



# R I V E N E R



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## **Riven** /'rɪv.ən/

*adjective, verb*

1. to split or tear apart violently
2. violently divided
3. divided into pieces or factions

# ONE

There's a heavy, wet leaf smell on the air. The sky is low and sombre, the outlines of clouds roiling against a flat grey. Distantly, thunder rumbles. Wren can feel the pressure of the approaching storm like a physical weight against her skin. She finishes packing up her snare and ties the coney to her belt by its feet. It and the one next to it have thick and healthy fur, plump meat on their bones. She can get a good meal and a new pair of gloves out of them.

Humming to herself, she stows her things and makes back for camp, retracing her trail through the underbrush, already tasting the savoury, potatoe-y soup she'll be making in an hour. She'll need more purified water tomorrow...

A raucous, frenzied cawing jolts her abruptly out of her idle musing. She looks up and around sharply, eyes narrowing, scanning the treeline and then the sky, but sees nothing. It doesn't mean nothing is there—just that her senses are too weak to pick it out. She pulls her knife from its sheath and strains her ears, holding still, holding her breath, the better to hear.

There's another call—this time, with a rapid *chkchkchk* added to the end—and then the flapping of wings, and a brown crow lands on the branch of a tree above her head, head tilted to peer down at her. Ark shuffles sidelong and flaps their wings when she looks up at them. Sure now that they have her attention, they take off, winging to another tree.

Poised and tense, Wren follows, stepping carefully to avoid snapping any sticks in her path. Ark leads her south (and away from camp) for several paces but it's not until she comes to a large bramble bush and hears the skitter of disturbed rocks and the crunching of sticks and leaves, in an unsteady and staggered rhythm, that she finds what Ark was warning her about.

Immediately she drops low to the ground and shuffles forward, balanced on her toes and her free hand, to peer around the bush—and sees a man, stumbling through a shallow gully

below and to the right of her. His head hangs low against his bare chest, shoulders bowed, gait weaving. He half-collides with a tree and stumbles, his hand coming up to push himself idly away from the trunk. His feet are bare and shuffling. There's a strip of bulky black tight around his throat.

She watches, frozen, from hardly five feet away. He's so close she can pick out the metal studs in the collar, the freckles on the bridge of his nose. And then he's passed her by, and she sees a smear of sticky, tacky red all along the length of his back.

Ark makes a low rattling sound. *Danger?* they're asking. *Follow?*

Wren adjusts her grip on her knife, her palms sweating. She should turn around, race back to camp and pack up, find somewhere far away to spend the night before the rain comes. But Ark's right. People mean danger, blood means danger. This man is either predator or prey. She'll only know by tracking him.

The man walks like he's half blind or half dead or both, stumbling over tree roots and the dry riverbed and his own feet, but always moving forward. She can hear his laboured breathing even with the distance she keeps between them, rasping in his chest. He never lifts his head, never strays from his meandering path. She might as well have tramped after him as brazenly as she liked; he wouldn't have noticed. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

She follows him for ages, walking parallel and a few paces behind him along the ridge of the gully, until he suddenly weaves to stop. Her stomach clenches—has he seen her? But he doesn't move for several long breaths, just stands, swaying like a young tree in a breeze. Licking her lips, Wren dares to creep nearer, edging around so she can see his face.

His eyes are closed, his face pale.

When he falls, it seems to happen very slowly, and ends with a crash that startles the forest into silence. Wren waits for the space of ten heartbeats, but he doesn't move, doesn't so much as twitch. The noise of the birds and the critters come back, and even the leaves of the trees seem to rustle louder in the breeze, as if to assure her the man is no longer a threat.

Ark caws and flutters forward, landing several feet away from the man's prone form. They cock their head this way and that and sidle toward him. Wren watches with bated breath as Ark draws nearer and nearer and then, brazenly, hops onto the man's head...and pecks him. The man doesn't so much as twitch. Ark does it again and then caws what Wren calls their amused sound and hops up and down twice on the stranger's head before flying up into a tree and settling there to watch what Wren will do next.

Shifting from foot to foot for a moment, she huffs, not to be outdone by a bird—even one as cheeky as Ark—and slowly approaches, skidding down the incline. She really should just leave him. He doesn't even have anything useful on him that she could loot, except the collar, maybe. She squats beside him, peering closer at it. What she mistook for studs are actually the backs of silver spikes pressing cruelly into the man's skin hard enough—and sharp enough—to scrape the skin red and raw and blister it.

