WHITE AS A RAVEN'S WING

An InCryptid Story
White as a Raven's Wing

by

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“We are born of winter. We live in winter. We die in winter. Spring is a lie we tell the young to give them hope before they are devoured.” —Waheela proverb

*The Freakshow, a highly specialized nightclub somewhere in Manhattan*

**Now**

Last call had come and gone, and the customers of the Freakshow—Manhattan’s only carnival-themed bar and burlesque club—had gone with it, streaming back into the chill February night. There was still snow on the ground, a fact that many of them had seen fit to complain about when I made my rounds with their final orders. More took this as an opportunity to look me up and down and then ask if, quote, “the chubby Eskimo lass was on the menu.” Their racially insensitive and inaccurate words, not mine. I had not broken any fingers. Kitty would be pleased with me.

Kitty Smith had become a bar owner in the traditional way: she had been standing in the right place at the right time when her Uncle Dave, who had founded the establishment, proved to be untrustworthy and had to flee to avoid being presented with his own liver. Dave had opened the bar under the name “Dave’s Fish and Strips,” and had traded less on novelty, more on nudity. Like her uncle, Kitty employed a largely inhuman staff. Unlike her uncle, she understood that each of us came with our own unique habits and complications. My temper, for example, was a complication when drunk tourists insisted on calling me a “chubby Eskimo,” and I deserved to be rewarded for keeping it in check.

Candy and her coterie of dragon princesses had already finished bussing the tables by the time I emerged from the back with the freshly laundered dishtowels. We had learned from hard experience that a failure to wash the dishtowels before closing would result in untidiness and despair. Many of us were nocturnal, or more so than the human members of staff; it made no difference whether we did our cleaning in the morning or at night.

Angel, our human bartender, was usually more than happy to do the opening tasks without our aid, if it meant that all towels and glasses were glistening clean when she arrived at work.

I had expected to emerge into a hive of activity, with the dragon princesses attempting to shake Angel down for a larger share of the night’s tips while Kitty hovered around the edges, prepared to intervene if their avarice became too aggressive. Instead, I found the main room effectively deserted, save for my boyfriend, who was leaning against the bar in what could only be described as careful nonchalance. He looked like a man who was sitting uncomfortably atop a secret.

I frowned at him as I walked to the bar and placed my burden of dishtowels atop its polished surface. “Where are the dragons?” I asked.

“Gone,” he said. “Kitty took them back to her office to adjudicate the nightly tip division.”

“She generally prefers to perform the division here, where the rest of the staff may watch and eat leftover buffalo wings from the kitchen,” I protested. “I very much enjoy the consumption of leftover buffalo wings.”

Ryan laughed, showing teeth that were slightly more square, and slightly more sharp, than the human norm. As always, seeing those teeth put me at ease. He did not try to conceal his predator’s nature from me: he wore it proudly on the outside of his skin, like it was a badge of honor, and so I knew that I could trust him. Only predators who mean you ill conceal themselves.

“As it turns out, I have something better than leftover buffalo wings,” he said. “Kitty agreed to let me
I didn’t lock up when we were done. So what do you say, Izzy? Want to come have a picnic under the stars with me?”

“I am not dressed for a date night,” I protested. “You should have warned me if you were intending to seek romance after work.”

Ryan shook his head. “You always look amazing to me.”

I smiled at that, even as I chafed at the idea of a picnic in my current attire. “As it should be.”

Most waheela do not care for the finer points of fashion. They are content to live their lives naked on the tundra, dressed in fur while in their great hunting forms, dressed in blood or in snow when in their softer, more dexterous bipedal forms. We look like wolf-bears when we prowl the snow, evoking memories of megafauna long since vanished from this world, and we look like the First Peoples of Canada when in our smaller shapes, but always we are waheela, the shapeshifting children of the north wind, who knows only hunger, and nothing of the thaw.

I am an aberration among my kind, a freak, for I find more pleasure in lace and taffeta than I do in mindless slaughter and the feeling of blood drying sticky-wet against my skin. As always, I had brought a change of clothing for when my shift was ended, for I take no pleasure in walking home covered in spilled alcohol and the sweat of strangers. I was wearing a simple pink gown over three layers of petticoats, with a hand-painted peignoir tied over the top. The sleeves were cap lace, and the silver stars I had applied to the dark blue gauze of the peignoir glittered in the light. They matched my boots, which were silver at the tops and mellowed slowly into dark blue as they approached my feet. It was a charming outfit for walking home with one’s mate. It was not necessarily appropriate for dining.

Ryan sighed as he picked up on my reluctance. “You look amazing, Izzy, and I’m hungry now. Aren’t you? It’s been hours since you’ve eaten.”

My belly, always open to suggestion, rumbled loudly. I looked down at it, muttering, “Traitor,” before looking back up at Ryan. “You won’t think less of me for wearing inappropriate clothing on a romantic occasion?”

“Sweetheart, I love you. Never think that I don’t love you. Any man who voluntarily sleeps in a room with a hungry waheela is either in love or suicidal.”

I nodded. “Very true, and you have never shown any inclination to take your own life, or to give it over to my jaws.”

“Exactly. So please don’t doubt my affections when I say that I basically never know whether what you’re wearing is appropriate: I just let you tell me one way or the other, and I keep smiling, because you always look amazing, whether you’re wearing twenty layers of lace or nothing at all.” His smile seemed to have more teeth this time. “Maybe especially when you’re wearing nothing at all.”

I shivered. The words, the tone, the expression on his face—he was trying to be suggestive, to imply that his love for my body was such that I could wear whatever I liked and he would admire me all the same. It was flattery of the highest order, and I only wished that I were capable of appreciating it.

But when he said those things to me, he did not conjure pleasant images of bed and lovemaking. He conjured the frozen tundra, blood drying in my hair and on my skin, teeth aching from the pleasant sensation of ripping through living flesh and bone. I was still that naked, feral girl. I always would be, beneath the lace and crinoline. The north wind was my father and my lover and my unborn son, and
he loved me too much to ever truly let me go.

Ryan blinked, his smile fading. “Izzy? You okay?”

This time the smile was mine. He would never understand how much it cost me. “I think there was a draft,” I lied, as pleasantly as I could. “You promised me food?”

“I did,” said Ryan, looking relieved. “This way.”

