BLACK AS BLOOD
An InCryptid Story
Black as Blood

by

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An airplane, beginning its final descent into the Seattle area

Now

Ryan was sleeping soundly in the aisle seat, his head thrown back and his mouth open in a silent snore. I watched him for a moment, checking the rise and fall of his chest for confirmation that he had not passed away and left me alone in this hellish contraption with more than a hundred humans. The waheela afterlife is very focused on cold: an eternity of ice so thick and unrelenting that it burns. After crossing the continent of my birth in a flying metal beast of human manufacture, I was beginning to think our theology was flawed. We should have spoken of airports as purgatory, and the planes which they contained as the truest manifestation of hell. The depth of your sins would determine where you were condemned to ride. Ryan and I, seated as we were in the very first row of the First Class cabin, were clearly among the least of sinners—those who eat their young or fail to yield their lives to the clutching claws of their parents, perhaps. To be condemned to the depths of Coach...

I shuddered. Had we been unable to acquire the seats we occupied, I feared I would have lost my senses and devoured everyone who was seated near us, simply for the sake of acquiring some breathing room.

The round, artificially cheery face of the flight attendant appeared around the edge of the row, directing a toothy grin in my direction. I swallowed my immediate urge to growl, folding my hands tighter together in the lacy froth of my petticoat. The seams on my gloves bit into my fingers. That, too, helped me to retain my calm.

“We’re beginning our final descent,” she said, her voice dripping with the accent of the Southern states, where the sun was hot and the harvests were good, and the ice was an alien dream. “Is there anything else that I can get for you?”

Again, I swallowed the urge to snarl. I was normally better with my temper than that; years of practice at living among the humans had taught me to bury my instincts deep, like the roots that thrived beneath the permafrost. The airplane had eroded my control, wearing it thin and ready to crack under the slightest pressure. “We are fine, thank you,” I said, biting each word off sharply, like the flesh I wasn’t allowed to stuff into my mouth. My teeth ached with the need to grow longer, stronger, prepared to pierce her cosmetic-smeared skin and taste the chemical contrails written in her blood. I swallowed that need as well.

To be a waheela is to be a creature of constant hunger. I was growing fat in the consumption of my self-denial, and began to fear that I would take no other sustenance ever again.

The flight attendant’s smile cracked, seeming to grow brittle. On some level, she knew that she was leaning over a sleeping predator, putting herself within reach of his agitated—and much more dangerous—mate. “Please make sure your seatbelts are fastened. We’ll be on the ground soon.” She retreated, leaving us alone once more.

I watched the aisle warily for signs of her return. The man in the next seat over had been smiling and winking in my direction ever since Ryan went to sleep. I was accustomed to that. My clothing choices are always impeccable, and would naturally draw attention, even in a more pleasant setting. On the plane, I was a jewel among the rocks. Many of our fellow passengers seemed to have dressed themselves without thought for the journey ahead, throwing on whatever they found before leaving for the airport. Some of them were even wearing pajamas—pajamas! Sleepwear! These were things intended to be worn in the comfort of the home, not displayed to the watching world. It was shabby, and shameful.
I, as always, had considered my attire carefully, and was wearing a traveling gown in black and gray argyle, with red highlights and an attached petticoat, to prevent my needing to maneuver multiple pieces. My stockings were opaque white, matching my white gloves, and my platform boots were black with red lacings. The red and white feather fascinator I had clipped to my artfully curled hair completed the ensemble. The flight attendant had required that I place my parasol in the overhead compartment, and my hands ached to recover it.

Soon, we would be on the ground. Soon, this terror would be behind me, and a new, greater terror would begin. I closed my eyes, leaning back in my seat, and waited for the flight to come to an end. It was strange to contemplate, but I feared that soon, I would remember with fondness the time we spent on the airplane, trapped like rabbits in a burrow, with nothing more to fear than gravity and ourselves.

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The baggage claim area of the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport was an echoing cavern, filled with the shouts, groans, and laughter of the people queuing up to recover their things. Ryan had shouldered his way into the throng as soon as we arrived at our designated carousel, leaving me to stand near the doors, twirling my parasol and watching the rain fall outside the windows. My legs tingled with the need to run, tight from the stress of sitting still for so many hours on end. A direct flight from New York to Seattle entailed a great deal of sitting. Ryan had apologized for that when he booked our tickets, and had followed his apology by saying, dourly, “But you’ll like it better than you’d like a connecting flight, I promise.”

After the terrors of the direct flight, I had no desire ever to experience the clearly greater terrors of the connecting flight.