She grimaces at it. Awful thing. She wouldn't use it on a dog, let alone a person. Stabbing her knife into the ground within easy reach, Wren takes up one limp wrist and feels for his pulse. It's thready and rapid, and his skin is cool and clammy to the touch. Peeling back one eyelid reveals mostly white and a sliver of hazel iris.

“Hm,” she says to herself, hooks a finger under the collar, and tugs. The man whines, recoiling sharply and startling her so badly she throws herself back, knife up and against him. But that's all he does, curling in on himself, eyes still closed. She blows out a harsh breath and

drops the knife. Ark cackles at her. She glares at them, glares at the man, and glares at the sky for good measure when a drop of rain splatters against her cheek. Wonderful.

“So,” she says to the crow. “I could kill him. Put him outta his misery.”

Ark caws.

“I know he’s only *sorta* dead but I’m not dragging him all the way back to camp. He’s heavy.”

Another caw.

“I don’t *want* to deal with him.”

Caw.

“Ugh. Fine.”

She sheathes her knife and takes off her pack, pulling out rope and a length of canvas that she keeps in case she needs emergency shelter. She shakes it out beside the man, rolls him onto it with a grunt, and then wraps him in it. She ties the rope into a sort of harness under his arms and around his chest, checking twice to ensure it’s not gonna constrict his breathing or blood flow.

He whimpers, eyelids fluttering and mouth twisting—the harness presses into the wound in his back, but he’ll just have to suck it up. More raindrops patter down on them as she works. She wraps the tail of the rope around both hands, surveys the rise of the gully and then the rocky bed of it, and frowns aggressively.

*Caw*, says Ark in reprimand.

“Well it would’ve been easier,” she retorts.

It takes some maneuvering and a lot of swearing, but she manages to drag the man up the slope. There’s already an ache in her hands and backs. Squaring her jaw, Wren turns north-west, digs her heels in, and heaves. Thunder rumbles too loud for comfort. Rain begins to fall more

steadily, light but persistent, and by the time she gets back to camp it's a downpour and she can hardly see through the gloom. There's a burning stitch in her side, her spine feels fused together, her hands are chafed, and she hasn't stopped to check but the man might be dead, and if he is she's gonna kill him.

Ark has long since abandoned her for shelter. When she stumbles into her clearing she finds them standing in the opening of her tent.

“Shoo,” she pants, drags the man the last few torturous steps inside and collapses onto her back beside him, just barely managing to avoid squashing the rabbits.

Clumsily, she slaps around and feels for his pulse in his neck, just under the collar's constriction. It's there, which is all she cares about, no stronger but no weaker. Turning her head, she surveys his drenched and muddy silhouette as she regains her breath. With an extended groan she heaves herself upright and then to her feet. Because of him she won't have a fire or a hot dinner, but she still needs to deal with the rabbits. The rain, in that sense, is a blessing. But first—with a match, she lights both of her lanterns, the glow illuminating the tent in a friendly warmth, and then ducks back out into the elements.

She skins, guts and cleans her catch in the storm, the blood streaming away almost before she can feel it. The innards she gathers in a bowl for Ark and then scrubs her hands clean, focusing especially under her nails. Back in her tent, she clicks her tongue at Ark and sets the bowl of their dinner down. Ark *chkchchkhs* back and digs in.

“Spoiled thing,” Wren mutters, dumping the rabbit carcasses in her brining container and sealing it closed. The skins she submerges in a different tub of water and salt and lids it. They'll need to cure for a few days. This done, she turns to the man.



He is, somehow, still alive, though shivering convulsively, lips blue. She's shivering herself, and her fingers are clumsy at the knots, but eventually she gets him untied and unwrapped. She fetches her medical kit out, pulling out gauze, a rag, and a tin of med-rinse, and then rolls the man onto his front to inspect the wound in his back, just under his shoulder blade.

It's a small hole. A bullet hole. Mostly clotted too, though dark red lines race out in all directions around it, like it's infected.

