm berry, too. I'll be right here for a while, picking with you. Let's see how long it takes to work our way over to Mira and Nico."

Each picker wore a mesh pullover vest with deep pockets around the waist. When their vest was full, they went back to the lip, where a shipper carefully lifted the vest over their head and poured the berries into a cloth-lined basket. Each picker, no matter their age or size, had to fill their vest five times before the rising sun made it too hot to keep working. If you didn't make quota, the boss foreman would stripe your back with a cane. Kim didn't tell Po that yet; new pickers got a little slack the first day or two. She just made sure Po kept picking steadily, and they both filled their

first vestful and part of the second before they reached Mira and Nico, who were already into their third.

"I've been watching you," Mira said, smiling at Po. "You pick like you've done it before."

Po gave her the faint smile and shrugged. Nico, as usual, was silent, picking quickly, steadily, shoulders hunched, eyes fixed on the clusters of dark berries before him. Pivoting slowly from left to right, he cleaned the vines of red-crowned indigo berries, leaving only the few that were grape with rose-red crowns or near black and too soft. Po watched him, then tried to match his speed.

Mira watched Po and smiled again. "Don't worry about going fast yet, Po. Nico's a year older than you and he's been here almost that whole year. You'll get fast soon enough, I can tell. Try this fast now." She started humming a sweet, easy tune, picking to the rhythm. Po matched it easily, so Mira increased the tempo a little. "Dance with us, Nico," she said.

He didn't look or nod or say a word, but he slowed and Po caught up. Kim picked with them for a while—a team boss still had to meet quota—but she also had to keep tabs on her team: make sure they drank, took turns fetching water, put on their headscarves when the sun got high, kept up their tempo, made the quota, and did *not* eat the berries or even lick their fingers. She told Po she would be back and meanwhile to keep picking here with Mira. She was turning away when a gunshot echoed around the canyon.

Po jerked upright, turning toward the sound. Her left foot slipped from the vine beneath her, and she automatically grabbed for one at waist height. She didn't even come close to falling, but her eyes were wide and filled with fear.

"Well done, Po!" Mira exclaimed, smiling brightly. "You kept your footing and didn't drop a single berry. She's really good at this, isn't she, Nico?"

Nico, who had paused only a moment at the first snap of the shot, stopped picking now and looked around just far enough to give Po a grimace that might have been a shy smile.

Po blinked at them. "Was someone shot?" she whispered.

"No," Mira said. "That was just a warning, a brush past the ear, probably for a new person in a team way over there." She waved toward the far end of the canyon, where the shot had first sounded.

"Really?" Po asked.

"Really," Mira replied. "It always happens when we get new pickers. The slappers brush a few on purpose, to make sure none of us forgets them. They get lonely in those towers, you know."

"Lonely?" Po peered at the nearest tower, trying to see the person under the low roof's shadow.

"Yeah. I'd sure be lonely up there. Wouldn't you?" Po gave a faint nod. "Now, we'd better get back to picking. He'll probably shoot near us sometime today, because you're new, too, but let's not give him any other reason to do it. Come on, Nico, back to the berries."

Nico was at it immediately. Po took another look at the near tower, then sighed and turned back to the vines, reaching for the cluster where she'd stopped. Kim nodded at Mira and went back to being team boss.

Kim wished she had Mira's easy way with the young ones. Mira was younger than Kim by a year, though she was taller and looked older. Much prettier, too, a real keeper. That was going to be a problem for her soon enough, but for now it helped. The others naturally liked her, trusted her, and usually obeyed her. They trusted Kim less easily and obeyed because they had to, whether they liked her or not. Kim tried not to let it matter.

Mira didn't want to be team boss anyway, though Kim couldn't understand why. Mira was born to it, Kim thought. Her parents never used blue-ream; they had owned their own company and worked all the time and been rich. Mira had gone to school, learned to read the right way, learned how to sing and add and a lot of other things, too. She was the one who told Kim that blue-ream was really indigo. But when she was ten her parents died in an accident, and her uncle took over the family business. He didn't use blue-ream either, but he sent her to the growers anyway and did something to her brother. Mira said she didn't know what, only that he disappeared the day before she was sold. Kim knew what that felt like. Her older brother, Kyle, had been sold with her. They'd been in the same team, but he got big and was going to move to shipping soon. Then, early one morning, for no reason she could understand, he'd gone out onto the vines and taken a blue jump. Chased by a gunshot. That was one way to disappear. Picking kept her mind busy every day, but she still mourned him at night.

As Mira was still mourning her parents when she'd arrived in the back of the pick-up a week or two later, as bruised as any of them—though Kim wondered if it wasn't quite the same pain when your uncle did the selling. Either way you had to get over it fast to survive. Kim was still just a picker then, but she did what she could to help Mira survive, and it helped her survive, too, and she guessed that was probably why she became team boss instead of Mira. That and being older, even if she was smaller and looked, if not outright ugly, then a lot meaner. She had her mother's face; her mother always told her so, and called her my poor Ugly Duckling.

Mira didn't look or act like a boss, and didn't care. That was okay, because that was what worked with young ones like Nico. And it would help Po, too, because Mira was also their midday teacher, and a good one.

The midday sun could kill you, despite the headscarves. Everyone went indoors before noon, then climbed back out on the vines four hours later to pick another three vestfuls. That made four empty hours to fill every midday, so there was dinner and cleanup and schooling. A picker didn't need to know much beyond picking, but a shipper had to know how to read and write and do sums. And the army could build on that, though very few of these girls would go into the army, or even to shipping, when they got too big for the vines. Still, the boss foreman made every picker study, every day. Mira taught them and read to them, filling up a lot of time that might have been spent being sad and worried and angry. Trouble time. She helped keep things smooth for the boss foreman. She made it easier for Kim to be team boss. She helped young ones survive.