Ryan emerged from the crowd around the baggage claim with all four of our bags. He was carrying one in each hand, and had another tucked under each arm. He was scowling. That was unusual. It was customary for me to be the one scowling, while he was the one enjoying an amiable, devil-may-care approach to the world.

“I called the car rental place while I was waiting for your second bag to come around; they’ll have our car ready for us when we get there,” he said, once he was close enough that he would not need to shout.

“Excellent.” I reached out and took the largest of the bags from him. My parasol meant that I had to leave him with the other three. His frown did not fade. “Why are you unhappy? We have reached your ancestral homeland without attacking anyone, or being attacked in turn. Soon we can run naked through the evergreen forests, and enjoy the smell of blood in the rain.”

A nearby woman shot me an alarmed look and walked a little faster. I ignored her. Humans did not like to consider that they might not be the apex predators they fancied themselves to be; I had long since learned that secrecy was less necessary than it might seem, providing you were utterly unbelievable when you spoke the truth. My camouflage took the form of frilly dresses and impractical shoes, and it worked as well as any fox that ever grew a coat the color of the snow.

“Izzy…”

“I would prefer you not call me that while we are here; I do not want your family to get the idea that it is my preferred form of address.”

“Right.” Ryan started walking, unhindered by the three suitcases he still held. I matched his pace, and the steady clomp of my boots provided a metronome to mark our steps. “I’m unhappy because we’ve reached my ancestral homeland, Istas. That’s all.”
"I frowned slowly. "But…this voyage was your idea."

"I know."

"You asked me every day for a month if I would be willing to undertake it with you. I was considering the practicality of ripping your throat out with my teeth to make you stop when you mentioned the Seattle fashion community. I am greatly excited by the idea of expanding my horizons with their wares." Finding good Lolita-style clothing—my preferred attire—is difficult, and most of my dresses and petticoats are handmade. Accessories are harder, and have required the cultivation of a wide network of stores, artisans, and leatherworkers, none of whom came from the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps my acquiescence was shallow, but it was honest, and honesty was the foundation of our relationship.

Ryan nodded, forcing himself to smile as we joined the line at the rental car counter. "I know, honey, and I’m really glad you let me live, and I’m even more glad you’re here with me. I just…this is the first time I’ve brought a girl home to meet my family. They can be a little overwhelming sometimes."

"Ah. You are having second thoughts about the wisdom of introducing me to them." I looked down at the floor to keep him from seeing how much this news dismayed me. "I can understand. I am not the sort of girl one generally returns with from a long voyage."

"What—Istas, no." Ryan sighed. "I’m not worried about introducing you to them. I’m worried about introducing them to you. They haven’t been as open to the idea of our relationship as I hoped they would be."

I frowned. "I see."

The line moved forward. Ryan stepped up to the counter to arrange for our car, and I was left alone.

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To the human eye, Ryan and I are engaged in what would be most simply termed a “multiracial relationship.” He is of apparent Japanese and European extraction, while I appear to have descended from the First People of Canada. In truth, race is the least of our differences. Ryan is a tanuki, descended from a species of Japanese therianthrope capable of transforming into myriad forms, all of which echo the Japanese raccoon-dog in some fashion. I, on the other hand, am a waheela, a child of the cruel north wind, born to the ice and the snow and the winter unending. To say that we are of different worlds is to understate the extremity of our divide…and yet we found each other in New York City, in a place rendered neutral by the many races and species it contained. Prejudice had no place there.

I had not stopped to consider that prejudice might still exist outside its hallowed boroughs. Waheela are viewed by many as mindless killers, incapable of mercy or compassion—and it’s true, those are traits more learned than inborn for my kind. But I had worked very hard, for a very long time, to learn them. I had hewed them from the substance of my soul one careful improvement at a time, and had come to appreciate the lives of others long before I met Ryan, or allowed him to court me, or allowed myself to court him in return.

Ryan fit naturally behind the wheel of the compact car the rental company had provided. The windows were down, flooding the cab with the delicious scent of pine trees and rain. There were other scents layered underneath those dominant notes, and I ached to strip off my clothing and vanish into the woods, chasing those wonderful scents down—and more, avoiding the inevitable encounter with Ryan’s family, which was seeming less appealing with every mile that passed.

"My mother’s a tanuki, like me: Yukimura Chiyako. Most of her human friends call her ‘Ako,’ so she may
ask you to call her that. She may also ask you to call her ‘Mrs. Yukimura,’ to show respect. Whatever she asks, just go with it, and please, try not to get mad. I promise I’ll make it up to you later.”

