

Feast

Riverton Grove was never crowded.

It wasn't special; and so Jack Porter and his wife Martha weren't special either.

They had grown up together, become adults together, and so decided to spend the rest of their lives the same way. Riverton Grove was all they had ever known, all anyone had ever known. To them, this was how life was.

Jack was in his mid-30s, tall and slightly on the larger side, an average man living in an average town. Martha was short where he was tall, petite where he was large, and had an effervescent personality that complimented Jack's diffidence.

The Grove really did love visitors. It was a tiny farming town, small enough for one to recognize people on the street, but yet large enough for one not to say hi to them.

It was the morning of June 21st, the day that marked the summer solstice, but the townsfolk had no idea what that was. To them, it was the day of Feast.

Feast had been a tradition since Riverton Grove's founding during the Great Shortage. In a time when food was scarce and knowledge of the land even more so, what few farmers remained moved to a place with fertile soil. The one thing the Grove lacked was livestock, and so meat would be had only once a year.

Jack woke up early to the chirping of birds, and Martha woke to Jack's heavy footsteps. They ate breakfast, oatmeal, and then began to walk to the square.

Mrs. Hargrove was 106 years old, but no one knew for sure. Some said that she was old enough to have witnessed the founding of the Grove, while others said that she was old enough to have been instrumental in it.

She had been a young girl when the bomb was dropped, but she would never forget that silver flash. A thunderclap and a mushroom cloud, then everything disappeared. All that was left was barren land. For years after, in the time that would come to be known as the Great Shortage, food that hadn't been poisoned was treasured, and animals like cattle were things of the past. The Grove had been born from these ashes, from a group of people who were willing to do what was needed to survive.

Her husband had been Chosen once, leaving her alone, but she preferred it that way. If she had learned one thing in her time in the Grove, it was that it was best not to get attached. She lived on the edge of town, an idea that seemed practical when she was younger and worked the land. She was far past working age now, but she refused to move, habit surpassing common sense.

She woke early, before the sun had begun to rise. Her pace was slow and deliberate, savoring the quiet. She liked the empty streets, the solitude giving her a sense of security in the fact that there was no one left to leave her.

The Grove woke as the Porters walked through the town.

They lived at the end of a blind street, their only neighbours young couples with young children. They were headed to the square as well, the parents smiling despite the worry clouding their eyes. Their children ran ahead.

"Come on, come on, we're gonna be late!" One of them said.

Martha smiled. She had always loved kids.

"That could still be us." She said quietly, her head resting on Jack's shoulder. Jack smiled, and nodded in agreement.

They continued on.

Mr. Evans was happy all the time, but today, he was at his happiest.

He walked through the crowd assembled at the village square, his wide smile making his excitement clear. They parted as he walked slowly towards the platform at the center.

A big one, he thought. A big one this time.

Mr. Evans had an important job, one that he took great pride in. He was responsible for the Choosing.

In the streets, children were playing Grab outside their homes, laughing and shouting as they chased after whoever was chosen that round. Their parents looked on, calling halfheartedly that they were running late, as if they didn't want to go at all. People wore cheap t-shirts with cheap slogans like *Licensed to Grill*.

The village square was a small cobblestoned space, but it was never full. There was always just enough space for everyone. It was lined by a few shops selling souvenirs to tourists who never had and never would visit. It was the site of the Sunday Market, where those too old to work in the fields would use their ration cards to 'buy' food. It was also the site of the Choosing, and in preparation, a small wooden platform had been erected at its center. On the platform was a microphone, and beside it a large barrel.

The Porters arrived as the ceremony began, greeted by an old recording of a trumpet piece. About halfway through, the century old record player gave out, no longer able to keep up its fight against the inevitable. A hush spread over the crowd, filling every corner until the dropping of a pin became a gunshot. A tall bespectacled Mr. Evans stepped onto the platform, smoothing his oily hair back and fixing his equally greasy mustache. He wore a tailcoat and a cheshire smile, darkness dancing behind his eyes.

Wordlessly, he reached his hand into the barrel, his eyes remaining fixated on the crowd assembled before him. He pulled his hand out, unfurled the slip of paper, and spoke two words.

"Jack Porter."

His voice was unwavering, devoid of emotion. Everyone knew Jack, but no one spoke up. This was how it always had been, and this was how it always would be. Jack stood amongst the crowd, his stony expression breaking into a smile. A ripple passed through the crowd around him as people slowly turned to face him, those near him stepping away, those further stepping closer.

Someone gave the record player a kick, and the music piped up again. The crowd roared, and lifted Jack onto their shoulders. They carried him to the platform, and thrust him in front of the microphone.

“H-hello?”

The crowd cheered.

“I j-just want to thank you for th-this honor, and I want y-you to know that I i-intend to p-perform my duty to the best of my ability, and..” Jack trailed off.

Mr. Evans stepped up to the mike, and spoke calmly and authoritatively.

“To do one’s duty is to eat the prized fruit of honor. Thank you, Jack Porter.” He said.

It’s a big one, he thought.

Jack was being celebrated, but Martha was nowhere to be found.

He had spent the day like a king, being revered throughout the town. It was coming to an end now, but he would remember this day for the rest of his life.

The townsfolk thronged the streets, cheering and chanting his name. His eyes scanned the crowd for his wife, one last look before he was taken to Feast, but she was nowhere to be found.

His eyes moved faster, his breathing shallower, panic rising in his throat.

The crowd began to chant louder, not his name, but the word Feast.

Then he found Martha, but she looked away.

The chanting became louder, but they weren’t saying Feast anymore.

They were shouting *Eat*.

The scent of roasting meat wafted through the evening air, the townspeople laughing and joking. They were sitting at long picnic tables, striking up casual conversation with their neighbours as they waited for the meal to arrive. And then, it did.

Every resident was given a single piece. Some chose to savor it, others choosing to scarf it down. Martha refused. Mrs. Hargrove sat alone, eating slowly, as she did with most things in life. Once finished, she rose to her feet, pottering down the rows of tables and leaving the Feast with its laughter and merriment behind. She walked home slowly, as the streets were empty.

It was never crowded in Riverton Grove.