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I was born in the high tundra, where the thaw never comes completely, and where the names of so many things have been lost in the face of colonialism and modernization. My kind have human lifespans, and as the people who were once our neighbors died or moved to the cities of their conquerors, we forgot what our ancestral caves and hunting grounds had been called by human mouths, in human tongues. We were waheela, children of the north wind, born to the cold that never ended and the hunger that could never be fulfilled. What cared we for names? Names were nothing, meant to be forgotten.

Ryan was born in Seattle. He was a tanuki, a breed of Japanese shapeshifter that had more in common with the waheela than it did with the more common humans, although his father was human. Paul Yukimura was a witch, and a very pleasant man who had married a tanuki woman while fully aware of her nature. They had many children together, all of whom were tanuki like their mother. I had only made the acquaintance of two of his siblings, and had found them both to be pleasant enough, if someone prejudiced by their preconceptions about my kind, I had done what I could to convince them that I was neither threat nor monster, although I hadn’t tried as hard as I could have.

Most waheela were monsters, after all. It was best if they never learned to trust us.

I had grown up cold and naked and shivering, with the knowledge that my own death was never far from laying claws upon my skin. Ryan had grown up warm and wrapped in love, confident that he and his siblings would live into adulthood. Our differences ran so deep, were so foundational, that sometimes I despaired of ever resolving them.

Then he led me up the stairs to the rooftop, where a picnic had been spread out beneath the stars, and I wondered whether resolution could really be said to matter in the face of buffalo wings.

The blanket had probably been scavenged from the prop room: it was red and white check, borrowed straight from a production of _The Wizard of Oz_, and large enough to cover a ten by ten square of rooftop. It was almost obscured by the sheer volume of food laid out atop it. Buffalo wings and fried chicken and pizza; slices of raw liver and beef heart and bowls of ranch dressing. There were also strawberries and slices of white-frosted cream cake and flutes of champagne, but I bore them little notice as I focused on the other offerings.

It is virtually impossible for a waheela’s hunger to be fully sated. I was fortunate: I had been in New York City, land of convenience stores, fast food establishments, and plentiful rats, for so long that I had built a certain softness over my bones, cushioning them from the worst cries of the north wind. A slender waheela is a waheela who cannot control her hunger any longer. Humanity prizes slimness, deifies it almost, as if hunger were a holy state. Had they ever met my teeth, seen my claws, they might have felt differently.

Tanuki also have a tendency to eat enormously, at least by human standards. According to Verity—once a coworker of ours at the Freakshow, and always a student of biology and the ways in which the
human world encroaches on worlds such as ours—this is because therianthropes burn calories at an accelerated rate, compensating for the strains placed upon our bodies by fluid biology and even more fluid physics. For a time, all was silence, except for the sound of chewing, and rending, and bellies being filled. The night air was cool. Snow clung to the corners of the rooftop, scenting everything with winter, atop the normal New York smells of too many humans and hot dog stands and motor vehicles. Ryan’s scent wound through it all, comfortably male and solid and familiar. I was content, even if I rather wished that I had something more substantial than a peignoir between me and the night.

I should have realized that it was all far too ideal to last.

Ryan cleared his throat. I tensed, shoulders locking, and swallowed my last bite of raw liver dipped in ranch dressing as I swiveled to face him. He looked very serious, and I swallowed again—only air this time, but sometimes a belly full of air will soothe nerves better than anything else. Hunger is a great distraction from the other trials and troubles of the world.

“Hey, Izzy, so I’ve been thinking,” he said. “My folks actually sort of like you now.”

“Your mother believes I am a monster who will one day devour her grandchildren,” I corrected stiffly.

“Yeah, but see, that means my mother believes there are going to be grandchildren. From her, that’s basically an endorsement. And Dad thinks you’re swell, you know that. He was really impressed with how well you handled Christine.”

“Your sister was no trouble at all,” I said. Christine was the youngest of Ryan’s siblings. She had spent a month living in Ryan’s apartment while she saw the city, and I had taken her on several trips to the Fashion District, helping her find the best items for the lowest prices. My knowledge of discount schedules and sample sales was unparalleled in the cryptid world, save perhaps among the dragon princesses, who raised the conservation of funds to the level of religion. I feared nothing, but even I would hesitate to get between them and a box of marked down pumps.

“See, you say that, and you even mean it, because you’re amazing, but trust me, Christine can be plenty of trouble when she wants to be,” said Ryan. “My whole family likes you, and they know you’re out of my league. I keep waiting for you to wake up and realize that.”

I frowned politely, waiting for him to make his point. Ryan looked at my face and sighed.

“What I’m saying, Izzy, is that my family likes you, but they don’t really matter, because me? I love you. Big love. Stupid love. The sort of love that makes people do things they wouldn’t normally do. I’ve never loved anybody like this. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “I know.” I felt the same about him, inasmuch as I could: I would never be as hot a creature as he was, never as passionate or as capable of summoning my heart into my hands. But I did love him, had loved him since the night he came to my aid beneath the body of Manhattan, even if it had taken me a little longer than that to sort through my complicated feelings and find my way to acceptance. I had allowed him to set his hands upon my body without severing them from his body. I had slept curled against his side, warmed by the heat of him, leaving my throat unguarded. Among my kind, there was no truer or more honest declaration of love. He knew that.

Didn’t he?

For the first time, I began to feel unsure. What if he didn’t know? What if he had done as so many...
friends and casual lovers had done since I started trying to live outside the cold, and taken my silence for aloofness, or worse, disinterest?

What if he was leaving me?

Ryan looked at my face and frowned. “You look upset.”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be?” I picked up another piece of liver, twisting it between my fingers until it drooled blood and connective tissue. It didn’t make me feel any better. I reached for a napkin, wrapping the liver uneaten in the paper. “I can have my things removed from your apartment before morning.”

“What…Izzy, what do you think is happening here?” Ryan leaned across the blanket and caught my hands before I could mutilate any more of the leftovers. He held them tight, and for my part, I resisted the urge to transform them into claws and punish him for touching me when I was already upset. “Do you seriously think I planned a romantic picnic on the roof so I could tell you I was breaking up with you?”

“There are so many customs I still don’t know,” I said, as bravely as I could. The words seemed to stick in my throat, making them difficult to speak aloud. “Perhaps this is how tanuki always manage a separation. With alcohol and organ meats, to make it less painful.”

“Okay, one, even if this was customary among tanuki, which it’s not, I would break with custom, partially because this would be a dick move, and partially because you would absolutely throw me off the roof if I broke up with you like this,” said Ryan. “I am not Verity. I do not appreciate toying with gravity. Gravity tends to toy back.”