She hisses between her teeth. "This was a bad idea," she tells Ark. Ark is busy eating and ignores her. She locates her tweezers and disinfects it with a dip into the medrinse gel, and then stares at the wound, her stomach turning.

"I can do this," she mutters, nodding firmly, and carefully pokes the pincers into the hole, wiggling gingerly until she scrapes against metal. "This is gonna hurt."

Pressing down on his opposite shoulder and settling all her weight on the man, Wren flexes the tweezers until she clamps onto the edge of the bullet and can pry at it. The man yelps, sharp and high, arching away from her, and she loses hold, blood oozing out and all over her hands, warm and slippery.

"Easy!" she barks, heart fluttering and hands trembling, the coppery smell strong in the back of her throat. "I'm tryna help!"

Like he hears her, he shudders and goes still, and she gets a grip on the bullet again and slowly pulls and wriggles and wheedles it out. She lifts it close to the lantern's glow—it's squashed and misshapen but entirely intact. Small mercies, she thinks, and puts it aside to be cleaned and saved. The man is panting underneath her, tears wetting his cheeks, eyes rolling behind the closed lids.

Ark caws inquisitively at her.

“Still passed out,” she replies, and reaches for the medrinse and the rag, only to falter. The bleeding that had welled up under her ministrations has stopped entirely. Under her astonished gaze, the bullet hole begins to close, quite literally fleshing out, the lines of infection fading away between one blink and the next. In three breaths it's completely clotted. Another three and it's a scab. Two more and she peels the scab away to reveal a scar. Her eyes drop to the collar. The collar which, she'll bet her rabbits on it, has silver spikes in it. Looks to the bullet, which she'll bet all the rest of her things is also silver.

“He's a friggin' *shifter*.”

Ark flaps his wings and rasps at her.

“I shoulda killed him.”

Ark waddles over and reaches up to nibble at her bloodied fingers.

“Ugh, stop,” she snaps, and goes back into the rain to scrub her hands and soak the rag. When she comes back in, Ark is sitting on the shifter's head. The man has moved, curled onto his side. He already looks better—he's still shivering, but less violently, and his colour is less grey. Roughly, she wipes his back clean of blood with the rag, rinses it in the rain, and wipes the rest of him clean of mud. After a moment of tense consideration, she drags his pants off and hangs them on the stick with little spiky knobs she's been using as a drying rack.

“Should just leave him right there,” she tells Ark, but she's already done this much to make him comfortable; no point in half-assing it. With a grimace, she brushes the bird off him, lifts him by the shoulders and drags him onto her bedroll, then lifts his legs to follow the rest of him. She covers him with her blanket, using a corner to ruffle his roughly cropped head dry.

When she lets it drop, she finds herself looking down into glazed hazel eyes.

She freezes. He doesn't say anything, doesn't move, just looks up at her, and a moment later his eyes drift shut, and he falls back into sleep or unconsciousness. Wren breathes out shakily, her eyes falling to the collar again, the chafed raw state of his skin underneath it.

Taking forcefully measured breaths, she presses the tip of her finger against it and focuses. Something inside her snaps, like bone breaking without any pain, and then so does the collar, neatly as though she took a blade to it. She pulls it off the man and shoves it into her pack.

She might be imagining it, but he seems to breathe easier with it gone. She watches in fascination as the blisters on his neck recede into his skin, the redness fading away. "Lucky you, huh?" she asks him, and gets up to strip herself of her sodden, filthy clothes. Using the soap she made weeks ago, she scrubs down in the storm just outside camp, where the runoff won't affect where she lives.

Her fingers and toes and the tip of her nose are numb by now, and as quickly as possible she returns to her tent and pulls on her spare clothes. She only has the one blanket, which the man is under, and the canvas she brought him in on—which she could've used—is bloody and muddy and soaked, so that's a no go.

She scowls fiercely. She either sleeps with him or freezes and risks getting sick. Unbelievable. Still scowling, she crawls onto her bedroll and squishes in beside him, her head by his feet. She toys with the idea of sleeping with her knife in hand, but the chance of stabbing herself or him is too high. Well, she just won't sleep then. She'll just lie here and get warm. Yeah. That's a good plan.

