

“I can stuff lightning into a jug faster than a frog can smell his own fart.”

The man didn't laugh. I don't think he even believed me. His lower jaw shifted from side to side, but the rest of him stood like a statue in his suit and tie. Even his eyebrows didn't move. It was like he was waiting for me to correct myself, or to laugh at a joke I had made.

Because, really, what City Man would believe a sixteen-year-old Apple Chain brown girl?

The two of us looked nothing alike. I was dressed in grey, worn, baggy pants, thick boots, and one of Ma's old shirts. The clothes on the City Man's back were the blackest black I had ever seen. Creased like a knife edge. It was like a six-foot-tall slice of night stepped into this tiny, dust-coated jail cell and sucked out all the daylight.

He stood in the open doorway, blocking the only exit. Not that there would have been room for him to come inside; the shack was barely bigger than an outhouse, with only one half-sized cot. Also one knee-high bucket; set on one end, it served as a table. Set on the opposite end, it had other uses.

“I swear I'm not lying,” I told him. “If Old Sparky was out taking a walk in the clouds, I'd show you. I'm the best.”

The City Man glanced at the law monkey who stood behind me, holding onto the rope tied around my wrists. “Is she?” he asked. “Is she the best?”

I looked back. Gilly Lipstick licked a circle around his mouth, tracing his rosy smile. I cringed. He slouched against the back wall, his muddy shirt blending into the muddy planks behind him.

*Please, I begged inside my head. Tell the truth.*

The Lipstick let out a sound somewhere between a belch and a growl, and then said, “Yeah, she’s all right.”

“How much all right?” The only thing on the City Man’s face that moved was his mouth.

Gilly stuck out his chicken neck. “All right enough that she’s given me constant trouble these past ten year or so.” The skinny little man took hold of the collar of my shirt and twisted the fabric, pulling it taut against my neck. “Finally slipped up, though, didn’t yeh?” He cackled, a wet sound in his throat. His breath smelled like the sweat between a horse’s legs. I wrinkled my nose, but I didn’t say a dang word. Not about to give him the satisfaction.

Gilly Lipstick had been chasing my tail for as long as I could remember. He ran the brown-suited gang that served as the law in Ellsboro, always looking to nab the bootleggers who sold electricity to folks outside The Scheme. He’d always been after us Capricorns. That red-lipped weasel always tailed me in town, asking when I was bottling next, who I was selling to. I never gave it up, but that didn’t stop him from trying. Last summer he even said he’d look the other way at my bottling if I would kiss him on the mouth. My answer to that was a slippery worm of spit on his boots and a cloud of dust as I ran away.

He stopped being nice after that.

I guess the monkeys found out about The Meadow from some snitch, because two nights ago I rolled up with my wagon of bottles just in time to find the Lipstick taking a leak behind a tree. Ratri didn't keep that night dark enough to hide me. Now I stood with a rope around my wrists, a City Man called down to look me over. I wanted to do a lot more than spit on the Lipstick's boots right now. And I had a bone to pick with Ratri, too.

The City Man didn't react to our salamander squabbles, small as they were to him. "Is she all right enough that she's worth our time in taking her off your hands?"

"Depends on what you got in that there case," Gilly said, sticking out his bottom lip. He pointed with his foot at the shiny briefcase our visitor had brought with him. "If that's got a good number of pretty presents, then I swear to Sparks you found yourself the finest little lightning lifter in the whole Chain."

*Stop talking*, I screamed at him in my head. It was all bluff. Gilly was just seeing how much he could get for his own greasy pocket. He knew the Scheme paid the law for every bottler they sent their way.

I watched the City Man. No response. Did he have anything happening on his insides? I sure did – mine were bubbling up and down like a hot spring. I wanted to go with him. I *needed* to go with him.

The alternative was just...

I couldn't do it.

Everyone knew about Mrs. Eppie, the wide river to the west. About The Outers, who lived on the other side. How their land was all desert and dry dung. How, every single day, they tried to cross over to our side any way they could, and killed anyone would tried to stop them. Any bootlegger who got their paw caught in the bear trap was shipped off to Mrs. Eppie to stand guard at the Wall built to keep these monsters out. Rebuilding sections that were breached. Hauling bricks and mortar and Sparky-knows-what-else beside a giant death-trap river. Wyatt Reddy, the second-best bootlegger in Ellsboro when I was younger, was caught and sent out there, never to be heard from again.

But criminals, we bootleggers were, so it didn't matter. Storm thieves. Stealing good money away from The Scheme, the nearest thing to government we had these days. We deserved to be punished, they said. To redeem ourselves by protecting our borders from the Outers.

Unless, of course, The Scheme wanted us to bottle instead.

Gilly looked at me, but I didn't look back. [a1] He probably *wanted* me sent to Mrs. Eppie. Wanted to see my forehead sweating, my knees knocking, and my belly-button shaking hands with my backbone for lack of food. Wanted to see an Outer borer buried in the back of my skull, only coming out long enough to put a straw in. For a moment, I thought about offering him a kiss on the cheek, or on his lips, or even interlacing my fingers in his, just to get out of it all. But then I saw him lick a circle with his tongue and my guts shivered inside my skin.

I turned my focus to the City Man. *Take me*, I made my eyes tell him. My palms turned in his direction like magnets to metal. *We can tame Sparky like nobody's business*, they sang. *Trust us.*

The Scheme wouldn't make me a human shield or work me down to bits for a useless mound of twenty-foot-high stone. The Scheme would just make me do what I did right now – bottling.