“I am glad you’re not Verity,” I said. “I would never have been able to become romantically involved with her. She’s so…”

“Nosy? Talkative? Human?”

“Breakable,” I finished. “I would have snapped her in half the first time I drew her close, and I prefer my lovers not to double as late night snacks.”

Ryan actually laughed before sobering again. “No, Izzy, I did not bring you up here to break up with you. I swear.”

I frowned at him. “Then why?”

“Because I wanted to ask you to marry me. Become my mate, whatever it is that you call it, I want it. I want to wake up with you beside me. I want to see what our kids will look like. Don’t you want that? Whatever ceremony is required, I’ll do it. We can go down to City Hall and have a human-style wedding, if there’s not a waheela ceremony for us to observe.”

“Anything?” I asked, eyes going wide with the force of my disbelief. I stared at him. He couldn’t possibly know what he was asking me—he couldn’t possibly!

But really, did it matter if he did?

“Anything,” said Ryan. “So what do you say, Izzy? Will you be my wife? Or mate or, you know, whatever?”

I looked at him solemnly. “Yes, but only if you will do something for me.”
Now it was Ryan’s turn to look bemused. “You mean other than marrying you?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Sure. What do you need?”

I sighed, and brushed a few crumbs off the front of my peignoir. It really was lovely. I was going to miss it while it was packed away. “I need you to explain to Kitty why we will both be absent from work for the next two weeks.”

“Where are we going?”

I had to give him this: he was extremely quick on the uptake. It was one of the things that had first attracted me to him. That, and the way he could transform into a vast, ravening raccoon-dog, fully capable of disemboweling my enemies. A girl likes to know she will be taken care of.

“Canada,” I said, and stood. “I will arrange tickets.”

“Why are we going to Canada?”

Maybe not that quick on the uptake. “I wish to marry you, Ryan Yukimura,” I said. “I will be the first waheela with a surname of my own. But before that can happen, we must return to the high country, so that I can kill my husband.”

Ryan stared at me, and didn’t say anything. That was probably for the best, all things considered.

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The closest airport to our destination was located in Kugluktuk, a settlement at the mouth of the Coppermine River. Getting there required us to travel to the very top of the continent, to the place where the land began to split into so many loosely affiliated islands.

When I had made the trek alone, largely on foot or bundled into the back seats of strangers who viewed my stilting speech and bare feet as signs of danger, it took me six weeks. Even had I been confident in Ryan’s ability to make the journey, Kitty would never have allowed us to take so much time off from work—and besides, I had been living among humans long enough to have learned about a quaint custom called “the honeymoon,” wherein the newly married couple traveled to some tropical location to drink layered alcoholic beverages and enjoy warm beaches. I had never enjoyed a warm beach. I wished to preserve some of my vacation time for the eventual enjoyment of warm beaches. That meant that we had to travel faster.

That meant that we had to fly.

I had only boarded an airplane twice before in my life, once to fly from New York to Seattle, and again to make the return voyage. Both times, we had been seated in First Class, and had been on what Ryan called “through flights,” making no stops en route to our destination. Traveling from New York to Kugluktuk was…not so simple.

Our first plane got us as far as Toronto. The second, which was smaller, and shook unpleasantly at takeoff and landing, carried us to Edmonton, where a third plane took us to Fort Nelson. The fourth and final plane was waiting for us there. We were its only passengers, and it was so small that it seemed more like an outsized bird than a vehicle capable of climbing to the heavens.
I huddled in my seat, breathing deeply and trying to find serenity amidst the turmoil of my thoughts. There was none. Ryan wasn’t helping. Ryan, who was my expert on such human things as airplanes and transit authorities, who had seen me to Seattle without a single maiming, turned out not to do so well when forced into planes scarcely larger than a yellow cab. He had turned a fascinating shade of gray, and his eyes were screwed so tightly shut that they were disappearing into his cheeks. More relevantly, his hand was clamped down on mine, fingers digging into my flesh.

“If you do not let me go, and quickly, I will be forced to take steps,” I said pleasantly. If I could not find serenity, I could look for violence instead. Violence had always come much more naturally to me. “I do not need you to hunt for me. I can do just as well with a mate who has one hand as I can with a mate who has two.”

“What?” Ryan opened his eyes, turning toward me. He looked as lost as a cub who had not yet survived its first winter. I nodded meaningfully toward his hand, still locked over mine. “Oh! Oh. I’m sorry, Izzy.” He let go. “I just wasn’t expecting this flight to be so…bouncy.”

“The north wind resists intrusions,” I said, beginning to massage some feeling back into my fingers. “He will keep us out, if he can.”

There was no in-flight service on this plane, and our sole flight attendant had retreated to the back as soon as we were off the ground, strapping herself in place for the duration of the trip. I was grateful for our solitude, and for the roar of the engines, which would keep her from hearing anything she shouldn’t. I would have hated to begin my homecoming with a burial.

“You talk about the north wind a lot,” said Ryan. “Is it…a god or something?”

“Waheela do not have a religion,” I said. “We have the ice.” The ice, and the snow, and the unrelenting cold at the top of the world. Those were the things that we believed in, the things that we prayed to, if howling our need and hunger to the moon could be considered “prayer.”

Perhaps we had a religion after all.

“Well, then, how does the north wind feature in all that? What does the north wind do?”

Nothing and everything. “The north wind blew the first waheela into being. When he tires of us, he will blow the last of us away. In the time between, we offer him no worship, because he does not need it. All he asks for is our hunger, and as hunger we possess in plenty, it has never been any difficulty to serve him.”

But that wasn’t true, was it? Hunger drove us in everything we did, even the things which made it difficult for us to stand in the eyes of the sun and face our own intelligence. I was only a pup when I aided my brothers in eating my older sister, rending her limb from limb and bone from bone to fill our bellies. Without her flesh to feed us, we would not all have survived the winter. No matter what, the spring would have come to find our litter reduced in size. I knew that. I had always known that. And yet sometimes still, I woke dreaming of her pleading eyes, and had to stagger to my fridge in the night—not to eat, just to open it wide and look at the food that was contained within, waiting for me to need it.