\*

Wren wakes with a jolt when something heavy and warm on her bed moves. She's up like a shot, scrambling for her knife and kicking out reflexively, her foot connecting solidly with

a body. Somebody grunts in pain, and then her brain catches up with the rest of her, and she abruptly remembers the shifter. She squints into the watery dawn light—her lanterns have burnt out, but she can just make up the man sitting up on her bedroll, looking both wary and wild-eyed.

Wren sits up properly and points her knife at him. “Don’t do anything stupid,” she rasps, voice hoarse from sleep.

He nods.

“Feeling ok?”

Another nod. Very slowly, his hand comes up to his neck, fingers dragging gingerly at the hollow of his throat.

"The collar? I took it off. Seemed like it was hurting you."

A third nod.

“Not much of a talker, are you?”

The man's shoulders hunch, gaze dropping to his lap and he shakes his head.

"...*Can* you talk?"

Head shake.

"Huh. Ok. Well." She flounders, and then rallies. “I found you yesterday and brought you back here and fixed you up. I know you’re a shifter. Your pants are hanging, but I can wash ‘em for you. I don’t have anything for you to wear that’ll fit.”

He shrugs, tucks the blanket more securely around himself.

“Ok,” Wren says. “I’m gonna...do that. And make food. If you attack me I will rip you to pieces.”

The man stares at her, eyes wide, and nods very slowly, like he fully accepts the seriousness of her threat. Well, he should. She means it, and she can. Still, she makes sure never

to turn her back on him, keeping him in the periphery of her vision as she washes his pants and builds a fire with the wood she keeps in her tent for just such occasions. She stretches the pants out on two sticks near the fire to dry, and then pours water from her bottle into her only cup and thrusts it at him

“Drink,” she says, when all he does is stare. “You might have instant healing, but you’re probably thirsty.”

Gingerly, he takes the cup from her and sips at it. He seems to be more wary of her than she is of him. Perversely, that makes her feel more secure.

She fills his cup again once he's drained it, and then leaves him to set about making the soup she meant to have yesterday. She's hyperaware of him watching her as closely as she's pretending not to watch him, only more directly, as she chops carrots and potatoes and onion and some rabbit meat into the pot, stirring in her preciously hoarded spices and the herbs she grows behind her tent. Ark flaps in just as it's finished, greeting her with the sound they make just for her (or for food, which are interchangeable to the crow), and then notices the man.

Wren ladles steaming soup into the small pot that doubles as a second bowl and watches them study each other. The man's attention flickers between her and Ark, and then focuses on Ark when they patter closer.

A foot away, Ark squawks harshly and the man just about jumps out of his skin. Wren snorts, and he glances at her nervously...which is a mistake, because Ark makes their move as soon as his attention shifts. The man lets out a rough sound as the crow launches at him, only to freeze as they settle on his head, flapping their wings for balance. Eyes wide, he looks at Wren, shoulders high around his ears, every fibre of his being fairly screaming *help*.

Wren feels a smile tugging at her mouth, but she ruthlessly suppresses it. "Don't move," she says sternly, "If they wanna be on your head, let them."

The man gapes at her, and then tries to look up to Ark without moving his head and goes cross eyed in the attempt. Ark pecks him squarely in the middle of his forehead, and that's it, Wren bursts into helpless, snorting laughter. It comes out harsh—she hasn't laughed in longer than she cares to remember.

When she subsides with a snickering sigh, the man is smiling hesitantly at her, one side of his mouth hitched up. Shaking her head, she walks over and hands him the serving of soup, which he takes very slowly so as not to dislodge his passenger.

"Eat slow," she tells him, "Specially if you haven't in a while, or you'll sick up everywhere." To Ark, she holds out her hand.

The man flinches when her hand comes near his head. Wren catalogues this for future reference. "Up," she tells the crow firmly, and Ark climbs onto her hand and up her forearm to perch on her shoulder, claws gently pricking.

"This is Ark," she tells the man. "They're not mine, we're just friends. I'm Wren."

He ducks his head in a little nod, making a raspy sound in the back of his throat that might be the only verbal hello he can make.

"Eat," she prompts him again, and for the first time, turns her back on him entirely.

She eats directly from the pot with her spoon, a recent whittling. She carves spoons when the old ones break or run down, and she's gotten pretty good at it. The man sips at his soup, slowly like she told him, fishing out bits of meat and veggies with his fingers—no, with claws tipping his fingers that certainly weren't there before.

