

# THE QUARRY

## Cattails

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Seaweed sat at the head of the table, staring at me. Her eyes were gold coins against her black fur and her blinks were slow and deliberate as if she were evaluating me. There was nothing remotely seaweed-ish about her but it was just like Grandma to give random names to her strays. I always complained when she brought home a stray, not because I didn't like cats, but because our village was awash with them and they were usually left to wander the streets on their own. It was dangerous to raise a cat. If you kept one for longer than seven years, it would grow up to crave human flesh. However, Grandma had saved Seaweed from the thunderstorm a few days ago, bursting through the door with Seaweed stuffed under her jacket, both of them dripping rain onto the wooden floorboards. Seaweed's ear had been torn and bloody and so I'd said nothing. I was now regretting that.

Grandma was in the kitchen making dinner. From the way the house turned to saltwater, I could tell it was some sort of seafood. Though it made Seaweed's nose twitch, she stayed seated to continue studying me. The stitches in her ear glinted as

she tilted her head. What did she think of me? She had been like this since she got here. I stood up, glancing at her over my shoulder as I slid on some slippers and joined Grandma in the kitchen. Grandma didn't enjoy company while she cooked but I needed a break from all the staring. I watched her drag a prawn through tempura batter and dunk it into a pot of shimmering oil with her chopsticks. The crackling filled the entire room. A pot of clear soup was boiling on the next burner. As Grandma tended to it, I reached for the jar of biscuits in the corner.

'Ah!' she scolded, her eyes on the soup. I snatched my hand away. She clicked the stove off and wobbled past me, using oven mitts to carry the large pot to the short-legged table in the living room. I followed her. 'Hurry while it's still hot,' she said, shoving a spoon at me. The soup was still bubbling and I didn't think it would cool down anytime soon in such hot weather but I sat down on the floor across from Seaweed anyway. I was hungry. I stirred the pot, kicking up bits of silken tofu and Chinese cabbage, then blew on my spoon for a while before it was safe to put in my mouth. Grandma fetched a saucer and filled it with some soup for Seaweed.

'I thought cats aren't allowed to eat human food,' I said.

'Tch. Human food, cat food.' She waved a hand.

Seaweed set her front paws on the table for leverage and lapped at the saucer with her tiny tongue, eyes flicking up to look at me every now and again. I frowned and glanced at Grandma but she didn't say anything. When Seaweed was done, she pawed at Grandma's sleeve.

'Don't give her any more,' I said.

'Why not?' Grandma said, already reaching for the pot. 'She won't die.'

'It's not good for her either.'

'Oh, so you like her now?'

I looked out the glass sliding door.

Satisfied, Grandma left to check on the rest of the food. Something clattered and I turned to see Seaweed pushing her empty saucer away from her. Her tongue came out to clean her claws before she looked up at me. She arched an eyebrow. I looked away, then looked back again. She had an eyebrow. It was arched. I opened my mouth

but what was there to say to a cat? She rolled her eyes and returned to grooming herself. Grandma came back with the rice and prawns, as well as a can of tuna.

‘Did you see that?’ I asked.

‘See what? Move the pot, will you?’

It felt silly to say it out loud—cats don’t even have eyebrows—so I just shook my head and pushed the pot to the side. As Grandma set the table, I scooped out the tuna onto Seaweed’s dish and set it on the floor beside her. If she had any complaints about no longer eating from the table, I wasn’t made aware. Grandma and I ate with the radio playing in the background. Two men with scratchy voices were performing a skit, one of them pretending to want a pet parrot. I didn’t understand the humour of it but, once or twice, Grandma let out a little laugh through her nose.

A sharp, black smell came from the kitchen.

Grandma gasped. ‘The red beans!’ She leapt up and disappeared behind the wall, muttering curse words that would have earned me a smack on the head if I’d said them. I listened to the racket before deciding she would be a while and therefore the last prawn was mine for the taking. I picked it up with my chopsticks but a black paw shoved my hand away. The prawn bounced onto the ground. Seaweed darted for it and swept it into her mouth. She sat there for a moment, her back to me as she chewed, then turned around and gave me a smug smile.