My children would never consume each other to survive. I was determined of that. Without the north wind whispering in her ear that hunger was another name for holiness, would my mother have reached the same conclusion? I had been second of a litter of five when I was born, and by the time the thaw came, I was the eldest of my season. How could that be right? How could that be a sacrifice worth making?
Ryan spoke of the Covenant of St. George in dark words, painting them as the greatest enemies the therianthrope world had ever known. Perhaps that was true, for the tanuki, who were gentle, and kind, and had their own culture, their own place among the humans of Japan, at least until the Covenant came along and swept them away like an avalanche. The Covenant never reached so high as to find the wahelela, and when they did encounter us, they were generally wise enough to run. In a world of alpha predators, we are the apex of tooth and claw and hunger.

Our greatest enemies have always been ourselves.

“Izzy?” This time Ryan’s hand on mine was gentle. His concern was stronger than his fear. That made him a good mate for me, but it also made me afraid for him. He did not understand what we were heading toward. No matter how many times I tried to explain it, he would never understand. If I was not careful, that lack of understanding would destroy him.

“Yes?”

“Where’d you go? You got real distant for a second there.”

“You asked me about the north wind,” I said slowly. “I did not lie when I told you that all he asked of us was hunger, but Ryan, our hunger is so big. It consumes everything. It would consume the world, if we allowed it. We would consume the world.”

“Hey.” He put his arm around me. “You’ve never eaten anything that asked you not to.”

He was lying. But as he did not know it, I decided to let it be. I snuggled into him, breathing in the warm scent of the fur beneath his skin, and closed my eyes. For all the years I had spent in running away, we were almost there. I was almost home.

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We landed just before eleven o’clock, as the sun was setting. It would be back up in four hours. Night was a short affair in Kugluktuk in the spring. When I was a child, my mother had told me that this was a blessing from the north wind, forcing us to become better hunters if we wanted to survive unseen. As we stepped off the plane, I wondered if she might not have been right, just…misguided. The short spring nights kept the wahelela from hunting too far from our dens. If the nights had been long during the season when we emerged from our voluntary winter’s hibernation, humankind would never have been able to gain a foothold at the top of the world. We would have devoured them all. The only way to make us share was to limit us.

Our bags had been loaded into the belly of the plane. Ryan shook his head again when he saw mine: an overstuffed hiker’s backpack, large enough to be unwieldy, but small enough that I could carry it without attracting undue attention.

“I never thought I’d see you go anywhere without half your wardrobe shoved into a hard-shell suitcase the size of a teenage boy,” he said.

“There is much you have not seen yet,” I replied quietly. Like me, naked and running across the tundra; me, dressed only in the blood of my victims. Oh, he had so much yet to see.

The airport was small enough that we were the only arriving passengers. Together, we walked to the exit. A sign indicated the presence of a taxi stand. The absence of taxis painted the sign for a liar. Not that it mattered. In this city, in this place, I did not want to lock myself in a shell of metal and let the world pass me by. I wanted to see the sky.
The air tasted like humanity, brick and plastic and burning oil. That was only the surface. I breathed in deeper, filling my lungs with open space and cold and ice that never fully melted. Somewhere deep in my chest, below my heart, my hunger stirred and snapped its teeth in agitation. I soothed it with the memory of my freezer, full of steaks and frozen fish, and my Costco card. A piece of plastic may seem a flimsy defense against a hunger great enough to eat the world, but the powers of a jumbo-sized economy pack of cheese balls should not be underrated.

“Whoa,” said Ryan, tilting his head back and staring wide-eyed at the sky. The first stars were beginning to peek through the gathering dark. Soon, they would become a glittering swarm, strewn across the night like jewels.

“We are at the top of the world; stars grow here,” I said. “Come. There is someone you must meet.” I started across the street outside the airport. My coat was not yet zipped, and the wind bit into my flesh like an old, familiar friend, sinking its teeth in deep. Good. Good. I would need to be as close to frozen as I could bear before I could do what I had come here to do.

Ryan hurried after me, feet clumsy in their heavy snow boots, legs and arms grown fat with goose down stuffing and weather-resistant fabric. He had never been so high before, and he came from warmer climes than I did: he was bundled as if we were planning to walk clear to the North Pole.

Waheela run cold. I had acknowledged that this was not a good place for peignoirs and puffy skirts, but that was less a matter of my comfort and more a matter of not attracting more attention than I would through the sheer act of showing up. I was wearing black trousers and gray snow boots, with a heavy white sweater under my dark gray jacket. I was a charcoal sketch of a woman, and I would remain such until I had earned my colors back again, by bleeding out my father beneath the north wind’s watching eyes.

The wind howled, and we walked on.

Kugluktuk was a large city, by local standards, and growing larger with every year that passed. Once, I had viewed it as a metropolis, so large and bustling that it would be impossible to ever see or do everything that it had to offer. Now, walking through its streets with Ryan beside me, it seemed small, quaint, like a fairy tale dream of a city. It had never been my home, but part of me still ached to see it reduced so, when once it had been the center of the world.

Few people were foolish enough to walk outside in Kugluktuk during the February evening. Cars passed us, but not many, some leaning on their horns as if to alert us to our own mistakes. We passed a small hotel, and it was hard to fight the temptation to stop, turn, go inside, and spend the remaining night in a warm room, curled in Ryan’s arms and thinking of anything but the future. I kept going, and Ryan paced me, although his yearning glance at the hotel doors told me that his thoughts matched mine. That was why we could not stop. Pause now, and we might never start again.

*You could marry him without resolving your duties here,* whispered a cruel, tempting thought, echoing in my mind like a shout from mountain’s edge. He would never have known that I had business to complete in the cold if I had not insisted on telling him so—but no. He fought for me, when he brought me before his family and said that he would stand as my mate, even if I could never be tanuki, or tame. I would do no less for him, even if it meant we must travel so very far, and grow so very cold.

“Um, Izzy, not that I want to criticize or anything, but we’ve been in transit for like a day now,” said Ryan, after we had walked for nearly an hour. We were cutting a fine line through the town, heading for the edge. He had no way of knowing that, however; he knew only that he was in a strange place,
“Almost,” I said. “We must walk carefully here. Kugluktuk is not waheela territory—we have always respected the town, in part because it is too large to eat without forming troublesome alliances, and in part because there is really nowhere else around here to obtain dental floss.”

“Dental floss,” said Ryan blankly.

“Yes. It is a rare and precious substance, and we treasure it. Even the wildest of waheela does not enjoy having bits of bone and sinew stuck between their teeth.” I shuddered delicately. “Dental hygiene is very important for carnivores. Gnawing old bones will remove a great deal of buildup, but sometimes it is important to floss.”