She finishes before him, feeling her stomach comfortably settle with the weight of it after several hours without anything. There's still soup left—she offers more to the man, but she shakes his head and hands her the pot back, so she'll leave it for dinner.

"Pants are dry," she tells him, handing them to him. He makes a barking sound she presumes is a thanks and she turns away to let him change in peace. When the sounds of rustling have died down, she turns back around to find him clothed, crouched and fingering the canvas she dragged him in on, mouth twisted as he touches the bloodstains. He seems to sense her watching and looks up, dropping the cloth like it's burnt him.

She raises her eyebrow at him. After an extended moment, he touches the canvas again and then mimes scrubbing it.

"You wanna clean it?"

He nods.

"...Huh. Ok. Follow me."

She fetches her soap bar and the dishes they've used and leads him out of the campsite, Ark bobbing on her shoulder, to the reason she chose this place as her campsite months ago. Namely, a small offshoot of the nearby river that has formed a sort of pool over the years. Excellent for washing both herself and her things. The man follows near silently, several paces behind. If she couldn't see him out of the corner of her eye, she doubts she would've heard him, he's so quiet. It says a lot about the state he was in yesterday.

"Catch," she tells him, and gently lobs the soap his way. "If it doesn't come out," she tells him, nodding at the canvas he's clutching, "Try to scrub it from the other side to loosen it. Wash the dishes too. I'm going back to camp. Meet me when you're done."

He blinks at her, visibly taken aback. Wren smiles at him, baring all her teeth, and leaves the way she came. This is a test, to see if he'll run off or if he won't, if he'll do what he claimed he wanted to do or if he's a liar. She's interested to see how it'll all turn out, but she does have other things to do, so she puts him to the back of her mind and sets about her usual tasks—washing her face and brushing her teeth, checking her vegetable patch for pests and removing weeds, straightening up her tent, and sharpening her knives and hatchet.

Ark leaves to do whatever they usually do when not shadowing Wren, and the man returns as she's testing the sharpness of the blade of her whittling knife, the canvas and dishes bundled in his arms. He hefts the pile her way with a deferent little bob of his head.

“Show me.”

He comes closer and lays out the pots—which are sparkling—and then shakes the canvas out for her inspection. He did very well—there's only one faded brown spot where the blood was too hard to remove, but the rest of it is clean. He makes a grunting noise and hands her the slip of soap, now much reduced. She appreciates that he didn't use it all up.

“Good job,” she tells him, and notes how his eyes brighten at her praise. “Hang it where I put your pants.”

He does while she stacks the dishes in a corner of her tent, fussing with it for several counts until, with a furtive look her way, he ventures to fetch a larger stick and stake it to hold up the middle so that most of the canvas is off the ground.

“Add more wood to the fire,” she tells him. “Wood's by my bed.” He fetches a good amount of kindling, nothing too large and nothing too flimsy, and arranges it properly too, stoking her smouldering fire into crackling flame. Between it and the sunlight beginning to filter through the gaps in the tree cover overhead, it should be dry in a couple hours.



“Good,” she declares. “Come here.”

He shambles over immediately and drops to sit across from her, arms around his knees, head bowed even as he looks meekly up at her from under his lashes. It’s weird.

“You’re weird.”

He huffs and scratches at the back of his neck, looking embarrassed.

Wren cocks her head. “You runnin’ from something?”

He nods. His fingers go tight around his wrist, the knuckles whitening.

“From whoever put that collar on you?”

Another nod. His wrist bone creaks. She nudges his calf with the toe of her boot and he startles.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” she tells him, and he immediately relinquishes his hold, folding his arms around his waist. “They coming after you?”

This results in a long pause, and then a slow nod and the man ducking his head so low it’s like he thinks he can disappear in front of her if he tries hard enough.

“Were they on your trail?”

He shakes his head no, makes a grumbling sound, and shrugs.

“You’re not sure.”

Nod.

“Hm.” The air is fraught with tension so thick she could chop into little pieces with her knife. “Got a plan?”

He mimes running with two fingers.

“Heading anywhere specific?”

He shakes his head.

Wren hums, and then, “Show me what type of shifter you are.”

