

...And so the fox said to the flame: "Flame. Do not burn me. Spare me. Have you not eaten enough? The forest. The mountains. The town. Mr. Pig. Ms. Hen. Spare me, and I shall breed many young, and give them to you another day."

But the flame, it was not so easily persuaded from its task: "But so lonely, you look, little fox. So cold without my embrace. I just want to be with you. For as long as you live..."

-Sang Folktale: *The Fox and the Flame*

25-14

The Fox and the Flame

-[Green River]-

Green River had been kidnapped a total of nine times across her life. The first six were all internal matters. Sister to sister or mother to daughter; problems resolved via bribery, blackmail, or promised favors. Another two were oppositional. The less said about her "dalliance" with that Kazahara bastard the better.

That just left her final two kidnappings to go over—both performed by the same woman for Green River's personal benefit, ironically. But there was no "normal" way to form a bond with a bloodthirsty ex-Regular like Jelene Draus.

A smudge marred Green River's reflection as she combed her fox-self draped around her neck. She had applied a softer coloring to the fur, desiring increased redness to welcome more auspiciousness into her life. She knew such a thing was superstition, but one needed as much mental support as they could when beset by troubles high and low.

Her esteemed and caring "elder sisters" up in the Tiers were inquiring about Ox-Three more and more. She received three gift packages over the past week, each expressing their condolences and offering to grant a "temporary vacation" so that she might refresh her spirit for the task ahead. Of course, someone else would be given governance during her absence and by fortune or skill, their metrics would be higher than hers. Perhaps they might somehow manage to capture a Low Master as well.

After that, the temporary vacation might become a permanent demotion: a permanent condemnation to the Warrens. Or worse—a command to offer herself as a cauldron for another sister to delay her "*cyclical assimilation*."

Her brushing grew rougher. Her vulpine extension flinched. Both woman and fox took a breath as Green River considered her options. She needed to offer them something. There were scant few she could trust back in the Tiers, but it was folly to think the party was a unified front. Everyone was player and pawn both in someone else's game. She just needed to form a narrow path between. An opening she could exploit and leverage to maintain her current position.

But what could she offer? Her banishment from the Tiers had severed her from countless favors and debts. The shame of her compromise at the hands of the Nolothe and Desoulment thereafter did more to cull her influence than diminish her power. That had proven to be the greater wound in the long-run; forever playing the role of lesser sister to those who dwelled above her. Fools and feckless sows who succeeded by insulation and fortune. Traitors that feasted from the carcass of her former position in the twilight of her mistake.

Her weakness was ambition. Was impatience. Was thinking she could outmaneuver a Low Master so easily. But there were a few good things to come from this. Truly wondrous things. The ghoul and its Frame, for one, would be worth an impossible fortune if offered properly—but she would need to be the one to deliver it. The removal of the bomb in her mind was another. A loosening of her chains.

Perhaps she needed to leverage her newest contact. Invoke Avo's aid by whatever means she could. She loathed interacting with the monster, but there was little question about its competence. And they shared enemies. Mutual commiseration sometimes served a better basis for alliance than friendship.

"I suppose I should inquire their progress with the Famines," Green River said, watching herself speak. Her fox just let out a slight whine in response. "Yes, yes. I know. They likely have nothing. But perhaps I can exchange some form of intelligence. A blurry lead to delay anymore "gifts" from my "elder" sisters."

She placed down her comb, running an index finger down the jade and vivianite inlaid along the plastic.

It was moments like these that the ache in her proved unbearable. That she remembered how diminished she was. She had a Frame once. She was beyond mortal—capable of stealing knowledge from shadows and through ink. Words betrayed her enemies, and she strode the length of districts, stalking the Ori and making prey of Sanctians. Once, the only question she held for herself was ascension. Was how many sisters she could pass her coming date of mortality unto. Was if she would stand with the true "firstborns" of the No-Dragons.

It took more out of her each day to turn away from the thought of escape. In one fashion or another. But wounded though her ego was, pride remained her bulwark against despair. Pride, and outrage.

She would reclaim what was rightfully hers. She would go further. Go beyond.

It was not her end to waste away in a place like this. To have what time left in her cycle offered to an unworthy sister in tied to predestined ruin.

She just needed to calm herself. Think. And use whatever advantage—

A glint of brilliance slipped along her cheek and struck the mirror. Green River had but a second to react before the glass before her came alight with thaumaturgy and a reflective arm shot out and pulled her through.

Her vulpine self managed a yelp. Her human shell didn't even finish her gasp. A world of shifting fractals swallowed Green River just as a knock sounded on her door.