‘Grandma!’

‘What?’ she snapped.

‘Your cat stole my prawn.’

With a huff, she appeared at the doorway, wisps of grey hair escaping her bun. ‘I leave you alone for a second,’ she said. She returned to the table and sighed. ‘Dessert’s ruined.’

I looked at Seaweed, who seemed pleased with the change of topic, and said, ‘Should I go grab something from the store?’

‘For yourself,’ Grandma said, leaning over to turn up the volume of the radio. ‘I don’t feel like it anymore.’

I got up and grabbed my wallet. It would have felt incomplete ending the day without something sweet. At the movement, Seaweed raised her head and unfurled herself from her position against the table leg. She trotted over to me. Grandma didn't comment on it so neither did I. I went over to the shoe rack and tucked my feet into a pair of ratty sneakers while Seaweed sat on the doormat, her tail swaying left and right as she waited. The sun was just beginning to set. She followed as I locked the door and set off down the porch steps. The dish of tuna that Grandma laid out every night by the front gate was untouched. This was probably the fifth night in a row that a stray hadn't come around our area. Maybe there would be another storm. Seaweed sniffed at the plate but was otherwise uninterested. There was only so much tuna a cat could fit in.

The gravel path naturally fed into the street on which all the shops sat. Everything was still open except for the florist. Mr Okada, who owned the place, was around the same age as Grandma and lived next door to us. He enjoyed leaving work early to spend the night tending to his garden. I wondered why. He had nothing but cattails sprouting in his yard. The tails were edible but did they even taste any good?

Seaweed was the only cat on the street. I didn't know if she was on edge because of it but she stayed close to my feet like a shadow as I approached the vendor selling shaved ice. It was right outside the little convenience store, both of which were manned by Ken. Ken had bleached hair, which he liked to push back with a headband. It made the ends fan out from his head like rays of the sun. He was sitting behind the counter, a cigarette dangling out of his mouth when he spotted me through the open door.

'Oh, Mio,' he said, coming out to start work on an ice cone. 'Blue?'

'Yes please,' I said. I watched him drizzle some blue syrup onto flakes of papery ice before I noticed Seaweed fixated on the pastry case inside the store. It was empty save for a single stuffed pancake shaped like a fish. 'You're selling them in summer?' I asked Ken. They were best in winter when they were warm between your hands.

'Had some red bean paste that was gonna expire,' Ken said. He handed me my cone and I gave him enough coins to pay for the fish cake as well. He put the cake

into a white paper bag and then went back to his crossword puzzle after I thanked him and began walking home. Seaweed trailed after, staring at the paper bag.

‘What? You want some?’

She nodded.

I had resorted to talking to a cat and now it was actually responding.

The dough broke apart with a crunch as I tore the fish in two. Steam curled up from the red bean paste within, ashen against the darkening sky. I bent down to offer Seaweed both halves to see which she would pick. The head was swollen with red beans, the tail thin and crispy with little filling. The tail was my favourite.

Seaweed nipped the head between her teeth and dragged it off my palm, continuing the walk home. I put the tail back into the bag and began to eat my shaved ice. It was already melting.

Mr Okada was outside his wooden house, waist-deep in cattails when we approached. Hearing my shoes crunch on the gravel, he looked up. He regarded Seaweed with thin eyes. He had never liked cats much despite living here his whole life, so he and Grandma didn’t get along. Still, I bowed and he nodded. Seaweed stared holes into him until I nudged her up the path with my foot. She climbed the steps to our house and waited as I took off my shoes, keeping her eyes on him the whole time. There was a rustle and then a grunt. I looked up as Mr Okada plunged his hand into the cattails and brought out a muskrat. He squeezed it between his fingers. It struggled against him, long claws scratching at the material of his glove. He tightened his hold until Seaweed hissed and he remembered that we were watching. He opened his hand. The muskrat scrambled through his yard and fled into the grove behind our street. Scooping Seaweed up, I rushed inside.