The man looks at her, eyes searching like he suspects a trap. She’s very aware of the knife she’s still holding, but she doesn’t back down. She wants to know. He’ll either show her or he won’t, but she has the feeling he will. She’s proven right when he breathes out and stands slowly, hands going to his pants. She looks away for a count of twenty, and when she turns back around, she’s looking at a wolf.

He’s small, as wolves go, a rusty cream and grey colour that darkens to black along his back and tail, with long sleek legs and a narrow head. His eyes are the same—hazel brown and intelligent. He wags his tail once and tilts his head. Ark chooses that moment to wing by, and shrieks in alarm at the sight of him. The shifter drops flat to the ground as Ark dive-bombs.

“Ay!” Wren yells, waving her hands, “Ark, stop, it’s fine! It’s safe!”

Ark berates her harshly, still trying to peck the wolf to death, and only subsides when she chitters at them and pats the shifter's head. When he doesn’t snap her hand right off, Ark settles on her shoulder, feathers fluffed, running their beak through the hair over her ear.

“I’m fine,” she tells them, smiling, and pats their talons twice.

Ark rattles, makes that call that means *Wren-food*, and nips her ear gently.

“Change back,” she tells the man, and looks away as he does, swiftly clothing himself again and settling back across from her. “Ark got scared,” she tells him, “But they’ll trust you now they know you’re a shifter.”

The man lifts his right hand in a fist and circles it over his heart, expression apologetic.

“That mean you’re sorry?”

He nods, ducking his head low.

“It’s fine. Not your fault.”

The man shrugs. Wren regards him, slow and steady, chewing over several things until she thinks she has the shape of them and likes it, and then says, “Long as you don't got anywhere to go...wanna stay with me?”

His head whips up so fast his neck cricks, if his wince is anything to go by. His eyes are very wide, his mouth parted in shock. Wren shrugs, which makes Ark pinch tight with their talons, and looks away. “Not for forever,” she mutters, “Just. I don't know. For as long as you wanna.”

A rasping, enquiring sound.

“Well, you'd be helping me out. You're a wolf. You can hunt, right? Get deer and things. Big game?”

A nod.

“Winter's coming on. My traps are good but not that reliable. And your senses are better than mine—if danger's coming our way you'll know before I do, maybe before even Ark.”

Another nod.

“Right. So it makes sense. And you can leave whenever you want. I'm not your keeper.”

A third, very timid nod. A hesitant touch to his throat, a low whine.

“You asking about the collar?”

A jerky nod, mouth trembling.

“What about it? It's awful. I'm not putting it back on you.”

The man stares at her again, and then, horribly, his eyes fill with tears. He ducks his head, pressing the heels of both palms to his eyes, breathing harsh. Wren doesn't know what to do in the face of this much emotion, so she just stands abruptly and busies herself with putting her

knife and whetstone away. She startles when there's a tug on her shirt, and spins. The man shuffles back, hands raised palm out.

"Jeez, you're quiet."

He rubs his fist over his chest again, and then flattens it so all the fingers are together and extended, lifts it to his chin and gestures outward, mouthing, *thank you*.

"Welcome," Wren replies, stiffly. "Come here, lemme explain the garden."

She leads him to the patch behind her tent, which she painstakingly cleared and tilled months ago and keeps weeded and guarded—as best she can—from animals eating her things. Ark helps sometimes, by chasing off birds and squirrels and, once, a fox, which is really why she can't help but to spoil the crow.

"Beans," she tells the man, pointing at the first crop of greenery "These're different kinds: bush and pole. Both good. This is squash, but just for summer. Don't plan on staying here for winter, so didn't bother planting winter squash." She moves to a corner. "Cabbage. Lots of vitamins."

The man makes an expressive sound to show he's listening, and when she hazards a glance at him, his face is dry, which makes her shoulders relax from around her ears. She leads him to the second patch, and points at each row in turn.

"Potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic. Staples, good eating." And then, finally, the herb patch. "Mint, rosemary, parsley, thyme. Got all that?"

The man nods, glances at her sidelong, and then shakes his head slowly, ruefully.

"That's ok," she replies. "I'll teach you. Just don't pull or eat anything without asking."

The man nods and crouches, sniffing inquisitively at the herbs, one by one. Wren wonders how strong his sense of smell is. She's not that familiar with shifters, doesn't know if their senses are more dulled when they're human versus when they're not.