The man's eyes met mine, those cold blue City eyes. They looked like the sun shining through ice – you wanted to believe there was warmth back there somewhere, but all you saw was cold. Even his skin was white, the color of snow. He spoke to the Lipstick: “Perhaps it won't matter what I have here in my bag if I report you for obstruction of company business. You haven't provided us with any new bottlers for years.”

Gilly's face turned dark. “Ain't my fault there ain't none to be had.”

“We find that communities who have not yet hardwired into The Scheme, who rely on hand-delivered bottles of lightning for their electricity, have a population of illegal bottlers three to four times higher than their hardwired counterparts. You're telling me this is the first bottler you've caught in six years? And, on top of that, you're telling me you've *known* this bottler has been bootlegging for some time?”

The City Man didn't look in a book to find these figures. He pulled them from right below his hairline. I wondered if this was the man's whole life. If he had a husband, or a wife, or children at home who waited for him to return at the end of every day. Did he tell them about the people he spoke to, the bottlers he brought in?

“I’m just sayin’,” the monkey mumbled, “that Miss Ahilya Capricorn might or might not be the person you want in that factory of yours.” He play-acted a shrug.

I took a step toward the man, my palms still singing, my fingers plucking out the accompaniment in the air like Pa’s old banjo on the wall. “You won’t be disappointed,” I said with pride. Gilly growled, pulling the rope taut in warning, but I didn’t care a dragonfly’s tit what he was gonna get from that suitcase. I was fighting for my life.

“You think you’re the right age,” the man said. I couldn’t tell if it was a statement or a question, so I answered it just the same.

“I’m sixteen. Long past toys and dress-up. Past believing City Tales. I know all the bottlers you take are like me – young and spry and able to dance with Sparks. You don’t like to take adults.”

“Is that so.”

“Sure is. And I’ve been bottling alone for three years since my Ma died. My auntie can’t help me. Even my pa can’t help me, not since his run-in with Sparky.”

“Stop talkin’ so much,” Gilly said. “He don’t need—”

“Let her speak,” the man interrupted without looking away from me.

I felt a rush of excitement. It was maybe the first time Gilly had been quieted when he didn’t want to be. He acted like the biggest slug on the rock, but now he had someone standing over him with a salt shaker.

There was a weight in my legs that made them feel safe on the floor, like I was balanced, like I couldn't be knocked over. I was strong. I was leaving with this City Man.

"I know what's what and how's how," I told the man in my best City accent. "And I know bottling. You'll be glad if you take me."

The man's eyes went down to my bare feet. He studied my dirty toes and my exposed ankles, worked his way past my pants, and rested on my hands. My fingers played a chord, and I saw a muscle in his cheek move. His City blues surveyed my arms, my neck, and came to rest on my face. The man looked at me a long time. I didn't mind.

It wasn't like with Gilly, who spied on me with his hands in his pockets every time I went into town. He swapped one foot for the other while this went on, dancing like a sick swamp rat. He was nervous. Me and the City Man paid him no mind, though. We just kept right on looking. Then the little hairs on the back of my neck raised up. The air around me grew warm, like right before Sparky came down to dance. Ma always called it The Sparking. It meant something was about to happen. This time, though, there wasn't any lightning to be bottled, so I had no idea what to expect. I shivered even though I wasn't cold.

Then the City Man had his briefcase up and papers came out, flying toward Gilly Lipstick. He recited some fast City speak, which washed over me like a magic spell:

"The Scheme, underwritten by the Municipality of Nork City, thanks you for your service in the acquisition of a new Lightning Bottler. This envelope contains your finder's fee – this is a non-negotiable amount. Sign here to transfer ownership of the prisoner. Thank you. The bottler

will accompany me to The Scheme to begin full-time employment. After two years, she will have repaid her debt to society and may choose at that time to interview for a permanent position at the company. She will be provided with room and board at The Scheme and will remain with said amenities until such time as she is terminated from her position or until she is granted permission by The Scheme to live off-site. This will not occur until after the mandatory two years of government work. As she is a minor, I also require the signature of her legal guardian. Thank you for your service to The Scheme, and good day.”

With a flurry and a flourish, the man grabbed the rope that held me. He pulled me away from the Lipstick and we exited the shack. We started toward his big, black truck, but Gilly came outside, a loose packet of papers in one hand, a wad of bills in the other. His eyes were wide. “Hey – I ain’t done with her yet!”

The City Man didn’t even blink. “By accepting the finder’s fee and signing Form 632, you have relinquished any local municipal authority over the criminal in question and she is now property of The Scheme.” He opened up the truck door and shoved me inside. “Have a good day,” he said to the Lipstick, then walked to his side and climbed in himself.

And that was that. I thought maybe there would be a test, or more questions to answer, or – I don’t know – *something*. He didn’t even ask me to bottle.

I thought about running away, about pulling the metal handle on my door and sprinting through the woods like a deer. I would hide out in Chimney Rocks – there was a cave up there

that no one else knew about, that no one else could even squeeze into. After a day or two I could come out and live my life again.

But it would never be the same. The chapped-lipped monkey would hog-tie me up faster than a fly could spit, and I knew this time he wouldn't call The Scheme. He'd just ship me off to Mrs. Eppie with the rest of the human garbage. Or worse – he'd keep me prisoner just for himself.

No. I had to go. Auntie Zoya would have to remember how to bottle herself again. It was up to her now.

The City Man took out a penknife and freed my wrists from the rope. He turned on the machine. Then he asked, "Where is your house? We need a signature from your legal guardian – your father is alive, you said?"

"Yeah," I answered, "but he won't be any help to you. My aunt will sign for me."

And we drove.