And so it went.

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Po did get brushed that first day, the usual near miss, clipping the leaves beside her head. She yelped and jumped aside, feet slipping, hands flailing around her ears, as if she could ward away bullets like bees. Her feet slipped and she started to tumble. Mira and Kim both leaped, grabbing, one hand for an arm, one hand for a vine. They caught Po on either side and hauled her up, breaking twigs, mashing a few berries, and not caring. They set Po back on the vine, where—to Kim's surprise—she shook free of their grip and glared.

"It's not fair!" she cried. "I was picking just as fast as I could. As fast as Nico!" She scrubbed hot tears from her cheeks.

Mira knelt beside her, eye to eye. "You were doing just right, Po," she said. "The slapper did it because you're new, and because it's a rule he has to follow. It's part of his job to make sure you remember our rules."

"That's a bad rule," Po muttered.

"Yes, it is," Mira said. "Lots of them are. But it's better for us if we follow them. Yeah?"

Po shrugged, still glaring.

Mira gave her a quick hug, then stood. "Now we all need to get back to picking or Kim and I will get brushed like that."

She set the example and Po followed, but suddenly turned toward the tower, stuck out her tongue, and quickly turned back to the berries.

That's when Kim began to love her.

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In the next year, as the team grazed from patch to patch of ripened berries, Po never got brushed. At first she would glare up at the nearest tower each time they stepped out onto a new section of vines, but that habit faded when the slappers seemed to ignore her. She grew easy with the vines, agile as a monkey, sure-footed as a cat. She learned to ignore the small flies and bees that dined in the flowers. She learned to spot and avoid the occasional scorpion. She got used to the tiny rose-hued spiders that lurked in the crowns on the berries. She could pick as quickly as Nico, even when Mira wasn't setting a slower pace. She became his shadow. She talked to him, and he started to answer, a word here, a word there. One night, instead of coming to Kim's bed, she went to Mira's. There wasn't room for three, so Mira quietly hugged them both and moved to another bunk. Kim finally got a full night's sleep.

Po never got caned either. No one did in Kim's team, she made sure of that. The rest of the team covered for newcomers. The boss foreman didn't care as long as they made the team quota. And if a team didn't make quota, every team member got caned, with extra stripes for whoever fell short. Slackers learned fast not to slack, the rest of their team made sure of that. Po saw it happen once: the bleeding welts and the many small ways Tommo's team applied their own punishment. Kim was glad to see she took both parts of the lesson to heart.

There was one other event in those months that mattered greatly in the end, though Kim didn't recognize it then. There was always need for more pickers. Newcomers arrived at irregular times, once or twice a month, and Kim made a point of being there whenever the truck showed up, whether or not her team was full. This time, the newcomers were mostly boys, mostly older, and even the two girls were good-sized and hard faced. There was no one there like Nico or Po, she decided. She paid no real attention to the men who climbed out of the cab, the driver and a passenger. They were older, adults, definitely not pickers. The driver she'd seen before, but the passenger was new, and so covered with tattoos on his arms, face, and shaved head, you could hardly make out his features, let alone tell his age. There were gang emblems among the swirl of glyphs, and army insignia and what might have been decorations, his idea of beauty or protest or a warning snarl. He carried a small duffel over one shoulder and a long, narrow case in his left hand. A rifle case; the slapper's companion. He glanced at her, eyes flat, face blank beneath his tats, then spotted the slapper captain (fewer tats, same flat eyes) and walked away with him.

Kim's stomach relaxed—she hadn't even realized it was knotted—and she turned back to the newcomers, a final glance to make sure she hadn't missed someone small hiding behind the big ones. She hadn't, and that was that; she went back to dinner and her team.

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A month later, Mira reached puberty. Kim noticed right away, because she'd noticed Mira's breasts were growing, and because she'd been expecting it in herself for months, despite her persistently flat chest. She'd seen it in others, of course, and Alis, who'd been team boss before her, had warned all the girls before they turned ten. Kim did the same: warned them about the growing breasts and menstruation, the bleeding, the cramps, and all the rest. Warned them to hide it as long as they could. Some didn't bother; they wanted to get older. They wanted to grow bigger and get out of the vines, no matter how. Others were the opposite; they hated the changes, hated

what would come next. The rest were too afraid and unsure to know what to feel. Everyone took puberty differently, yeah, but they were all taken the same in the end, no matter how hard some tried to hide it. Even Alis.

Mira had been waiting for it, waiting to hate it. She managed to hide her breasts with a tight strip of cloth, managed to hide the bleeding the first month, even from Kim. But she put on a growth spurt, despite the meager food. No picker went to bed hungry, but nobody had a full belly either. Kim noticed the hunger, and tried to share part of her own portion. Mira refused. She grew leaner, even as she grew taller and her breasts continued to swell. The other girls noticed soon enough, and then it became obvious to anyone who might be watching. The slappers, from their high towers, with their telescope sights, were usually the first outside the team to guess.

When Mira bled again, the boss foreman came with his wife, who had been a nurse and was the closest thing to a doctor they had. She confirmed it was puberty and gave Mira looser clothes and pads and a little instruction. A week after the bleeding stopped, after the evening meal, Mira was taken to the house, where the new slapper awaited her coming.

She came back the next morning with a vivid bruise across her cheek and a red-rimmed gaze that looked nowhere. She moved differently, too: shoulders hunched, joints clumsy. Pained. She was still on the team, still light enough to work on the vines, still had to make quota. But everyone knew she'd be leaving soon. The bruise on her face (and the others on her arms) testified that she'd struggled, but she was much too pretty for the shipping shed. In three or four days a grower would come and take her to the house. If she went quietly, he'd drive off with her the next morning in his black-windowed, air-conditioned car. If she struggled again, she'd go back out on the vines until she got too big. Then she'd go off in the pickup to a brothel. That was the way of it; girls were the growers' side crop. Only the ugly and skinny went to the shipping shed, and only if they fought back hard.