"River? River? There's someone waiting to see you. Real bigshot fucking figures. Uthred Greatling and his son. The old one looks pissed. The young one keeps leering at our bioforms. Please come down and talk to them? Please. You know I hate speaking to the Highflame fucks. It's always honor this, duty that, worthy whatever. Holy shit, how do these people take a shit with the pillar stuck in their asses? River? River? River!"

But the room was empty. And the light upon the glass was fading. Bright-Wealth's soft sigh followed. *"I just want you to know that I will complain about this in the next union meeting we hold. But I can be bribed. It is not too late to rethink your response about my raise. Or loan me another twelve thousand imps. You can pick."*

—[Draus]—

Kidnapping Green River was always funny as shit. Useful as the Sang was for intelligence, support, or just smuggled goods, it was clear she couldn't fight worth a godsdamned.

First came the expression on her face—that look of pure horror as her human body's arms extended out while her fox-self squealed in outrage. Then was the flailing and the scratching—the with the fox sinking into her dress as a crimson-decal, looking for a flat surface to escape across.

But they were in Draus' world now. Her **Liminal Paracosmos** anyway. Wasn't nowhere to run. Wasn't nowhere to hide. It took the Sang the better part of five seconds of thrashing before she realized she was being held by a glass-shaped construct, and that Draus was grinning at her off to the side.

Awkwardly, she readjusted her attire and mastered herself. Through the process, she never stopped glaring at Draus. *"Jelene,"* she spat, unable to keep the venom inside her. *"Always a pleasure to be kidnapped by you."*

"River," Draus replied, keeping her tone even. "See you still do that combing thing when you're nervous."

Now the fox was glaring at her two. But dammit, did the flailing and kicking tickle her.

Shaking her head, Draus began opening passages across New Vultun, through the Sunderwilds, to the place where Avo intended to host this little get together. “Sorry ‘bout snatchin’ you on short notice, but you know how it is. Gotta keep things quick and silent.”

“Ah. So this is a *business* kidnapping, then?”

“Business. Pleasure. All the same with me, really.”

“Indeed. So. What caused you to spirit me away on this most auspicious of days.”

The corner of Draus’ lip curved. That earned two rapid blinks from the Sang. Oh, Green River, you are going to be a happy, happy sow today. “Avo wants to talk with you.”

The fox rolled its eyes and spat. “*Ah*,” Green River’s flat tone conveyed her scorn. “The ghoul. It has made progress then.”

“*He* has. More than you might think.”

Both Sang and vulpine tilted their heads, the animal uncoiling from being mere ink the woman’s dress to wrap neatly like a scarf back around her neck. Fucking Sang and their godsdamned flesh-shit. “Do I sense a hint of protectiveness in your voice, Draus? Are you feeling protective of the creature.”

The absurdity of the notion made Draus bark a laugh. “Sure. He needs protectin’. I—fuck it. He can tell you himself. Let’s make this a surprise.”

A visible frown crawled over Green River’s face as she struggled to right herself in the reflective liminality. “I do so like surprises.”

“Gonna like this one. Now come on.” Draus pulled the Sang along with her, passing through another reflection—and then another. Green River’s gaze scythe across each checkpoint, and her accretion began to spin. She was trying to make out where she was—if she could get back on her own. That wasn’t going to matter in a couple more passages since they were going to be out in the Sunderwilds, but what the hells: let a half-strand some hope before it dies in them.

“Where are you bringing me.”

“Some place scenic.”

“...I’m not dressed for one of your slaughterhouses, Jelene.”

“Ain’t that kind of scenic.”

“I shudder to imagine what else you might consider a pleasant view,” Green River muttered.

Bringing her beyond the bivouac placed right next to the sanctuaries, a growing weight of suspicion echoed out from the Sang. A few more mirrors later, and they stopped at the last portal beyond where Avo awaited.

Ever pleasant, Draus gestured for Green River to pass through first. "After you." Green River's eyes narrowed. "Come the fuck on, River. If I was gonna snuff you, I'd done it along the way and left you in the Maw. Stop bein' such a godsdamned glassjaw and get."

The fox rolled its eyes in place of the woman and Green River stepped through. A moment later, Draus followed her to the edge of a ravine.

Birdsong wailed at Draus senses while the roaring winds rushed to the accompaniment of crashing waves. The horizon offered itself as a canvas to an unceasing duel: massive fangs sprouted from sea and sky were biting into each other, the heavens above intermingling with the waters below. Waterfalls spilled upward in coiling steams while winged fish flew and gilled birds dove.

On the edge was Avo. Avo as he once was—a form he manifested from memory. He towered over Green River a creature of bone and paleness. His Echoheads remained buried in the ground while he judged the Sang with milk-white eyes.

"Welcome, Green River," he hissed.

