

“*Feast.*”

Callisto meets Famine during the summer.

In the arid August heat, she lies on her back in the middle of a field, screaming and cursing her luck under an empty sky. It’s not unexpected for a fragment of your soul to break off like that, manifesting itself as a type of pseudo-spirit. One in four people, or so the statistics said. That was how commonplace the experience was.

Of course, people wanted for the *one* to be them. It was special. Significant. An indicator of a person meant for great things, tapped into a parallel world that was otherwise invisible. They were respected, wise and otherworldly in their perceptions—lawmakers and politicians practically required their peers to possess a connection. You were more likely to receive the joining if there was a family history of it. This, of course, created a sort of aristocratic hierarchy that naturally fell into place as partners were selected for their bloodline.

Callisto doesn’t want to be the one writing laws or deciding the fates of the guilty or leading a country. But she thinks she still deserves the *option*. She still deserves the respect that comes with the joining, family trees be damned.

The top of the pyramid seems so far away from her life on the bottom steps. She often wondered if the bottom would look as far away if she were to stand at the top.

She’s not thinking about that at all when the blood stops roaring in her ears and she finally sits up. It takes effort to open her eyes, the surface of them having grown rough and dry like the dirt path she followed here.

She sits, forces herself forward and rests her weight on her hands. Burn grass pricks at her palms, crunching under flesh.

She sees Famine.

Instinctively, she knows what name to give it. Oh, she knows all too well, and how could she not? It's a part of Callisto, fragmented and given form.

This creature wouldn't garner the respect of anyone. Society would shun it as a reflex.

Sitting on haunches, it sort of looks like a man. Only if she squints, though, or was perhaps viewing it from a fair distance back. Its skin is greyish and sickly, with empty veins that alternate between bulging dehydration and delicate spiderweb patterns all over. Like a body preserved under a thick layer of moss and damp sediment then dried out in the sun, there isn't an ounce of fat to be seen. The veiny hide is stretched tight across sinewy limbs, stretched over bone sections and creasing at the joints. She can count the vertebrae where it hunches over, rising off its back like stones cutting through waves. This, however, is where it ceases to resemble anything human or alive.

From the bottom ribs to the pelvis, the flesh falls away. A gaping hole occupies the space instead, edges of skin frayed by disease. There is no way for it to contain organs within. The entrails fall out and drag on the ground alongside a viscous fluid, so dark it lacks in any colour she knows the name of. The fluid pools at Famine's feet and hands, gnarled instruments both. It churns and moves in slow waves, a mockery of life.

Callisto sees her reflection distorted in the fluid layered with the image of Famine's open underbelly.

She cannot see a face where a head should be. A burlap-like material tied off with a rusted chain acts as a hood. And perhaps the crudely cut out eye holes would be funny, if she could see anything reflected within them.

She stares. Famine stares back, to the best of Callisto's understanding.

It breathes. Without lungs, it breathes somehow—there is no room in the way its chest caves inwards for functional lungs. A low sound, like growling, rattles through her head. It's not actually audible; the sound comes from within her head.

The inside of her mouth is filled with the copper taste of blood from where she's been biting on her tongue.

“Is this because I forced it?”

Her voice is unrecognizable to her own ear; hoarse and tired.

These fragmented beings were supposed to be something that occurred naturally, like waterfalls or shooting stars. If it were meant to be, she would have simply seen it take shape and moved on with her day. But sometimes—

Sometimes you could pull them out early.

Sometimes you could force the growth, the introspection. Bring your body to its own limits, and see what protections the mind can conjure up. Deny your hunger, your thirst, sear meaningless shapes into your skin until something broke free from the suffering. It wasn't like these were baseless rumours. Several historical figures had done similar things. Usually during times of war and great upheaval. Callisto selfishly counted her own suffering alongside those tragedies.

Famine groans out a response, making words without a mouth or tongue. The black bile sputters and splashes out of its torso with the syllables, shriveled intestines swaying.

Callisto can't find a feeling in herself to label. The accounts she'd read all described it as an emotion akin to meeting your firstborn child or a soulmate. Instantaneous connection.

Immediate affection.

There is nothing.

Disappointment in herself, perhaps. Yes—definitely that. If nothing else, she could grieve for her own creation.

Crawling forward, Famine doesn't move when she approaches. It allows her to reach out and place a curious palm along its spine. She runs her fingers up the sharp bumps. The skin is just as leathery as it looks, and she feels like it would split if she were to try and cut it with a knife.

She has one on her person, tucked away and out of sight.

She could try it.

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She does not try it.

Callisto instead takes it home with her.

Famine does not understand her request to hide itself away. Or perhaps it does. Perhaps it actually is an intelligent beast, stunted by an inability to respond to her queries in a way she understands.