“Right,” said Ryan. “You know, there’s a movie I should show you sometime, called 30 Days of Night. It’s about a little town in Alaska that gets eaten by vampires.”

I frowned at him. “But we are not in Alaska, and vampires do not exist.”

“…fair enough,” he said, and kept following me.

We walked until my calves stopped aching and accepted their fate. The town fell behind us, replaced by the endless black line of the road, and the white shadows of the snow against the distant mountains. And, eventually, by a few squares of light standing out brightly in the night. I took Ryan’s hand in mine.

“Whatever happens, show no fear,” I said. “We can sense fear. It excites us. You would not enjoy the consequences of that.”

“No fear,” said Ryan. “Right.”

I could smell the fear radiating off of him, delicious and thick and rich, like good marbled bacon. I decided that mentioning it would just make it worse, which was not what I wanted at all. Hauling him along with me like a cub, I trotted across the snow to the gleaming lights of Mary’s Place.

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The front door was not locked. The front door was never locked: that would have gone against the purpose of opening a public house. As a bar, Mary’s Place was ready to receive customers at all hours of the day and night, although some of those hours saw the staff absent and a sign reading “Help Yourself—Pay For What You Take” next to the cooler. As a safe house for those who might be caught out by the weather, Mary’s Place was prepared for refugees at any time, and a box of blankets sat next to the fire, old-fashioned but incredibly welcome when presented to frozen travelers. And as a waheela’s den, Mary’s Place was not exactly a target for local thieves. Not ones who would ever be seen again, at least. My aunt had domesticated herself because she no longer saw the point in being wild. That did not change the shape beneath her skin.

A bell rang as we stepped inside. The woman behind the bar looked toward the closing door, her expression broadcasting polite welcome. Not too much—not enough to make us feel pressured by her attention—but not too little, either, lest she drive her customers away. She had deep brown skin, tanned a few shades darker than mine by the sunlight reflecting off the snow, and short black hair that hung around her face like the wings of a blackbird, concealing and revealing at the same time. I liked to think we looked something alike, although she would have benefitted from adding some color to her attire. Gray on gray on gray is not a good look for anyone.
She blinked once when she saw me, and again when she saw Ryan, her smile fading first into a look of faint puzzlement, and then into one of calm resignation. “My niece has returned from America,” she announced, to the three people who were still present, consuming sandwiches and mugs of tan liquid that could have been either tea or beer. Given the hour, my bet was on beer. “I’ll be upstairs if any of you need me. I don’t suggest needing me. Leave your money on the bar when you’re done.”

Then she was moving toward me, closing the distance between us at a speed that would have been threatening from any other waheela in the world. Even knowing who she was, and that she meant me no harm, it was all I could do not to meet her approach with a snarl. I stepped slightly to the side, keeping her from moving straight toward Ryan. Instinct would allow me to do nothing less.

She stopped a foot away, a smile flitting quickly across her face. Then it was gone, replaced by concern. “Istas.”

“Miali,” I replied.

“You’re here.”

“I am.”

“You said you were never coming back.”

I rolled my shoulders in a shrug. “I did not lie. I spoke according to the information I possessed at the time.”

“I didn’t say you lied, Istas, I said you told me you weren’t coming back. Not the same thing.” She turned to look at Ryan. “Who’s your friend?” She knew Ryan wasn’t waheela. Even if his Japanese heritage hadn’t given him away, she could smell him: the faint, earthy scent of tanuki. Waheela smelled of nothing but the snow. It was part of what made us such powerful predators, and so unbearably dangerous.

“Aunt Miali, I would like you to meet the man I am to marry, Ryan Yukimura. Ryan, this is my mother’s sister.”

“A pleasure,” said Aunt Miali, holding her hand out for Ryan to shake. She moved with the calm assurance of someone who had been living among the humans for longer than I had been alive. I envied her that ease. Among our kind, I was considered gregarious to the point of being dangerous. Miali made me look like my father. She could walk among humans and feel no urge toward gutting them.

Someday, I hoped I would be as comfortable as she was.

Ryan took her hand with an expression of pleased surprise, glancing toward me as if to confirm that I was seeing this: he was shaking hands with a member of my family, welcome and wanted. I forced myself to smile for him. He looked so pleased, and what was to come would be so much less pleasant than this. I didn’t want to take it away.

I didn’t really have a choice. “You indicated to your customers that you would be removing yourself to the upstairs rooms,” I said. “Was this true?”

Miali smiled at me, letting go of Ryan’s hand. “I don’t lie either, darling,” she said. “Come along, you two. Follow me.”
She led us through a door at the back of the room and up a narrow staircase that smelled refreshingly of snow and mud and drying blood. I inhaled deeply, remembering long afternoons spent hiding in these same rooms, chewing idly on a deer bone and paging through a fashion magazine stolen from a foolish traveler’s car. Miali had eventually started ordering magazines for me, delivered to her address, where my parents would never need to know.

Without her, I would never have been able to make my escape from the cold. She gave me the tools I needed to begin reshaping myself into the woman I wanted to be. I could never repay her.

If I failed to kill my father, I hoped that he would not come and punish her for having helped me. But then, he had failed to punish her thus far: maybe he didn’t know. Or maybe he was afraid of her. That would be the wiser course.

She stopped at the top of the stairs, letting me and Ryan walk past her into the cozy rooms she claimed as her own. Calmly, she closed the door, turning the deadbolt with her thumb. Then she turned to look at me. Her smile was gone, replaced by profound stillness.

“You weren’t supposed to come back here,” she said. “You said you were leaving forever. Istas, why?”

“Because Ryan asked me to marry him, and Mother is dead,” I said. “How did she die, Aunt Miali?”

“How do you think?” For the first time, there was bitterness in her tone. She walked past us, heading for the small kitchen. I trailed after her, and Ryan trailed after me, the three of us forming a limited horizon between ourselves.

She didn’t look back until she had filled the copper kettle she inherited from her grandmother—a rare thing, for a waheela to have such an heirloom—and placed it on the stove. Only then did she turn, resting her hands against the counter, and say, “My sister fought long against the monster she was mated to, and because she was a monster too, her fight was usually something she could bear. She loved him.”

“I know,” I said softly.

“Do you, Istas? You left because the fight was not for you. I left because the fight was not for me. But it was the fight that drew them together, the long battle against the thing in the dark that was also the thing they loved most in the world. He loved her, in his way, and he resented anything that took her away from him, even for an instant.”