"Welcome usually comes with a small gift and greetings," Green River replied tersely. "Being snatched from one's home is more a case of 'summoning.' Something a master does to her servant."

The once-ghoul chuffed with laughter and shared a look with Draus. The Regular smile folded her arms. "Alright, motherfucker. Stop teasin' her and let's get on with it."

The woman turned to face Draus but the fox kept its gaze locked to Avo. "Get on with what?"

"But I do have gifts for you," Avo said. "Several gifts." Before the Sang could respond further, a torrent of phantoms poured out from his Metamind and began to bubble into the shape of a man. A screaming, enchained figure manifested greeted Green River on his knees, eyes bleeding naked fury, the armored scabs lining his body just bleeding.

The Famine of Peace whipped his head around to snarl at the ghoul, but Avo just chuckled. "Won't believe how hard it was for me to get that one."

All of a sudden, Green River's animosity vanished like a parting cloud. The fox perked up. The woman's expression brightened. "A welcoming indeed. I apologize. I was uncouth. Rude to my host."

“Understandable,” Avo said. “Would have been annoyed as well.”

“Release me!” Peace snarled. Frothing spittle splattered out from his lips as he struggled in vain. His eyes met Green River’s, and he clenched in his teeth in rage. “What are you looking at, you dragon-fucked corpse-to-be?”

Green River remained unbothered by the provocation. “My gift, I assume.”

Peace spat at her foot. The ghosts simulating the fluid unraveled at Avo’s whim.

“Believe this will keep your superiors pleased.”

Green River’s face darkened at the word “superiors” but she gave a slight nod a moment later. “Perhaps a bit more than that. You have my gratitude, Avo. Truly. I expected—far less than this.”

At this, Avo clicked his fangs together and let out a slow, sibilant laugh. “Should expect even more. Sometimes... sometimes we are just favored.”

But Green River was too distracted to catch the implication in his words. Her attention was given unto the captured Low Master, and a predatory glint came alight in her vulpine’s eyes. “So, Priest of Noloth. Such a day has come for you too? Do the chains feel heavy? Does your mind feel burdened being made a slave to a creature you once owned?”

Words couldn’t paint the sheer hatred oozing from Peace. “We should have ruined your mongrel kind years ago! We should have finished the fucking task that the festering words wriggling inside you couldn’t.”

“Should have. Could have. So many hypotheticals.” Green River knelt in front of the Famine and her fox growled at his face. “I am uninterested in hypotheticals. I am interested in debt and punishment. You killed my people. Sisters. Guests. You broke the *peace* of my district. And you thought yourself my overlord. You, or someone like you. It matters not. We will be getting quite acquainted, you and I. My sisters and mothers will be quite interested in speaking to you. But only after I am done.”

A hoarse cackle whistled out from Peace’s throat. “You’ll get fucking nothing from me. I know your ways. I’m not flesh. I’m not something you can just torture—”

“But you can be?” Green River interrupted. “You can be placed and body. One specially made for you. A body imbued with such sublime sensitivity that wind rushing over your skin will make you scream, with hearing so good that you can hear the heartbeat of a fly, denying you sleep. There are many such sheaths. All they need is something to occupy their mind.”

“River,” Avo said, pushing into the conversation. “Not done with gifts yet.”

That was what it took to pull the Sang’s attention away from her prize. “Truly? Our relationship is taking quite a turn, Avo. Grant me anything more, and my gratitude might turn into genuine—”

“Would you like a Soul?”

“--*favor.*” Green River said just in time for her jaw to slacken. The vulpine blinked twice and briefly, both woman and animal forgot to break. “Apologies. I—I seem to have misheard.”

Avo but shook his head. “No. No, you did not.” Reaching into himself with a phantasmal limb, he pried a searing fissure free with an eruption of rippling resplendence. For a single beat, all the world was bathed in the light. The horizon vanished, and of Draus, Avo, Green River, and Peace, only shadows revealed their places. As the light settled—as Avo *toned down* his theatrics—a metaphysical fracture spewing a persistent flame revealed itself, hovering in place over Green River like a crown yet to descend.

No more words came from the Sang. The fox whimpered, overwhelmed by the sight, and her thoughtstuff went haywire.

“I know what was lost to you,” Avo said. “What Noloth deprived you. How you were cast down. Don’t like this. Think this was undeserved. Think we share enemies. And common cause. Think we can continue helping each other. In ways the other cannot.”

Green River opened and closed her mouth several times. She blinked fast to deny her eyes any moisture, but failed to hide the shiver running down her fox’s snout. Her eyes found Draus and the Regular just shrugged.

“Surprise,” Draus deadpanned.