Po didn't know these details yet, but she must have realized something more had changed, something that hurt Mira inside as much as out. She went to her and hugged her fiercely. Mira didn't hug back, didn't even look down, though she stroked Po's hair gently for a moment. Then all she did was say, "We need to keep picking." She pulled Po's arms open and led her to the thickest patch of berries. Nico's eyes had never left his picking, but he followed quickly, quietly.

Kim watched, wondering just how hard Mira would fight; worrying how hard Nico would take it when Mira was taken from them. He seemed not to notice the tension, made no comment on Mira's bruises, but Kim never could tell what Nico was thinking. Only Mira had gained a glimpse, and Kim feared the past night had shut that window. To Kim, Mira was already as good as gone. In her four years bossing the team, Kim had watched seven girls taken from her. None had hurt so much.

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The black-windowed car arrived three days later, right at the end of the midday break. Kim had been waiting outside, expecting it, and she hurried her team out onto the vines, hoping they wouldn't notice. She knew the boss foreman and his wife would be waiting for Mira at sunset, with a couple of the biggest shippers standing nearby just in case, and everyone would notice that, no matter what Kim did. She simply wanted to keep Mira with them as long as she could, to give her a final few hours to pretend nothing had changed. But Mira had noticed the car; they all had, and they all pretended they hadn't. Except once, when Mira turned from the berries and stared up at the nearest tower. The new slapper's tower. Everyone glanced at her, glanced up at the tower, then quickly went back to their picking. Mira stared a moment longer, then turned her back on the tower. Somehow, she made it a gesture. Head high, back straight, she went over to Nico and Po, began picking between

them, began humming, and they slipped into her rhythm. Po hummed a reedy harmony. Kim went over beside Po and picked in time. For a few minutes, she could almost forget the past week, but it made her ache to know this moment, this gift from Mira, was all pretend.

Nico broke the spell. He stopped his steady picking. He held out his small, cupped hand to Mira. It was filled with berries, an offering.

Mira recoiled as if he'd punched her face. She slapped his hand, spraying the berries in an arc across the vines, into the depths of a gap just beyond the ripe patch in front of them. She glanced fearfully at the tower, but Kim, without thought, had moved quickly over to block the slapper's aim. His presence was an itch in the center of her back. She looked at Mira and saw such anger, such grief, such fear that Kim half lifted her arm, as if raw emotion were a rain of blows she could fend off.

Mira's eyes refocused on Kim. She shook her head sharply, then grabbed Nico into a fierce hug. Just as quickly she thrust him into Kim's arms.

"Hold him!" she whispered. "Do not let him follow me." She turned, stared a moment at Po, huddled against the vines, wide-eyed and still as a hiding bird. Mira stroked Po's hair once, then went quickly along the border of ripe berries, picking as though nothing had happened. Kim watched, barely aware of Nico or Po or any other thing, not even the slapper in his tower. She watched, frozen, as Mira took two more steps, picking her way to the end of the patch, to the edge of the wide gap beyond it, and threw herself in.

Mira tumbled out of sight.

A gunshot rang from the tower.

Nico screamed.

Kim unfroze and grabbed him more tightly just as he was slipping free. He struggled, still screaming, beating her chest and arms, kicking. Po started toward the edge of the gap, but a second shot rang out and brushed her.

"Po, come here!" Kim yelled. "Now!"

Po stared at her, looked back at the edge.

"Help me!" Kim cried. "Nico's slipping out of my hands!"

It was a lie, but it worked. Po rushed over and pressed against Nico, her slight arms stretched around him, fists buried in the mesh of Kim's vest. Berry juice stained them all.

Then the boss foreman was at the lip of the canyon, shouting, ordering the team off the vines. They all closed in, surrounding Kim and Nico and Po, herding them off, making sure no one else tumbled.

Once they were on hard ground, the boss foreman called in the next team over, Gail's team. He sent Gail across the vines to peer down into the gap. She came back shaking her head.

"That's it, then," he said, loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Dead or good as, I can promise you that. The rats and lizards will eat what's left of her."

\* \* \*

The grower was angry. He'd come all this way under the glaring sun, looking forward to sampling a bit of byproduct that had been described as very pretty, a real keeper. He blamed the boss foreman and told him so in hard, threatening words, before being chauffeured away, alone in his black-windowed car. The boss foreman took the tirade stoically, then turned the blame on Kim, who took it numbly. There were things she might have said but had no strength to, even if she'd been that foolish.

There was little talk and scant appetite in Kim's team that night. She bunked with Po and Nico, mourning silently, accompanied by bouts of tears at any given moment from other beds. Sleep was scant, tears were plenty, and it was true in other teams as well. Mira had been their best teacher, their reader, their storyteller. Even the

boss foreman felt that lack. He had lost his soother. There were a few older pickers who could take on teaching, but no one could match what Mira did. Reading—teaching and doing—was shared round robin. Sometimes it eased, more often it grated. It was too easy to remember Mira. That worried the boss foreman.

What worried Kim more was Nico. He stopped crying after the first night. He stopped speaking with Po. His picking never changed. If anything, he sped up, filling his vest like a machine, as though he were trying to make his quota and Mira's, too. As if he could fill the empty space she'd left by filling his vest. Po stayed with him constantly, humming, singing, sometimes grabbing a wrist to make him slow down or drink some water, and it took Kim's help to get him to come in off the vines at midday and go into the meal shed. They sat on either side of him to make sure he ate something, but then he'd go sit by the window with his back to the tables so he didn't have to look at the teachers. When the reading started, he covered his ears.

And he began to eat berries.