I knew all of this, but it was new to Ryan, at least in this incarnation: he had heard some parts from me, especially after my father had come to New York to try and reclaim me. This, too, was the purpose of our visit to the top of the world. He needed to understand, completely, what he was inviting to his bed.

“There were children,” said Miali, when she realized that neither Ryan nor I was going to fill the silence. “Three of them. The last time I saw her was a week before the birth. She was gravid and starving, and she emptied my pantry and told me that he was going to kill her. She sounded so...so calm. So resigned. ‘I cannot allow him to eat another litter unchallenged,’ that’s what she said. I begged her to stay with me. To have her babies at my hearth, and raise them here, where they would still be cold, but wouldn’t have to be frozen through. She refused. She said she was more waheela than I was, and that she couldn’t bear the fire. And she went back to him, and he tore out her throat when she didn’t give him the babies for his feast.”
“He ate her?” Ryan sounded horrified, and disbelieving, like this didn’t fit with any of his conceptions of the world. But he knew I had come from a litter of five. He knew that waheela parents, when the cold was deep, would eat their young. I frowned at him.

Ryan caught my expression and shook his head. “I know you told me all this, Izzy. It just seemed… far away when we were at home. Like it couldn’t be real.”

“I do not lie,” I said stiffly.

“I know,” he said. He shook his head again, harder this time. “It wasn’t a matter of thinking that you were lying to me. More like… this can’t be real, there has to be some hidden meaning to it.’ Only I guess that’s not so.”

“Has she told you what it is to be waheela?” The human warmth had entirely dropped from Miali’s voice, replaced by the cutting cold of the wind blowing over the tundra. It was almost comforting, hearing someone else talk like that. It was also terrifying. I did not—I didn’t—want to go back. That was the way things had been, not the way things were. Not the way things were ever going to be for me again.

“She’s told me a lot,” said Ryan.

“Telling and seeing are never the same,” said Miali. The kettle began to whistle. She turned and took it off the stove, saying, “I don’t know what happened to the pups. He may have kept them alive, since he wouldn’t have been hungry anymore, but they may have starved to death, since their mother was gone and they wouldn’t have been weaned. It depends on your brothers, Istas. If they felt like nurturing another generation, they might have gone scavenging for milk.”

“Did any nursing mothers disappear from town?” That, too, was part of the waheela way. Human women could give milk just as well as waheela women could, with the benefit of raising a litter that felt no loyalty to one parent over another. Many waheela males disliked children, not because they resented the loss of their mate’s attention, but because there was always the chance of a jealous son devouring his father out of love for his mother. Bringing in a human wet nurse meant the babies would be fed, and fed again, when they were finally weaned.

Miali didn’t smile as she turned to set a cup of tea in front of me. “Yes,” she said. “Near eight months ago. The pups will be weaning soon, and beginning to go through their changes.”

Waheela were always dangerous, but pups in the process of weaning were dangerous for a whole different reason. They didn’t understand their bodies, which changed around them in new and painful ways. They lashed out, cutting and clawing. They bit down with their fine new teeth, which were strong enough to break stone. A waheela mother could stand it. A human surrogate…

“Why did you not call me? I learned of Mother’s death when Father came to find me. He said I was the eldest female now, and his mate. I would have come, if you had called me.”

Miali’s smile was sad, and very human. She leaned forward and twisted a curl of my hair between her fingers, revealing the pink streak that I had meticulously dyed into the bottom of it. “You look like my sister,” she said. “You look like my sister, and you did what even I couldn’t bring myself to do. I can learn to live like them, laugh like them, swallow the urge to taste their hearts, but you! You walked away, you took yourself to their greatest city and you lived among them and you didn’t kill any of them who didn’t require killing! Your letters fill me with hope for our species.”

“The north wind will keep those who keep themselves,” I said automatically.
“A pox on the north wind. The north wind can’t stop the world from warming, or the ice from melting, or the people from moving up when the waters rise,” said Miali. “I live in a roadhouse in Kugluktuk, but I have Internet, and I know about global warming. There will be a war between men and waheela if something doesn’t change, and while individual men will lose, the waheela will be lost. We are too concentrated, and too bestial.”

“So you did not call me because of global warming?” I asked blankly.

“I didn’t call you because you would have come, and I would have been responsible for you standing here, in this place, where the north wind might see you and remember that he loves you, and have you for his own,” said Miali. “I looked for the den, for the human woman who had disappeared. It seemed the proper thing to do. I didn’t find her. And I didn’t call you, and I’m not sorry.”

“I know, Aunt Miali.” I wrapped my hands around the mug of tea she had prepared for me, remembering all the hours I had spent in these places, holding these same cups. I had been a child in these rooms, safe from the cold, safe to dream of being something more. In a very real way, she had saved me. That was what I had brought Ryan to her to see. That we could be saved.

“Do you think you can find your father’s den?” she asked. “The woman had a baby before she was taken.”

“Of course she did. Without it, she would have had no milk to give.” Her scent would be long gone by now, shredded by the north wind to protect his children, and waheela have no scent to follow. That did not matter. I grew up in that den. I could find it.

I could bring her home.

We stood in the warm kitchen and drank our tea, and I prepared myself for what was yet to come. I could bring a human woman home, but it might be at the expense of ever going back myself—and if I wanted to be the woman I had come here to prove I was, I didn’t have a choice.

*

Together, Ryan and I walked across the frozen face of the world. We both walked in man-form, indistinguishable from any two people foolish enough to come this high, to walk this far. He shivered, although he tried to hide it, buried as he was in his warm synthetic skin. I no longer wore my coat. We were far enough from human civilization now that I didn’t have to pretend to fear the cold, and I couldn’t appear weak in front of my father. Not if I wanted to have any chance of winning this.

The meal Miali had pressed upon me before I left sat in my belly like a stone, heavy and sour and undigested. That didn’t stop my nose from twitching when the scent of a rabbit blew toward us on the wind, or keep my mouth from growing heavy with saliva. I could drop this façade of humanity at any time. I could transform myself into a beast that belonged here, and fill my mouth with teeth, and coat those teeth with blood. I had worked so hard, for so long, but my domestication would never be anything more than an ill-fitting coat. Every muscle I had ached to slip it off and run.

Then Ryan slid his hand into mine, and our fingers fit together like the seam at the heart of a glacier, and I remembered why I kept my coat in place. He deserved better than a monster. I deserved better than to become one.

