

The Boy and the Cat

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I sat at the edge of the pit and dipped my toes in the murky water. It rippled, and I tilted my head to the side to ponder its movement.

Maya stretched her long body forward until her nose just barely tapped the surface. The ripples she made were smaller but it was a reaction nonetheless. In that moment, I decided that water was different than people; I could count on the response of the water to remain relatively consistent. In my past experience, humans weren't like that. My sister once inexplicably jumped in a pond the same mucky color, causing my mother to shriek and yank her out. She ended up covered in sooty mud anyway... But that was years ago – before everything escalated, before I was a run away with a stray cat. Nowadays, ever since the war began, it seemed like everything was covered in soot.

I ruffled Maya's fur, its natural snowy color concealed by all the dirt and grime. Briefly, I entertained the idea of plopping her into the pool entirely, but thought better of it. She was my sole companion, so I wanted her on my good side. As she purred in assurance, a fly buzzed around her, landing on a particularly dark spot of her coat. Scrunching up my face, I flicked it away.

“When's the last time you were washed?”

We'd been on the run for weeks now, at least it must have been somewhere close to that. I'd been counting the number of times I saw the moon in the beginning, but somewhere along the way I must have lost interest. The only thing I knew was that many moons had passed since I'd taken Maya and ran from the Survival Training Facility. Leaving had been a suicide mission at best, and it seemed like a good idea at the time. Now, I wasn't so sure. But I didn't have a choice; I couldn't go back. All I could do was continue on and use the skills I'd learned during my stay at the Facility.

Either way, I couldn't remember the last time I had truly bathed.

I sloshed the water around with my feet and watched the waves appear on the reflection of Maya's white furry face, and then I dared study my own. As the water stilled, I saw that to my surprise I looked mostly the same. The same greyish eyes. The same dark hair. The same pointed cheekbones. The only new feature was a scratch across my left cheek, but I figured this was part of what came with being a runaway.

Leaning forward and cupping some water in my hands, I began to wash my face, smoothing the dirty water especially into that nook between my inner cheek and the rim of my nose. I nearly got it in my mouth! Perhaps it wouldn't taste as bad as it looked, but I didn't let it tempt me.

Despite the muck of the water source, my face felt fresher as I lathered it with the slimy, silky liquid. Surely the pond could have been a bit more pristine itself, but it did the job of getting off the dirt and for that I was satisfied. I imagined the surface of the water rising higher around me until it was level with my belly button. And then a bit higher.

I could nearly feel its form hugging my body, soaking into my parched skin.

Screw it. I took off my shirt, unzipped my damp khaki shorts, and plunged into the pond with a splash that made Maya recoil. My unkempt hair slapped my back as I swung my head up and rubbed my eyes, watching as Maya became less blurry.

Determined to share the exhilaration, I decided a bath would be good for. Scooping the cat up in my arms, I positioned her over the water, "You're up."