Kim didn't know when he'd started. It was near impossible to notice. His hands moved so quickly, never breaking rhythm; she just happened to be looking right at him from the right angle, worrying about his manic speed, when she saw his right hand flick past his mouth as it moved from vine to vest. Even then, she almost missed what had happened. One flick, one berry, the rest dropped into the vest. But he chewed once and swallowed, even as his hands kept working. They were still in the section where the boss foreman had moved them when Mira tumbled, supposedly to help them forget and reduce the chance of copycats. Kim doubted it helped. They still ate and slept in the same sheds, woke up to the same view, the same gaps. They still went out on the vines and picked berries with the same team members. Minus Mira. The only thing really different was the nearest slapper, which didn't feel any different at all.

Kim straightened and stretched, then scanned the rest of the team, turning both ways so she could judge the angle between Nico and the tower. He was standing so his right hand was hidden by his body. That was good. But his hand was also hidden from Po. For all his quirks he was clever.

She bent to her picking, but moved along the vines at his pace, watching carefully. He didn't eat another berry that morning; not that she noticed at least.

During the break, while Nico worked on subtraction, Kim took Po aside and told her. Po looked terrified.

"I never saw it," she whispered.

"I almost missed it, too," Kim said, to remove any blame. "It was only one berry and he's very good at hiding it. It didn't seem to change anything, anyway. Not when he's picking at least." They both glanced at Nico, hunched over his pencil and numbers. He didn't look any different now either. "Don't feel bad that you didn't notice. Just keep an eye out for it. If you see it happen, ask him to stop, but don't grab him, don't argue, don't do anything the slapper might notice. Just ask him nicely."

Po nodded, wide-eyed, solemn. "Like Mira would, before . . ." Her face fell.

Kim remembered what Mira had done when Nico offered her berries. Was it only a week ago? She took Po's hand and squeezed it.

"Yes. Like Mira would before things changed. I'll talk to him too when we go back out today. He'll listen if we both tell him."

Po wiped her eyes, nodding again, but she didn't look convinced, and Kim couldn't blame her when she couldn't convince herself. This was dreamberry, after all.

\* \* \*

Nico listened impassively when Kim told him to stop eating berries. He didn't meet her gaze, staring instead off to the left. He didn't look at the tower. When she asked him to promise, he gave a single, slight nod.

"That's your promise?" she asked, straining to keep her voice gentle.

Another jerk of the chin.

"All right," she said. "I'm holding you to it, yeah? Get picking now. Po's waiting."

She couldn't watch him all the time; she had to keep an eye on the rest of the team. Even Po, right next to him, had to fill her own vest. But Kim was fairly certain that he didn't eat any berries that evening. The next morning at breakfast, it seemed even more certain, because Nico started to act like her mother had whenever she ran out of dreamberries. He was twitchy, angry, startled by the slightest scrape of a chair on the floor. When Po tried to take his hand he slapped hers away. When Kim asked him if he felt sick, he turned his back and put his hands over his ears, but not before she saw tears start in his eyes. He ate no more than a bite, fidgeting while the others finished, then hurried out to the edge. Kim watched closely as he grabbed his vest and wrestled it over his head. He was first on the vines, first to the ripe patch—Po scrambling to catch up—and the first berry he picked went into his mouth.

Kim realized then that he must have been eating berries for a long time. Maybe since Mira first reached puberty; maybe even longer. And maybe no more than a couple a day, but that young, you didn't need more than one to start dreaming. Berries latched onto young ones quick; soon enough, you'd need more than one, and soon enough she saw Nico eat a second. Then a third.

Po noticed. She spoke to him. Nico froze, staring at the berries just beneath his nose, then turned his back on her and started picking again. And ate another one.

Kim started toward him. He ate a fifth, but it took time to digest the berries; she knew that from her mother, too. And until that happened, until the berry had gone through his gut and into his blood, there would be no dreams.

He ate a sixth, and Kim started running along the vines. Po reached for him.

"Po!" she yelled. "Get back! Get away from him!" She veered, trying to put herself between Nico and the slapper.

A shot rang from the tower. It brushed by Kim's ear, brushed Nico's arm.

He looked at the torn sleeve, at the oozing welt, looked up at the tower. Grabbed a fistful of berries with his other hand and shoved them into his mouth.

The next shot burned Kim's cheek and slapped Nico back into the ripe berries before she even heard it. The echo went on and on.

She reached Nico and grabbed him, but he was too tangled in vines to tumble. She sank beside him, lifting his small body onto her lap, cradling his head in her arm. He gasped, struggling to breathe. Mashed berries and blood ran from the corner of his mouth. A bloodstain bloomed in the center of his chest. He gasped again, small face clenched in mute panic. Then his eyes went empty and it was all she could do to hold his dead weight in her arms.

\* \* \*

Two in one week. That's what the boss foreman yelled: Two in one week, on the same team. Two hard slaps, two bloody blue tumbles. What kind of team boss are you? What are you teaching these kids, yeah?

It's what Kim asked herself.

"You got soft," he growled. "You let that Mira make you think you're some kind of mother, yeah? Well, you listen to me: You are *not* a mother! And if I had someone old enough you wouldn't be no team boss neither. Get back out there and get your stinking team out there picking, and you keep them in line. You got a quota to make, I don't care how short your bloody team is. Now move!"

So Kim did. She yelled at her team. She chased them back onto the vines, made sure they were all picking, then made sure they all saw her picking, too, picking faster than any of them, scouring the ripe patch where Nico had died less than half an hour before. Alone there, because not even Po would come near her. They picked heads down, silent but for the rustle of leaves and the creaking vines. And, faint but

there among the small bees, the weeping. Kim clenched her jaw, scrubbed her eyes dry, and kept picking. Some one of them—Jaide maybe, she was next oldest now—began to hum. One of Mira’s songs, wordless, almost tuneless, but with a steady rhythm they all could keep up for a long time. Kim scrubbed her eyes again and managed to keep from shouting her down. Silence did no one good right then. She let herself slow to the rhythm. She angled toward the others, rejoining the team. She added her voice to Jaide’s, and two or three others sang too: Eny, Daza, Stelle. But not Po. Po kept herself distant, and when Kim moved closer, kept the others between them.