Green River stared on for a few seconds, nodded, and muttered a single word under her breath: “*Bitch.*”

They had her at a severe disadvantage. Overwhelmed by all they were offering—everything she yearned for and desired. But now came the conditions of the offer: an offer she lacked the fortitude to refuse. “Speak, then,” Green River coughed. “What are the terms for this? What am I to do? Tell me of my new chains.”

Avo’s jubilation only grew. “No chains. I just want you to win. Climb the Tiers. Bring Peace back with you. Take your revenge.”

Green River all but choked. “Impossible. There must be something—something you want.”

“I already have it.” Avo said. “If you accept. I will have your aid. You will know this to be an

alliance. A common front. And we will share... a deeper understanding of one another.”

“My mind, then?” Green River asked. “You wish to dwell there? For me to serve as your backdoor?”

“See you as more than that,” Avo whispered. “Don’t need to accept. Won’t force any of this on you. It is your choice. Not some tyrant. Not the *Strix*. Not even close.”

A gasping laugh left the Sang. “Choice? You speak like—like. You mock me. You behold my degradation. What choice can I possibly have.”

“Could say no,” Avo replied.

Both Sang and fox growled. “As much as one could say no to air. Yes. Yes, damn you. I will accept these gifts. I will accept them. And I will be the finest friend you will ever make.”

The thrill vanished from Avo’s eyes as he turned his attention over to Draus. “Somehow doubt that.”

The Regular just rolled her eyes.

Avo continued. “Will need to come with a reason behind your Ensoulment. Something believable. Worth become legend. Something that the No-Dragons can’t take from you again. Want to stage a *usurpation*.”

Green River paused as she considered Avo’s words. “Using a Fallwalker.”

“Or so it would appear.”

“Yes. I see. Good. You intend to use my Second Fortune as a staging ground.”

“Seems to be the best option. Many witnesses. Will engender more respect for you. A moment worth noticing.”

“Quite so. I—I will need to get some things in order. Decide on a replacement—”

“Can help with that too. Bright-Wealth—”

“Oh, *gods*, we’ll be bankrupt in a month. It’s ill-fortune to be addicted to the pleasures you peddle.”

“Can keep an eye on her. Will arrange for everything to happen properly.”

“I understand. So, the Soul.”

“Can be done now. The performance is more a *formality*.”

Green River almost shuddered. “Ghoul, I am fighting the urge to kiss you.” A look of disgust passed over her face. “I cannot believe I said that.”

“We all have moments of weakness,” Avo replied. A beat followed. Peace cursed at both of them in the background. “Not really one for speeches. More your think. Can proceed to Ensoulment now if you want.”

The Sang paused. “Ah. Yes. I will need to die for this.”

“Won’t even feel it.”

Green River scoffed. “Pain is—”

Draus’ arm expanded in an instant. A trajectory extended out from her implanted launcher and she fired. Both Sang and fox burst apart in a shower of reddened mist. Her draw surprised even Avo—his ghosts scrambling to capture Green River’s death before mantling a Soul over the woman’s Nous.

The ghoul hissed with annoyance. “Told you to wait for the signal.”

“I thought ‘won’t even feel it’ was the signal.”

“I would have cast you the signal!”

“Well, shit, Avo, you gotta communicate that in advance next time.”

His chuffing continued. “Just wanted to shoot her. And surprise me.”

Yes. Yes, she did.

–[Green River]–

Green River was carried along a river of rushing ghosts as her mind reeled.

What just happened? Where was she? How did she get here? Where was her human shell?

Did she just die? What killed her?

These questions remained unanswered even as more came. A phantasmal expanse opened beneath her, and she found herself draw closer to a phantasmal bridge of some kind—no, it looked more like a street, with rows and rows of people on two sides watching—

Wait? Was that one person beating anothe—

The pace of her approach suddenly accelerated. The vulpine yelped. She slammed down against the street expecting to splatter and die, but as she impacted, she felt nothing but a jolt. As her mind struggled to catch up to her present circumstances, the sound of a fist cracking against a skull beckoned her to turn her head.

There, right next to her was a man she knew a lifetime ago—*Shotin Kazahara*. His face was a mask of pure rage, and beneath him, Aedon Chambers yelped as cursed as he blocked a rain of punches using his forehead.

“Hey, cal—calm the fuck down,” Chambers cried, trying to push the other man off him.

“Rash me now, motherfuck! Rash me! Come on!”

The moment was surreal. Incomprehensible. It took a dozen more punches before she finally spoke. “Shotin?”

The Seeker froze—his fist buried against Chambers chin. He shifted his gaze up and did a double take, narrowing his eyes. “River?”

“Good,” Avo’s thunderous voice boomed from all around them. **“Both of you have arrived and Shotin’s rage is vented. Now we can begin.”**