"That's thyme," she tells him, when he pauses at the fragrant, woody little bush. "My favourite. Smells good cooked and raw."

He moves onto the mint beside it, fingertips grazing gently at the leaves, and then mimes holding a cup, and sipping from it.

"Yeah, it's mint," she says, "You can make tea out of it. Good for getting sick too. ...Can you even get sick? With your healing?"

The man nods, straightening up from his crouch, eyes going distant, expression darkening. He lifts his hands, and then, after a pause, lets them fall with a shake of his head. She wonders if he was going to try to gesture something at her and gave up because she wouldn't understand all his hand signs, or because he didn't want to. She leaves him be. She doesn't think it would've been nice to know anyway.

They leave the garden—well, Wren leaves, and the man follows. She putters around camp, tidying, pushing out the water that collected in the top of her tent, and then fetching her biggest pot. It's nearly empty of water—she pours the last of it into a canteen and makes for the river. The man trails after her, a shadow on her heels. He really is uncannily quiet. It's a testament to how sick and injured he'd been yesterday, and how quickly he's recovered.

The river isn't far—it's the parent of the dry riverbed the man had been stumbling along yesterday. At some point in its history, the river had diverted—maybe a mudslide had changed its course, or it had worn itself a new way. In any case, the route it takes is now only a few minutes from her clearing.

She pads down to its bank and crouches on one of the wide flat rocks, lowering her pot into the current. Not too low, so she doesn't gather too much silt, just enough that water flows over the lip. The man watches her, but Wren ignores him, humming tunelessly to herself, until the pot is full. She stands, shifting carefully on the rock to keep her balance, and carefully pivots to pick her way back to solid ground, trying to avoid spilling any of the water.

The man grunts at her, reaching out. She blinks at him, and he reaches forward ever so slowly to lift the pot out of her unresisting hands without any apparent effort.

...Right. Shifters are strong. Stronger than humans. She'd forgotten. "Useful already," she mutters, and he smiles sunnily at her. Her belly squirms and she looks away, stomping past him. She's gotten used to talking out loud to herself (and Ark)—she'll have to break that habit now this man's here.

The rest of the day is spent quietly. Wren boils the water clean and mending some of her things. When the canvas is dry, she asks the man to fold it and set up a bed for himself.

"Not sharing," she says, when he makes a questioning noise, and he flushes pink, and then, for some reason, points to a random spot on the ground outside the tent.

She peers at the ground, then back at him, uncomprehending. "What?"

He points to himself, mimes sleeping by putting his hands together against his head, and points at the ground again.

"Sleep there? You? Why?"

The man rubs at the back of his head and shrugs, making a grumbling sound.

"I mean. You can if you want. Do you wanna?"

He looks at her all shifty, shoulders hunching, shifting back and forth just slightly on the balls of his feet before he seems to notice what he's doing and stopping. He doesn't answer her.

Wren clicks her tongue, impatient. “Well? Do you? Answer me, I’m not gonna bite you.”

He slowly shakes his head.

“’S there a reason I *shouldn’t* have you in the tent? You gonna attack me or something?”

He shakes his head wildly, eyes big and round.

“Ok then. Tent’s big enough for the both of us, yeah? So sleep in it.”

A rapid nod, and then a fluttery, signed *thank you*.

Wren huffs. “Stop thanking me. Why would I make you sleep outside? ’S dumb. *You’re dumb.*”

He whines, low in his throat, going pink again. She rolls her eyes at him. “Go on,” she tells him. Only to watch as he does the *worst* job at making a bed out of the canvas. He literally folds it into a rectangle and then just lays it out on the ground. Wren sighs loudly and he startles, glancing at her. “’S not gonna be *comfy*,” she explains. “Jeez, you never done this before?”

He shakes his head, biting the inside of his cheek.

“Figured. K, well, you gotta get some pine needles and put it under the canvas. A lot, so you’re not right on the ground. It’ll make it softer and it smells good, and keeps bugs away. And it’ll keep you warm. ” Something occurs to her, and she frowns. “Guess you don’t really have to worry ‘bout being warm though, huh? You can just shift. Must be nice to be all furry. Never gotta worry about making fire or carrying clothes or the snow or nothin'.”