They made quota that day, personal and total. That night, Kim slept alone, if you could call it sleeping. Near dawn she went to Po’s bunk and found her stiff, awake, silent tears trickling from the corners of her eyes. Kim crawled under the threadbare blanket and draped an arm over Po’s thin shoulders.

“It was my fault,” she whispered, “not yours. You did what I told you, what I thought was best. I was wrong. It’s not your fault.”

Po rolled toward her. “You won’t make me leave the team, will you?” she whispered, her reedy voice barely audible over her heartbeat.

Kim cupped Po’s head beneath her chin and held her tighter. “No,” she whispered. “Never.”

Po buried her face in Kim’s breast, soaking her nightshirt. “You won’t leave? Promise?”

Kim’s breasts ached. “Don’t worry, I’ll be here.” It was only half a lie.

\* \* \*

Two days later her first period started. Kim was caught unprepared, for all that she’d known it was coming. Her stomach felt tight, but she blamed it on too much grief. A sharp cramp brought her up straight; dampness on her thigh confirmed her fear. Po, picking beside her, was the only one who noticed, or at least let on. She offered her headscarf, but Kim made her put it back on. No one would take off their scarf under that sun, except to wet it again and wipe their face. Instead, she tucked her shirttails beneath her pants. Luckily, the flow was light and brief. Her emotions made up for it; heavy, jagged, and lingering, long after the bleeding had stopped.

She skipped the next month. Her breasts ached anyway. She was more than hungry. Her emotions went jagged again. Mostly, she was angry; at the boss foreman and slappers and growers and berries for everything they were and did; at Mira and Nico for dying; at herself for having to change. She snapped at the team for little things. Even Po was careful around her. But she settled down soon enough and convinced herself her breasts weren’t growing.

The next month there was no hiding it. The nurse took her aside when the bleeding had barely begun, gave her the pads and the new set of clothes and the talk. Welcome to womanhood. Then sent her back out on the vines.

“Best thing for you, yeah?” the boss foreman said. “Keep your mind busy with the day-to-day. Don’t let it drag at you, like some of ’em do. Put it behind you, move on.” He took tight hold of her arm so she wouldn’t look away. “Put the berries in the vest, yeah? And stay away from the goddam gaps.”

As if he really thought she needed to hear it. As if he thought she’d listen to him.

Yeah, she remembered Mira, she remembered Nico. Vividly. It dragged at her all right. But what she felt was anger, only she bottled it tight so she could still take care of her team. She knew what she looked like, she knew her build. She was her mother’s daughter, the Ugly Duckling; no man would look at her twice. She still had plenty of time left on the vines. She was still worth something there.

Her period lasted four days. Four days later, they took her to the house.

\* \* \*

It could have been any one of the foremen, any one of the slappers, but her team

had been moved again, back in front of the new slapper's tower. He'd noticed first and that gave him first claim. That he took it took Kim by surprise. The boss foreman drew her aside after dinner. He didn't look her in the eye, just muttered, "Don't fight, yeah? If you know what's good for you, don't fight." Then her passed her off to the two heavies from shipping. She was too startled to believe it at first, too sure she was not and never would be a keeper. But this was too obvious to deny. She tensed, started to pull back; they were expecting it and lifted her feet off the ground. So she didn't struggle. She saved her strength for the slapper.

The house had one door. They put her through and pushed it shut behind her. Kim heard the key turn in the lock. She looked around the room, back pressed to the hard, paneled wood. Closed curtains made it just as dim inside as out. A bit of light flowed in from a side room, sketching shadows around a table, two chairs, a couch against the far wall. The new slapper was sitting there, as dark as the air in the room.

"Don't worry," he said softly. "We're just going to talk, quiet like." He angled his head toward a curtained window. "Sometimes people try to listen."

Kim clamped her jaws hard shut. The silence grew.

He angled his head the other way. "Sit down. There's a soft chair over there. Or at the table, wherever. Just don't stand there looking like a scared, angry rabbit."

Kim scanned the room again, looking for something hard and small she could grab and throw or swing. There was a small bowl on the table, two half-filled glasses; nothing else she could see without moving, and she wasn't going to do anything he told her to.

He watched her a minute longer, hands restless in his lap, head cocked. She couldn't make out his features through the gloom, only an abstract pattern of tattoos, but there seemed a hint of letdown in his voice when he spoke next, as if he'd expected something better.

"You don't recognize me, do you, Duckling. Huh. I guess we've both changed a bit."

The nickname was a slap to the face, then a fist to the chest as her hearing remembered. The mask of ink disguised his face, but she could see it plain in his voice. It had changed too, yeah; he sounded like their father.

"Kyle?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Took you long enough."

The wonder of it filled her first. She could hardly breathe, hardly think beyond the vision of his younger self waving at her across the vines the day before he took his blue jump. She was that age now, and so much had happened. So much . . .

Her eyes filled with tears of rage.

"You killer," she breathed. "You lizard! You goddam bastard!"

She ran to the table, grabbed the nearest glass and threw it as hard as she could at his face, screaming. "Murderer! You murdered Mira. You murdered Nico!"

He ducked and the glass shattered against the wall above him, spraying wine and shards. She lunged for the other glass but was too blinded by tears and rage. She knocked it over and it rolled off the table in a spill. She groped for the bowl, still screaming, but he lunged off the couch and reached over the table to catch her wrists. She twisted one free, clawed at his face, bit his hand. He stifled a yell and tried to grab her loose wrist, to keep her nails from his eyes. She jerked the other hand free and slammed the bowl up into his face.