We had already been over all of this a dozen times, but I held my temper and forced myself to nod, saying, “I understand.”

“My father is human. His name is Paul. He’s a witch, purely small charms and runic magic, but that’s one of the things that brought my parents together. He’s less formal than Mom tends to be. Please don’t bite his hand off if he asks you to call him ‘Dad.’”

“I understand,” I said again.

“Only two of my siblings are going to be here for this visit, Christine and Michael. Mikey lives in Chicago with his boyfriend, and has promised to mate with the daughter of a tanuki family we know, but he really doesn’t like to talk about that, so it’s better to avoid the subject. Christine is still looking for a long-term boyfriend, and may be coming out to stay with me this summer. She can work at the Freakshow, maybe meet someone nice. That depends on the two of you getting along, of course. I’m not going to let her come if she makes you uncomfortable.”

“I understand,” I said, for the third time. Mating was of dire importance to Ryan, and to every tanuki I had yet encountered. The Covenant of St. George—may the north wind flay the skin from their living bones and leave them naked to the world as a sign of their wickedness—had killed most of his kind, hunting them first in Japan and then around the world. Without mating, the tanuki would go quickly extinct, forgotten in all save for story, which is no real comfort when you are looking at a winter without end. The waheela do not share this problem. True, we have been hunted, and hunted even by the Covenant, when they thought to come into our high, frozen places, but we are hunters by nature, and when we were pursued, we pursued back. Of all the therianthropes I have known, the waheela may have had the least to fear at the Covenant’s hands.

It is truly a pity that we are so good at destroying ourselves. The Covenant was merely one short freeze in the long, hard winter of my kind.

Ryan paused. “I’m sort of lecturing you, aren’t I?”

“No,” I said. “You are entirely lecturing me, and I am making agreeable noises, because it is easier than attempting to soothe you when you cannot be soothed. Your parents will either welcome me or not; it is outside my control, and outside of yours as well. I came because you wanted me to. I do not care about the approval of parents.”

“My wild girl.” Ryan smiled a little. “Thanks for putting up with me, Izzy.”

“You feed me.” I leaned over just enough to bump his shoulder with mine before sitting straight and re-fluffing the sleeve on that side. Affection was all very well, but it should never leave a girl looking disheveled.

The line between my nature and the life I have chosen is thin, and bordered in lace. Very few of the people I have known have truly been able to understand that. Ryan, for all his strange obsessions with family and civility, did. When I looked up, he was still smiling at me, and we drove on into the Washington night.

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Before they were pulled into the orbit of human civilization, concealing themselves among the people they resembled in an effort to keep themselves safe, tanuki had lived in elaborate dens in the ground, somewhat like the “Hobbit holes” in those dreadful movies which Kitty forced me to watch in her attempts at bonding.
with her employees. In the modern world, tanuki apparently chose to live in unremarkable suburban homes, tucked into neighborhoods filled with equally unremarkable suburban homes. It was a functional means of camouflage, I supposed. We pulled up in front of one such home after driving past at least forty more, and I wondered how many of them were actually occupied by humans. All the humans I had known were either woodsmen or deep city dwellers, with very little variation.

It was an amusing thought: perhaps the suburbs were all cryptids in hiding, thinking themselves clever for finding such excellent cover, when it was not cover at all.

Ryan sat perfectly still in the driver’s seat, his hands resting on the steering wheel, eyes fixed on the house in front of us. I sighed and unfastened my seat belt.

“It is clear that you require some incentive,” I said. “I am going to meet your family now. Perhaps you would like to be there?” Ignoring his protests, I opened the door and slid out of the car.

Ryan joined me before I was halfway up the narrow brick pathway leading to the door. “That was mean, Izzy,” he said, voice pitched low.

“That may well be, but we are here. Meanness has its virtues.”

Ryan sighed and raised his hand to ring the bell. The door swung open before he could finish the gesture, revealing a brightly smiling woman in jeans and a button-up plaid shirt, her long dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. “Ryan!” she cried, and spread her arms, clearly expecting him to come to her. Her eyes did not so much as flicker in my direction: all her attention was on her son. And he was her son. The scent of her was similar to the scent of him, but older and deeper, like a stone that had been dropped into a bottomless lake. She could be no one other than Chiyako Yukimura, and the fact that she was not yet looking at me spoke ill for my chances of acceptance.

Waheela are creatures of stillness and the snow. I called that stillness to me, and froze myself in place, not even twirling my parasol as I waited to be acknowledged. Finally, Chiyako released her son and turned a critical eye on me, sweeping her gaze from my fascinator to my shoes and back up again.