“How far?” he asked. I could hear his teeth chattering, and wished—not for the first time—that I had been able to convince him to stay behind with Miali, where there was warmth, and light, and he
would not be walking through the Arctic darkness toward a hole filled with death.

“Another few miles,” I said, and took my hand away. “You might stand the cold better in fur. Change, and walk beside me.”

“I can’t talk to you when I’m in fur,” he said. “It’s a downside.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” In our man-forms, we had matching mouths, filled with blunt teeth and clever tongues. In our great-forms, his muzzle was longer and thinner than mine, which was closer akin to that of a bear than to any other creature that currently walked the world. The language of the tanuki was impossible for a waheela’s throat to craft, and the same applied in reverse: he could no more speak to me than I could speak to him. I would have to learn his language eventually, in order to understand our children, but I would never know what it was to speak it from the inside.

The world, which sometimes seemed so small, was vast enough that there would always be things I could not experience for myself. There was something comforting in that thought. I continued walking.

“Istas?”

“Yes?”

“What happens when we get there?”

“I had wondered when you would ask me this question,” I said, and squeezed his hand before letting it go. “You will stay outside. I will go inside. Hopefully, I will come out again.”

“Uh, no,” said Ryan.

I turned to blink at him. “No?”

“No. Izzy, I don’t know what you think being married means, but for me, it means I don’t let you walk into a murder den for fun, and stand outside to see whether you survive. That’s…that’s not okay. I can’t do that. I won’t do that. Don’t ask me to.”

“This is not your fight.”

“This became my fight the day I asked if you wanted to get a cup of coffee,” said Ryan. “If you didn’t want me here with you now, you should have said ‘no’ to me back then.”

I frowned. “Agreeing to coffee did not mean I granted you consent to the rest of my life.”

“No, but it did mean you let me in, and once you did that, loving you was sort of inevitable,” said Ryan. “You never told me to stop. You’re not going to do it now.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because if you didn’t want me here, you would never have let me on the plane.”

His logic was sound: his reasons were good. They still made me want to snarl and snap at him, telling him that he was wrong, driving him away from me. He was a child of cities and civilization, and he didn’t understand what he was following me into. He needed to understand.

That was why he was here. He needed to see what I really was if he was going to marry me, love me,
get children upon me. I needed to know that there were no lies lingering between us, and this was the best way to make that knowledge plain.

“You may come inside with me,” I said, and the howling of the wind nearly stole my voice away. “You may fight my brothers, if they corner you. But do not raise your voice or show your throat to my father, and if he strikes me down, you must run. Promise me you’ll run.”

“I promise,” said Ryan, sounding subdued.

“Then I can let you stay.”

We walked on, leaving no lasting marks on the skin of the world. The wind blew behind us, erasing our footsteps. I had angled our route subtly, keeping the wind between us and our destination. I had no scent, but Ryan was less lucky; my father would smell him coming a mile away if he was given the opportunity. I wanted to ambush, not suffer the fruits of same.

When we were a quarter of a mile from our destination I stopped, removed my backpack, and began to strip naked. Ryan stared for a moment, apparently stunned by the sight of naked flesh against the frozen earth. Then he cleared his throat.

“Uh, Izzy? Do I have to get naked too?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I have a change of clothing for you, should what you are presently wearing not survive the encounter with my family. But unlike me, you are susceptible to frostbite.” My skin was singing, covered in tiny, stinging needles of ice and glorifying in the touch of the frozen wind. I removed my under garments, tucking them into the pack. Now all of me was naked beneath the sky.

Nearly a decade after leaving, I was finally, utterly home.

“Yeah, there’s that,” said Ryan. “I might lose bits.”

“I will only lose them if someone else removes them.” I dropped to my knees in the snow and proceeded to roll, covering myself thoroughly. When I stood to brush myself off, Ryan was staring. “Waheela have no scent, but baby powder does,” I explained. “I wish to be sure that I am carrying no foreign odors on my skin.”

“So you’re rolling in the snow.”

I smiled. “It’s quite refreshing.”

“I’m sure it is.” Ryan smiled back. “Let’s hope our kids get your cold tolerance, huh? You’ll put a whole new spin on the phrase ‘cool mom.’”

“Yes,” I agreed, and resumed walking, a little faster now that there were no boots between the soles of my feet and the snow. It was like the land itself was giving me strength, welcoming me home by helping me to do what must be done. By the time the old, familiar shape of the hill that housed my family loomed into view, I was all but running. Ryan had dropped some distance behind me, struggling to keep up, but ah. I was always faster than he was. Here, in my native terrain, in the place where I was made, I could have outrun the wind.

I love you, I thought. If I have lied to you, it is because I love you. And then the opening to the den was before me, half hidden by a boulder but visible to one who knew where to look. I dove inside, squeezing through the opening, and into my personal hell.
Waheela den in family groups: eldest male, eldest female, and their unmated children. It is less a matter of companionship or affection, and more a matter of keeping the larder full and close to hand. All know that they are meat for the next largest in the den, and still most do not leave, for the largest among us protect their stockpiles. A parent will fight to the death for a child, if only so that the privilege of eating them may remain where it belongs. We are always in danger. Most simply prefer the danger from within to the danger without.

The den of my family was carved into the rock, gnawed into its current size and shape by the teeth of a dozen generations of breeding males. It was large enough to house a dozen of us, supported by pillars of unbroken stone. A fire burned in one corner, under a natural vent. It still flavored the air with its smoky, peaty taste, making it difficult to breathe. I stopped a few feet past the entrance, letting my eyes adjust, allowing those within the den to get their first proper look at me.

“Istas.” My father rose from a pile of half rotted furs, some of them clinging to his body for a moment before dropping away. He was as naked as I was, as my brothers were; I could see both of them behind him, still tangled in the furs. “You returned.”

“I am the eldest female,” I said.

He smiled, teeth glinting white in the smoky darkness. “I told you that you were. You are the eldest female, and I am the eldest male.”

“Yes.”

“You are mine.”

“No.” I inclined my head slightly. “I am here to tell you that I decline. I will not be your mate, or the mother to your children. I will be the wife of a man who does not believe that divorces are best performed with teeth, and I will be taking the human woman you have stolen back to Kugluktuk with me. Her family misses her.”

There was a faint whimper from the back of the den, in the dark place where the light did not reach. She was still alive then: good. Miali would be pleased.

My father seemed to stand a little straighter, growing taller and more substantial. It was not a trick of the light: he was calling upon his great-form, using it to lend him strength. “You are here now. What makes you think I would let you leave again?”