He erupted with a push so strong she flew back from the table, landed hard on the floor, and slid up against the door.

"Dammit, Sis!" he hissed. He spat and scrubbed his mouth, cheeks, and chin with his hands, then spat again, wiping his hands hard on his pants. "Goddammit! These are dreamberries!" He cleared his throat and spat again, then hurried into the side room.

Kim heard running water, gurgling, spitting, but she lay where she was, curled up

on her side, breath knocked out of her, struggling to inhale and weep at the same time. Kyle came back into the room. He crouched by her, but not so close she could reach him.

"I didn't shoot Mira," he said. He was speaking softly again, but his voice bit. "She chose to jump and I let her."

"So you—" Kim still couldn't get in enough air.

Kyle set down the glass. "Roll onto your back. Come on, get your knees up, feet flat on the floor. Tilt your head back. Breathe." He knelt behind her and raised her head and shoulders, then rubbed her back hard till her breathing settled enough for speech.

"You let her kill herself!" She put knives into the words.

Kyle stopped rubbing. "No. I told her where and when to jump, how to get hidden, how to get out."

Kim drew in another deep breath. "Yeah. And Nico? What did you tell him?"

"Nothing, dammit! I couldn't get near him!" He shook her shoulders once, hard, then took a breath and let it out slowly. "I wasn't anywhere near him that day, you know that, Duckling. There wasn't a thing I could do." He pushed himself up, paced to the table and back. "Dammit, Kim, I can't save everyone."

Kim heard pain in his voice, a tear wanting to fall. If only he didn't sound so much like Father.

"What about the bruises?"

"What bruises?"

"On Mira's face. On her arms. Did you give her those?"

He clenched and unclenched his hands. "I had to. I swear I didn't take her, but it had to look like it, and look like she'd fought. It was her idea, Sis. She was the strong one. She figured it would give us a little more time before the grower came. She wanted time to . . . I don't know. We knew she couldn't tell anyone, not even you. We just couldn't risk it. But she wanted enough time to get herself ready for it. Inside, yeah? She needed time to say goodbye, even if it was only in her own mind."

Kim wept again then. And she couldn't help wishing she'd understood Mira better that last day, understood she'd been saying a different goodbye, understood enough to let Nico know. She reached for Kyle. He pulled her up into a hug and she wept against his chest.

"I should have known," she whispered. "I should have guessed. I should have saved Nico."

"Ah, no, Sis. God no." He shook her again, gently this time. "Don't blame yourself, yeah? You can't take that on you. You did everything you could to make it better for him, and for Mira and everyone else on your team. You want to blame someone, blame the growers and blame the dealers and blame the people who take their bribes."

He rocked her till the weeping stopped and Kim could think clearly again.

"You told Mira how to get out?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"There's really a way out? Past the snakes and lizards and roots and everything?" She wanted to believe it, but couldn't quite make the leap of faith.

"Yeah."

"Did you know that before you jumped?"

Kyle gave a humorless laugh. "Oh, I didn't jump, Duckling." He let go and started pacing again, hands clenching and unclenching, always moving. "I was all cock-sure and full of myself, already a shipper in my mind. No way I was going to jump. I just stopped paying attention to the vines, that's all. Yeah, I slipped. I took a deep blue tumble. And the slapper missed. Like I missed your Mira. A lot of us do, you know. We're crack shots, army trained. We can brush a mosquito off your ear and not mess up a single hair." He mimed it happening. "We only miss when we want to. So I was

lucky that day, out in front of the right tower. I was lucky how I fell, too; into a gap, managed to bounce lucky and fall out of sight. I thought about climbing back up." He stopped pacing and looked at her. "I thought about you, Sis, but there I was, out of sight, like I'd planned it or something. It seemed like climbing back up would not be a good idea. I didn't know some of the slappers missed on purpose, not then, and I sure didn't want to get shot if I surprised one when I popped back up. So I decided to keep going down."

Kim studied his face, still trying to see young Kyle beneath the ink, trying to see if it matched what she heard. "How did you get out?"

"It's a long story, Sis, but I guess we got all night."

He took her hand, sat her on the couch, and told her how he had jumped and scrambled down through tighter and tighter windings of fatter and fatter vines into a green twilight. How the air got damp and the vines slippery with some kind of moss. How it became less like climbing and more like crawling, then squeezing. How the green became gray, the very edge of night, before he reached what he thought was the bottom, a slab of rough stone floored by layers of slick, interwoven vines as thick as his body. No dog-sized lizards, no poisonous snakes, not even scorpions that he saw.

"All a pile of boss foreman bullshit," he said. "I think whatever lives in that place is more afraid of us than we are of them."

He did see bones, and he wondered then if he'd be able to find his way back up. The tangle was so thick, he couldn't make out the last hole he'd squeezed down through. So he kept going, squeezing his way along the edge of the slit the vines disappeared through, until he came to a kid-sized crook between two vines that curved down into the slit and the murk below.

"If I'd been a day older, I would've been too big to fit through. I almost got stuck, too, almost turned back. But I thought I saw something gleaming just a little ways down, a tiny bit of light, and I told myself if I didn't at least go far enough to see what in Hell it was, I'd regret it till the day I died. Which I was thinking might be pretty close at hand. I was some hungry by then. It seemed like hours since I'd taken the tumble."

"What was it gleaming?" Kim whispered.

"It was a lantern, a little battery-powered thing sitting on a ledge in the slit. So dim I could tell the battery was almost dead, but there was another lantern a little ways on, and another one a ways after that, and another one, this one sitting just below another kid-sized crook in the vines like the one I'd come down through." Kyle's voice grew thick. "It was a path, Duckling, a lit path leading along a cave running below the slit."