Coolly, she said, “You must be Istas. I have heard much about you. I am Mrs. Yukimura, Ryan’s mother. Do I have your word that you do not carry trouble to this household?”

“Mom,” said Ryan, sounding scandalized.

I merely inclined my head. “I carry nothing intentionally. I am here at Ryan’s request.”

“So he has said. I suppose you had best both come inside.” She stepped back, holding the door open to let us pass. Ryan kissed her cheek as he crossed the threshold. I did not.

The door led us to a very small entry foyer, connected directly to the living room, which was filled with people who smelled faintly of Ryan, and strongly of the woods. The older man standing near the fireplace was his father, then, and the two whose coloring resembled Ryan’s would thus have to be his siblings, distinguished by gender before anything else: Mikey and Christine. Christine was wearing a tailored blazer, and looked upon my attire with approving surprise. I decided that I was most likely to get along with her.

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“Ryan is home,” announced Chiyako gleefully. That seemed to be the signal that the others had been waiting for: they leapt from their seats and pushed themselves away from the walls and swarmed him, becoming a laughing, delighted ball of tanuki.

I took a prim step backward, out of the range of flailing limbs, and gave my parasol a nervous spin. I did
not like this place, which smelled too strongly of judgment, and not at all of home.

When the greeting was done Ryan pulled away and reached behind him to catch my arm, tugging me forward. I went without protest, reminding myself that this was important to him; this was why we had come. “I want everyone to meet my girlfriend, Istas.”

His family looked at me with blank eyes, enthusiasm draining away. Christine was the first to speak, offering me a hesitant, “Hi, Istas. I’m Christine.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” I said gravely. “Ryan tells me you may be coming to join us in New York for a time. I would be happy to take you to the Fashion District, should you decide to go shopping while you are there.”

“Oh.” Christine sounded surprised. Then she smiled a little, uncertainly. “Thanks.”

“I appreciate any excuse to visit the Fashion District,” I assured her.

Mikey was still eyeing me with blank wariness. “So Ryan tells us you’re a waheela,” he said. “That true?”

“It has always been so, and I do not feel any different for having entered your home, so I assume that it is true,” I said. “I was born to waheela parents, at the top of the world, where the wind is ever-present and the thaw is ever-wished. Ryan informs me that you are a tanuki. Is that true?”

“Do you doubt the parentage of my children?” Chiyako’s voice was like the snap of a whip.

I blinked slowly, feeling as if I had just walked, with eyes open, into a trap I could not recognize. “I was asked a question, and I echoed it. Is this somehow offensive? Have I somehow offended?”

“Watch she doesn’t eat you, Mom,” said Mikey, and now there was a note of distinct malice in his tone.

The urge to growl rose in my throat. I swallowed it back down. “I mean no offense,” I said carefully. “I am here at Ryan’s request. He wanted me to meet his family. He said it was important to him that I meet his family, and that his family meet me.”

“Why?” asked Chiyako. “It’s not as if we were ever going to approve of you.”

“Mom!” Ryan sounded scandalized. His grip on my arm did not waver, and while I was grateful for this sign of solidarity, I also wished he would let me go. At some point, I would either fight or flee, and I did not think he would take kindly to my attacking his family. “Istas is my guest, and my girlfriend. Why are you being so rude?”

“Why are you bringing us a monster and pretending she can be tamed?” Chiyako narrowed her eyes. “No waheela has ever been trained to be anything other than what it is; a beast. A destroyer of men.”

“Mom.” Now Christine sounded disapproving. “This isn’t what I agreed to.”

“Wait—agreed to? Are you telling me you invited me here because you wanted to stage an intervention about my girlfriend? I love her. You’re the ones who told me to find a mate, because we can’t afford to lose our breeding adults. Well, I found one I actually care about. Istas is funny and kind and…and she tries so hard to be gentle with the world. I don’t think people understand how difficult it is to live in a place where everything seems breakable, all the time.” Ryan looked at me, finally letting go of my arm. “She’s perfect. She’s just what I need.”

“She’s a beast and she will devour your children without thinking twice, because that’s what she is; that’s
where she comes from.” Chiyako’s voice was cold, as cold as the north wind. “We didn’t expect you to bring her.”

“You said—”

“I know what we said, Ryan. I never thought you’d get her on the plane.”