“I did not think you would let me,” I said. I heard footsteps behind me, accompanied by the size of a body burdened by clothing squeezing through the opening. Good. I did not want him to see—oh sweet, cruel north wind, I did not want him to see—but he needed to. He needed to understand, all the way down to his bones, what he was marrying into.

My bones grew first, sheathed by a layer of swiftly increasing muscle. The pain was brief and intense: a kiss from the north wind. Then the hormones designed to shield me from the change washed the pain away, and the world went red, even as my mouth grew heavy with teeth and my hands became paws intended to rip out the throat of the world.

I roared. My father answered the sound with a snarl, but did not lunge. He held his ground, digging his paws into the soil and refusing to be moved. Good. That was good. I forced the thought through the red. It was good that he did not move, because I didn’t want to kill him.
Not alone.

<< Brothers, heed, >> I barked and yipped. The language of the waheela is simple, and given little to nuance. It’s why I had such trouble with human idiom, the way they said things other than what they meant, the way they shortened words seemingly at random. With a language—with a thousand languages—devoted to subtlety, why would they ever want to refuse a syllable’s strength? << Eldest, yes, but not best. His mate, eaten. Your mother, eaten. Your mates, where are they? No mates. Why not? Because him. Because he says no. Brothers, heed. Brothers, help. >>

<< Silence! >> barked our father. He hunched his shoulders and bristled his fur, and he seemed as large as the mountains. He could have eclipsed the sky, had he been outside and not confined. That was why it had to be here. I could allow him no advantages, or he would turn them on me.

<< Brothers, hunt, >> I snarled, and leapt. My father leapt at the same time, and we met in the middle of the den, a roiling ball of shadows and violence.

His claws found my shoulder, cutting deep, despite the layers of fur and fat that were intended to protect me. I twisted in his grasp, digging for his throat as I shoved my muzzle up under his neck. He responded by slamming me backward, almost knocking me across the den.

“Izzy!”

Ryan’s voice was thick with his impending change. I whipped around and snarled at him, showing him my bloodied teeth. He froze, shrinking down so that the seams of his clothing no longer strained to contain him. This was not his fight. Not while I still had strength to make it mine.

The momentary distraction he had created could easily have proven fatal. My father slammed into me from the side, clawing and biting at my unprotected belly. I kicked him away, and was rewarded with a pained snarl. Then the fight was rejoined in earnest. My teeth crunched on an ear. He howled.

The eldest of my brothers bounded out of the back of the den in his great-form, his eyes glowing red in the dimness. I snarled at him, not warning, but not inviting, either. He snarled back, and grabbed Father’s hind leg in his jaws, biting down until bone snapped. Father howled again. Brother roared. Then my younger brother came out of the dark, and the three of us fell upon the beast that had sired us, and all was ripping and tearing and the taste of blood on my tongue.

I looked back once, to see if Ryan was watching. He stood in the entryway to the den, and his face was a mask. He turned away as I looked at him. He went back outside.

I returned to my father’s body. Some things must be seen through to the end. To do otherwise would be disrespectful to the dead.

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Waheela are not great advocates of cleanliness. After my father was gone, I returned to man-form and used some of the dryer furs to wipe the bulk of the blood from my face and hands.

“The cubs,” I asked. “Are they weaned?”

“Close to,” said my oldest brother.

“Good. Take them to our aunt. Irniq will take the woman back to the city.”

Now my oldest brother frowned. “What if she tells what happened to her?”
“She will not. No one would believe her, and if they did, they would never find you. Our aunt will care for the cubs. You and Irniq will be free to find mates.”

His frown deepened. “You will not stay?”

I smiled. There had been a time…but I had been very long among the humans, and the thought of mating with one who had shared my litter was repugnant to me now. Perhaps I was more domesticated than I believed myself to be. “I came here to rid myself of a mate I could not love. Do not put yourself in that same place.”

Siluk looked at me for a long moment before reaching out and buffing the back of his knuckles against my cheek. He left a smear of blood behind. I didn’t wipe it away. “You have done well, sister.”

“You will do better,” I said. “Do not make me come to you again. No more human women. No more dead mothers.”

“I will try,” he said, and I nodded, because that was all he could promise, here at the top of the world, where the north wind was so close and the sky was so cold. He would try. I could ask for nothing more, and so I turned and walked away from him, back to the den mouth, and to the rising sun outside.

Ryan was sitting on a boulder some ten feet from the den opening. I stopped when I saw him, my heart hammering in my chest. I had half expected him to be gone, running for the horizon and the promise of a world where things like this didn’t happen: where monsters were easier to see. My feet made no sound against the snow as I walked to him.

Blood, no matter what it comes from, has a scent. Ryan’s nostrils flared as he turned to look at me, taking in my red-spattered skin and the gore matting down my hair. “Is it over?”

“Yes,” I said. “Are we?”

“Izzy…” He stood, moving as if to offer me his hands. Then he stopped, and let them fall back to his sides. “Did you bring me out here so I would see this?”

“Yes. You had to understand.” I cocked my head. “Do you understand?”

“I think so. I mean…you won’t…if we ever decide not to be together anymore, that’s not how we’ll end it, right?” There was fear in his voice, and while it hurt me, it also reassured me. He would have been a fool not to have been afraid.

“If you wish to leave me, I will let you leave,” I said softly. “Always. I am domesticated now. You have helped with that process, whether you intended to or no. But you needed to understand the top of the world before you could live with me in warmer lands. I needed to kill my father before I could be your wife.”

“Two birds with one stone,” said Ryan. “I guess…yeah, I guess I understand. Let’s just not tell my mom about this, okay? I don’t think she’d really get it.”

Then he smiled. It was hesitant and shaky, but it was real, and it was for me. I stared at him for a moment, stunned. I had thought that I might never see him smile again.

I took a step forward. Ryan took a step back.
“Love you, looking forward to proving that once we get to a hotel, but you are covered in blood and I don’t want to get arrested at the city limits,” he said. “Can we hug when you’re less, you know, sticky?”

I blinked at him. Behind me, I heard cubs crying: my brother was getting them ready to move. I would have to meet them, before Ryan and I returned home. I had new siblings. There were still waheela in the world. My brothers were free of my father, free to seek mates and futures of their own. And my tanuki still loved me.

“Yes,” I said. “We can.”

“Cool. So can we get married now?”

This time, the smile was mine. “Yes,” I said again. “We can.”