It was a big cave, in some places huge, with a little brook that wandered in and out of sight, sometimes disappearing through a crack in one wall or the other. The vines were still there, alone and in clumps, some so tight he had to squeeze again, but they had plenty of room to spread out and root themselves into a thick layer of mucky, mossy stuff, tough and crusted here, soft enough there to sink into up to his knees. He stumbled on, following the line of lights, until he came upon a person changing the battery in one of the lanterns.

"It scared the crap out of me," he said. "I guess I should have expected it, but I wasn't thinking straight then. It was all just too damn weird. I was pretty sure I'd died or eaten dreamberries or at least knocked myself silly when I tumbled, and this was all either some kind of bad trip or me dead and on my way to Hell."

"Who was he?"

"She was a she. They're mostly girls, and most of them pickers once. Women now. Women who tumbled or jumped or ran away from a brothel. Women who thought they were going to die or thought life was worse than dying. They live just beyond the edge of the hardpan, where trees grow and it rains. The cave runs way past the

end of the canyon, but it's still a long way to walk from there to the trees. There's men there, too, but boys my age have more options once they get out and make their way to a city. Most of us wind up criminals or in the army."

Kyle had done both, petty crime first, then into the army as soon as he was old enough, because he knew the next step up in crime would have been to start running dreamberries, a goon for the growers.

"But now you're a slapper," Kim said. "Just a different kind of goon."

"I'm where I can help pickers jump." But he shook his head. "It turns out it's not that easy finding a chance to talk to a picker. These two rooms are the only place we can meet up, and you hitting puberty is the only reason why." He finally stopped pacing. He sat beside her and hugged her so tight it hurt. "I was afraid I'd get here too late, Duckling, or that some other slapper would get first claim on you. The thought of you getting kept by a grower, or going to a brothel . . ."

Kim realized he was crying now. "You didn't have to worry about me, Kyle, you know that. I'm too flat and ugly." She forced a laugh. "Boss foreman probably thinks you're a pretty weird guy, taking first claim on an ugly duckling."

He sat back, hands on her shoulders, arms' length. "You are not ugly, Sis. You aren't even plain. You're small, yeah, but most guys would just call you cute. Foxy, even. Never ugly."

Now, even through the tattoos, she could see the concern in his face. She also knew he was wrong. "You're my brother, you have to say nice things to me."

"I'm also old enough to know what a lot of men like. Haven't you looked in a single mirror in the past five years?"

She didn't look into mirrors. She avoided seeing that face. "I look like Mom, 'warts and all,' like she always said."

His face grew hard again. "I found Mom when I got to the city."

"I've still got the scar she gave me when I hid her berri—"

"It's nothing, half under your hair! Nobody's going look twice at it!"

She refused to hear it. "I'm skinny and pinch-faced and spotty and—"

"She was in a brothel, Kim!" He shook her. "I tried to get her out, but she wouldn't come. She could hardly remember me."

She stared at him. "In a brothel?"

He wouldn't let her look away. "A brothel. Where she looked just as good as any of the others. She died there while I was in the army."

Kim stared at him, seeing her mother's face. She had dreamed of her mother coming to buy her back, a dream of redemption. She had dreamed of escaping and finding her mother, a reunion. Or of telling her mother to go to Hell, a resolution. Sometimes she'd dreamed of finding and killing her. In every dream, Kim shared her mother's face, two ugly ducklings, and that had protected her. Kyle killed those dreams. He held her while she cried again.

"Time to dry up, Sis," he said finally. "Come on, get a hold of yourself. This night ain't over."

Then he told her precisely where to jump, how to climb down, what to look for, how to get out, who she could trust.

"Do it tomorrow," he said.

She shook her head, overwhelmed by the past few hours. "That's too soon."

He shook his head. "That's just what Mira said, and she got less than three days. If you hadn't rushed the team out onto the vines, the grower would've taken her midday."

"No grower is going to hurry out here for me."

"Didn't you hear me? You're not ugly. If none of the growers want to take you, you'll just be shipped off on the next truck."

"I'm a team boss, and I'm still small enough to pick."

"You're worth more to them in a brothel than you are on the vines."

"I—"

"What if the boss foreman moves your team to a different section, yeah? Not all the slappers aim to miss. Do it tomorrow. Please!"

"Or the next day?"

"Dammit, Sis, this is what Mira did!" For a minute he looked like he might hit her. Then he sighed and hugged her again. "The next day, yeah. But that's it, Sis. That's it!"

"Yeah, I guess it is. Now you'd better go ahead and hit me some."

He frowned. "I already have, a lot more than I liked."

She punched his arm hard. "It's got to be more. They know I'd fight."

\* \* \*

The next day felt like a bad trip. Kim was bruised and exhausted, anxious but half asleep, walking in a waking dream. Everything Kyle had told her clashed with the sun-stark reality out on the vines. Every berry seemed fluorescent, every crown glowed blood warm, every gap loomed deep and black. Her team members watched her constantly, always nearby. Po never left her side, picking slowly because she wouldn't take her eyes off Kim's hands. Kim knew none of them would make quota that day, her least of all. She rehearsed dozens of ways to say goodbye, none of them good. She despaired of finding words when Mira, their storyteller, could not. After the midday dinner, she went to the boss foreman, reminded him that her team was still short, and tried to tell him that Jaide could probably grow into a team boss, with a bit of help.

"What, do I suddenly look old?" he snapped. "Don't tell me how to do my job, you just do yours. I need to see more full vests from your team today, yeah? I don't care how much sleep you didn't get last night, they got no reason to go slow."

So she shut off everything but picking for the rest of the day. She told Jaide to set a fast pace, made Po join the singing, and they all made quota, just barely, Kim least of all.