I looked past Chiyako to Paul, standing still and silent at the back of the group. He looked away. Ah.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I said, and turned, and walked away before any of them could say a word. The front door was unlocked. I left my parasol on the porch. Midway down the driveway, with the sound of raised voices following me like accusations, I paused to unzip my boots and daintily roll down my stockings. I tucked them into the space where my toes had been only a moment before, and then, fleet as the wind across the tundra, I ran.

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The forest is never far from the surface in Seattle. I undid buttons as I fled across the city, my fingers following their familiar paths as my feet did the same: it has always been in me to run for safety, to seek the dark wood and the places no man goes. When the trees loomed before me like a promise I dove into them, and my frilled dress and lacy panties—the trappings of the civilization I aspired to and might never claim—fluttered behind me, caught on the branches of the guardian evergreens. I struck the forest floor like an attack, my hands and feet already stretching into paws, and still I ran.

Waheela leave no scent behind us in either our human or great-forms; we smell of clean water and nothingness, as befits the tundra’s greatest predator. When I had fled far enough that the angry yearning was no longer clasped in iron bands around my heart I slowed, flanks heaving, muzzle drooping low, and curled myself into a ball. I felt no cold, for my fur was made for colder climes than these. So I lay there, and I breathed in the scents of the forest, and I tried to push away the pain.

I had not been looking for a mate. Ryan needed to breed to keep his species alive, and he had pursued me, and I had not been averse to the idea. If I bred with Ryan, I could be a mother without being a mother to waheela; tanuki were special, somehow, on what our friend Verity called “a genetic level,” and any children Ryan sired would be tanuki, although they would borrow certain traits from a non-tanuki parent. Our children would be large for his species, and dark-furred, with muted scents that would keep them safer. But they would not be waheela, and they would not know the north wind. That had been so appealing. The idea that I could be a better mother than my mother was, just by freeing my descendants from the north wind’s call…

But that was not to be. Ryan’s family was his world, and they would not have me. We would return to New York together, and then we would become separate again. Perhaps his family was right; perhaps I would never be tamed, but would always be a beast from the top of the world, waiting for the day I must return there.

A deer walked by, tail flipping idly, unaware of my presence. My stomach grumbled, but I did not move. I just watched the deer. It lived here, in the woods on the verge of the city, and it did not fear, for it knew what it was and where it belonged. It fit into this wood, into this place. It lived as it wished. There was power in that, and I was not so hungry that I needed to take that power away.

I raised my head. The deer went bounding away, startled by the motion, and was gone. I could have pursued it, but I did not. I was hungry, but I controlled my hunger. Could a beast have done that? There was a time when I could not have controlled myself. There was a time when all I would have been was hunger, and not a thinking creature at all. I could not be tamed, because I was already taming myself.
Lumbering back to my feet, I turned, and began the slow, thoughtful walk out of the wood. There were things yet left for me to do.

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Ryan was sitting on the porch when I came walking up the driveway, his head bowed and his hands dangling between his legs. My boots were on the step next to him. The small shushing sound they made when I picked them up caused him to lift his head. He gasped, taking in my muddied appearance, my hair falling free and tangled with pine sap and needles.

“Istas—”

“In a moment, please.” I rang the doorbell.

Christine answered the door. Her eyes widened. “You came back.”

“Get your mother, please,” I said politely, still holding my boots in one hand. My bare feet ached with the pleasurable memory of running.

Christine nodded, eyes still wide, and withdrew. I heard her call her mother’s name. Seconds passed, and Chiyako appeared, her own eyes narrowed in wary suspicion.

“Greetings,” I said. “My name is Istas, of the high tundra, daughter of the north wind, and I am going to stay with your son whether you approve or no. I will not eat my children. I will not be driven away by cruel words or unthinking superstition. I fled my own family rather than allow myself to be devoured. I hope you will not put me to the same decision, because if you do, I will not run. But I will love your son, and I will keep him safe, and your grandchildren will be better protected than any other tanuki in this world. I do not think we have anything else to say to each other tonight. Perhaps later, when the wind has blown a little more for both of us.”

Then I turned, leaving her staring after me, and walked back down the porch steps to where Ryan was waiting. I offered him my hand. He took it.

Behind us, Chiyako called, “See you tomorrow night for dinner?”

“Sure thing, Mom,” said Ryan, and led me to the rental car. He opened the door for me. I slid silently inside, and watched as he walked around the front to the driver’s side door.

Once he was seated, I said, “I require a hairdresser, a manicurist, and a steak the size of my torso.”

Ryan smiled. “You got it, honey,” he said, and started the car.

We drove silently away into the cool Seattle night.