Grandma was washing the dishes. The radio was still on, now playing an old song, and the pot that had once held our dessert was soaking in the sink. Seaweed jumped out of my arms to finish her fish cake at the table. I threw the plastic cone from my shaved ice into the bin.

‘What’s with that look on your face?’ Grandma asked. I shook my head. She spent a moment examining me, then lifted her hands out of the sink to shake them dry.

She went over to a drawer and took out a matchbox, passing it to me. ‘Light the lantern outside, will you?’

Seaweed lifted her head when she saw me walking back outside and dashed to follow. I raised my eyebrow. I still couldn’t figure her out.

I crouched down to the little lamp sitting beside the post on our porch. Mr Okada had returned inside his house. The polished wood attracted cuts of moonlight that were painful to look at for too long. I struck a match and held it to the wick, letting a flame form. A pair of paws landed on my thigh. I looked at Seaweed but she was looking at Mr Okada’s house. He was old-fashioned and used sardine oil to light his lantern. On humid nights like this, the smell clung to the air.

She ran towards it.

‘Hey!’ I shot up. The cattails parted where she stepped until she disappeared into Mr Okada’s backyard, leaving me with nothing but the sound of crickets. I had no choice but to follow. If she wasn’t interested in the lantern, what had caught her attention?

I pushed away the cattails as best as I could. The heads, usually rough, were now starting to burst with cottony hairs that raised goose bumps on my arms. The ground was muddy and it was only then that I realised I had forgotten to put on my shoes, but it was pointless to turn back now. I took the same path Seaweed had, the mud slowly giving way to soil and then grass as I rounded the corner and entered the backyard.

A giant plum tree stood erect in the middle of the garden, bulbs of deep purple fruit hanging from the branches. One plum began to move down the branch until it landed on the grass and I saw that it was Seaweed.

‘You’re in serious trouble,’ I whispered, marching towards her. She ignored me. ‘Hey, are you li—’

A yowl cut me off.

The back door burst open and Mr Okada came down the steps. He stopped when he saw us. In his hand was something long and white, flecks of red at one end. The expression on his face was unreadable and I realised he was holding a cat’s tail, newly chopped off. He dropped it. It landed on the deck with a dull thud. His eyebrows drew

together, the corners of his mouth pulled down, revealing yellow teeth, and his wrinkles grew even deeper as anger took over his face.

A strangled sound escaped me and I stumbled back.

‘You... the cats...’

He seized my wrist, his long fingernails cutting my skin. He might have said something but the image of that long line of white fur flushed my ears with blood. He began to drag me into his house. I pushed against his hunched back but he dug his nails deeper into my flesh.

‘Let her go,’ said Seaweed.

We both stopped.

Mr Okada turned to face her, the silver wisps of hair on his chin trembling. ‘What did you say?’ he asked. His voice was barely there.

‘Are you deaf?’ Seaweed said.

I ripped my hand out of his grasp and tripped down the stairs, gathering Seaweed to my chest and sprinting over the grass, across the soil and through the cattails. Cold sweat pricked my forehead. With muddy feet, I raced up the porch steps of Grandma’s house to the front door. My hand was shaking as it tried to twist the doorknob. I forced myself not to look back, not to think about the sickening brush of those cotton tails against my elbows.

The door opened and I tumbled inside, Seaweed jumping out of the way before she was crushed beneath me.

‘Heavens,’ Grandma said, ‘what happened to you?’

I looked up at her but it was like a film of oil was covering my eyes. ‘Mr ...’ My throat closed in on itself.

‘God,’ she said, pulling me up. ‘Let’s get you to the bathhouse.’ She thumbed away my tears and left in the direction of her bedroom. Seaweed stroked my calf with her paw. I looked down into her golden eyes as she nestled on top of my feet and began to purr. For now, I would get clean. Everything else would have to be dealt with after.