She fell into her bunk that night more tired than she could ever remember. Po climbed in with her, all shoulders and elbows and knees against the bruises, but Kim couldn't bring herself to send her away. And she couldn't get goodbyes out of her mind, until Po whispered her back from the dark edge.

"Kim? Are you awake?"

"I wish I wasn't," Kim said, but she hugged her, admitted she was sore, and said they both needed rest to get through tomorrow.

"What happens tomorrow?" Po asked.

"I'll tell you then," Kim replied. "I promise. Hush now. Sleep."

Amazingly, they both did.

But the next morning, the boss foreman pulled Kim aside as she and the team entered the meal shed.

"You made quota yesterday," he said, "the whole team. I didn't think you would."

"Yeah," she replied.

"Yeah, well, I thought you might like to know we got a truck due this evening. There should be enough to choose from." He looked away. "Keep the team at full strength, yeah?"

"Yeah, good. Thanks."

He glanced at her face, then back off to the side, and she thought he actually did look older. "Bring that Jaide girl along so she can see what you do."

He walked out quickly, and she realized what he meant to tell her.

When she led her team out onto the vines, Kim still didn't know how to say goodbye, but she gathered them around her and started with the latest facts: A truck was coming that evening; the team would be back at full strength; Jaide would come with her to choose the replacements. She let it sink in for a moment, then plowed on.

“The boss foreman was surprised we made quota yesterday, but he was happy.”

“Hard to imagine that,” Jaide murmured.

“As happy as he ever gets,” Kim said. “Keep making quota and he’ll leave you alone.” She looked around. They were all looking back. They knew, she could tell; even Po knew. Kim took a deep breath. “Make quota, stay clear of the gaps, take your turn reading, even if you can’t read like Mira, because, well, who can, yeah? Remember her and do your best. Most important, remember Nico and don’t eat the berries. Ever.”

“You, too?” Po asked.

Kim looked her in the eye and nodded. “I promise. You?”

Po nodded. Then Kim looked each of the others in the eye for a moment and asked, “Promise?”

They all did.

“Good.” Then, before she made herself let them go, “There’s one more thing.” She scanned their faces again. “I learned stuff last night that had nothing to do with being a keeper. Like you can trust a few of the slappers. Remember that, but don’t say a damned thing about it to anyone you don’t know good enough to trust. Yeah, that doesn’t make sense now. Someday it will.” And that was all she could trust herself to say.

\* \* \*

The rest of the morning seemed almost normal. The truck wasn’t due till the evening, so Kim let herself relax and be team boss: pick, check in with the others, keeps tabs on the quota, join in the songs, stay close to Po. Po, who hummed along but otherwise stayed silent, picking intently in a way that almost reminded Kim of Nico. Almost. Not enough to panic, but enough to make her worry. She reminded herself that Po had promised, and Po placed great store in promises. But Po was seven and a half now, going on eight—damn, had it been that long?—and older kids lost faith in promises. Picking did that to you. So did having your team boss lie about more than one promise.

But Po made no complaint. She just kept picking, well over quota by midday. She went in quietly and ate as much as she ever did. She studied arithmetic and got all her answers right. She even took a turn at reading, insisted on it in fact, and obviously remembered Mira’s style, despite being so young. Kim thought, *She could be a team boss in a couple of years*. She felt her heart fill and blinked away tears. She turned toward the window to hide it, wiped them clear, and saw a black-windowed car drive up.

She looked at the boss foreman and caught him staring at her. He looked away quickly, then glanced back, angled his head toward the door, and stood.

“It’s time!” he called, cutting off Po in midsentence. “Back on the vines. Get picking.”

She wondered if he was trying to give her the rest of the day with her team, or was he just worried about making quota when a grower was there?

Then Po and Jaide and the rest surrounded her; almost pulled her out the door. They climbed straight out onto the vines, donning their vests as they went. And suddenly Kim didn’t know what to do. She’d take the truck and brothel over the house and black-windowed car any day, and Kyle had shown her a way out of both. But what about Kyle? Did the boss foreman know? Had he told the growers? Would he?

She started picking with the team; it was all she could think of to doing. They moved out along the edge of the latest ripe patch. It was in the right direction, toward the gap that Kyle had said she should use, a gap so narrow it wasn’t quite visible from the lip of the canyon; nor from the vines, until you were almost right on it.

And then they were.

Kim looked back at the lip. The boss foreman was talking to the grower by the berry baskets. Just talking, looking at the berries, looking out across the vines, looking down at the berries again. The black-windowed car was parked by the house. The

grower said a few more words, then he and the boss foreman headed toward the shipping shed. There were still a couple of hours of daylight left.

"Keep picking," Jaide said suddenly. "Don't attract attention." She picked up the pace of her song.

Kim bent to the work, picking berries, loading the vest, moving along the edge of the gap. A few handfuls later she risked another look at the lip. The grower was talking to the boss shipper. The boss foreman was just listening, arms folded across his chest.

Kim shifted closer to Jaide. "Watch Po," she whispered.

Jaide, still singing and picking, nodded once.

Kim steeled herself, turned, and took one step toward the gap.

Po stepped in front of her. She faced Kim squarely, silently, jaw set.

Kim tried to step past her but Po moved sideways, blocking her way.

Some of the team slowed.

"Keep picking!" Jaide snapped, and increased the pace again.

Po held out her hand, open, empty, waiting.

Kim stared at it—*Kyle was right*, she thought, *you can't save everyone*—then looked up into Po's wide, unwavering eyes.

"Do you trust me?" Kim asked.

Po nodded.

Kim grasped her small hand. She glanced at the near tower, turned back to see Po sticking her tongue out at Kyle, and broke into a wild laugh. *You save who you can.*

"Jump with me!" she breathed.

Together they took one more step and threw themselves into the gap.