The man is now gaping at her. She blinks out of her idle reverie to scowl at him. She’s getting *really* sick of that stupefied expression on his face. Has she really been away from people so long that she’s weird now? She doesn’t *think* she’s weird. She thinks *he’s* weird; he acts like everything she says is in another language. Huh. Maybe he doesn’t know English that well? But

no, he understands her no problem...So why does every thing she say to him get met by surprise?

“*What?*”

He flinches, head dropping low.

Wren smothers the sigh trying to make its way out of her. He’s so *jumpy*. “Sorry,” she says shortly, “If you don’t wanna make a nice bed you don’t have to. ’S just my suggestion, but I’ve slept on the ground and everything hurts after. So.”

He nods reverentially, signs *thank you* at her and scurries into the woods without explaining. Once he’s out of sight, Wren flops onto her back and allows the sigh she’s been holding back explode aggressively out of her. This man is so *much*. *This* is why she came to the wilds, to get away from the muchness of the world, and yet here he is.

...Because she invited him here. Dragged him here, literally. What was she thinking.

Ark chooses then to drop down out of nowhere onto her knees and croak at her.

“This is *your* fault,” she tells them.

The man returns a few seconds later, carrying an armful of pine needles, green and fragrant, and making a pile in the corner of her tent, across from her bedroll. He does this several times, until he has a sizeable pile and then lays the canvas over it all, tucking and prodding at it until it’s all contained and unlikely to escape, unless he’s a really violent sleeper. He tests it, sitting the midst of his new bed and bouncing a little.

“Good?”

He nods, smiling shyly.

“Good.”



That night, they eat more rabbit, this time with baked potatoes and squash and a careful doling out of salt, because she's nearly out. Ark joins them, and Wren gets to watch the man hesitantly share bits of rabbit with the crow. Ark takes them shamelessly, at first picking them up from the ground when the man tosses pieces their way, and then right from his fingertips. The man grins, wide and pleased.

It makes him look...young. She has no idea how old he is. She's lost track of how old *she* is, at this point. Somewhere in her twenties, she thinks, and this man doesn't seem that much older than her, but his smile makes him look like a kid, all toothy and sparkling.

"Hey," she says, and both he and Ark look her way, the one guilty and the other trying to steal more rabbit. "Don't waste your food on Ark, they can catch their own grub."

*Sorry*, the man sighs.

"It's fine. Eat."

He does. When he's finished, she plucks some of mint from her garden, drops it into a cup of warmed water, and hands it to him. He takes it, eyes wide again.

"Don't have anything sweet," she says, "But it still tastes ok. Drink."

He does, sipping tentatively, and she watches his eyelids flutter, his fingers curling tightly around the cup.

"Like it?" she asks him, though she doesn't really need to. It's obvious he does. Still he nods, smiling.

They subside into silence—or rather, she does, since he doesn't talk. She lets the fire's warmth wash over her, lets the singing bugs, a distant hooting from an owl, the wind in the trees, the usual nightly noises, fill the air between them until her eyelids are heavy, and then banks the fire and rummages for her toothbrush, to give them a quick scrub and head to bed.

She wriggles out of her shirt and trousers without a thought but is pleased nonetheless when she looks 'round and the man is staring very firmly into his cup of tea. She rolls herself into her blanket and wiggles until she's comfortable. Ark flutters over to perch on her 'clothes rack', tucking their head beneath their wing.

Wren's sleepy, but she watches the man finish his drink, leave to rinse out the cup, and return to put it away with her other dishes. Only then does he make for bed. He stares down at it, expression torn, and then glances sidelong at her, a question in his bright eyes.

“What?”

He doesn't answer, and she watches him stand there and do nothing but breathe for so long she almost falls asleep to it. Finally, his hands rise to the waist of his pants, eyes still fixed on her, wordless question still on his face.

“Oh,” she yawns. “Yeah, shift if you want. I don't care.”

The man...barks, almost, an affirmative sound, and she closes her eyes, rolling over as he starts to undress. She slips into sleep sometime between one breath and the next. She doesn't see the way the wolf watches her before padding over, doesn't feel it when he presses his snout against the hollow of her back, eyes slipping shut, before he turns and pads onto his bed, circling thrice and curling up, head over haunches, to sleep.

Ark notices, watching with one eye, but it's a secret they'll keep to themselves.