It does, eventually, dissolve itself into the air. She isn't fool enough to assume that means it's missing now; it will come back, whether it be at her command or at its own will.

It doesn't take her long to see Famine again.

Callisto beds over the yellowed apartment sink, hiding her wet face behind her hands. There's only cold water today. There's only ever cold water from her taps, but she's grateful for the sensation against the puffy skin under her eyes.

She raises her head with her eyes scrunched shut to keep the water out. It gets through the seal of skin anyway, smearing her vision.

Famine takes up all of the free space in the tub, filling the empty areas around her reflection as the world comes into focus again. She startles only out of obligation.

"Thank you," she says flatly. "For keeping out of sight."

It's the least she can do. Her parents never taught her how to receive guests, but she'd heard enough through her radio dramas to have an idea. Of course, those visitors were typically far more typical than this.

This time, the sound of rattled breathing is absent. Callisto looks at it through the mirror, lashes framed by lingering water droplets.

"Are you mad at me?"

Nothing.

"I didn't mean to bring you here."

More nothing.

"Are you planning on staying?"

The world around her exists in a vacuum. She has never tasted silence in this fashion before; the pipes under the sink no longer shake, the tap does not drip. The sound is smothered, Famine's presence becoming the only real thing in the bathroom.

Callisto bites her tongue again, filling her mouth with the same copper taste from before. The wound on the side of her mouth never heals, just like the blisters on her tendons and shallow

scabs on her hands. She doesn't look directly at the spirit. If she keeps her own eye contact safe with the reflective barrier of the mirror, she can stay impersonal.

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The spirit cannot eat.

This is what's unusual to her. Not the artificial nature of its birth, or the strange ambivalence she feels about the fact that it's in her house.

Famine cannot eat.

She's never read about anything like this before. Its kind didn't necessarily require the food for nutrients; it was more symbolic, or perhaps just an act of shared pleasure with their corporeal counterparts.

She offered the plate. It was her good plate—the one without the chips in it. She eats out of a disposable paper bowl, and knows it will only be so long before her meal ends up making the bottom too soggy for use.

“It's not a lot,” she warns, sliding the dish of salted grains and leftovers across the floor. Perhaps that was what it was like to have a dog. She wasn't certain; pet owners seemed considerably happier than she was.

Famine makes a noise, something breathy and scratchy and not at all like any word she's ever heard before.

The trickle of black liquid that's been steadily leaking onto her floor picks up its pace. Callisto scowls, with no idea how she's going to try and contain it all. Eventually, the neighbours downstairs might notice it leaking through their ceiling, and what could she say about that? That

it wasn't her fault? That she didn't court death beyond the outskirts to be something special?  
That this was all she had to show for it?

Callisto is starving. She eats while standing up. It's an unsatisfying, cheap dinner. She barely tastes it, swallowing down spoonfuls while staring at her guest. It's gone within five minutes.

*Are you satisfied?*

"Never." She runs the tip of her tongue over her lips, taking in the last memories of the salt.

She doesn't blink twice at the voice in her head. Or perhaps it's beyond it; the deafening silence from before still remains, sealing the apartment off from the rest of the world. Curtains move around an open window, which should mean city sounds traveling in on the wind. There is nothing.

*Eyes bigger than your stomach.*

"It'd be easier if it were just that. I don't know. It's a muscle I've never used." An organ, technically, but even those needed practice, didn't they?

*Nor I.*

"You can't help me," she concludes simply. It's not a question.

*Hunger and desperation rarely do.*

"But they should. That's drive, isn't it? That's how you get places?"

*One without the other. Perhaps.*

She sighs. Famine makes a noise that's possibly a version of the gesture.

"Why aren't you eating?" She asks. It's a fact that she's already confirmed in her own mind, but she wants to know why.

The echo of the answers ceases to function. Instead, it reaches forward, taking a handful of the food off the plate with a leathery claw. The chain from Famine's neck slithers off as its hand raises up, landing on the floor with all of the grace of a crumbling guard wall.

Callisto watches with sick curiosity, hoping for a glimpse of a face that never comes. It stays hidden behind the roughspun fabric.

She winces at what sounds like wet mounds of viscera being wrenched from bone, mixed with snapping and crunching and animalistic noises of euphoria. The black liquid is gushing forth now, covering the scuffed hardwood and settling into cracks along the baseboards. The neighbours were surely going to notice this, she *knows* it. The tearing sounds go on longer than they should, especially from that little handful of rice and giblets. All the while, the liquid continues, coating everything in sight.

It reaches her feet, reaching up her legs instead of just passively flowing around them. It's as close to boots as she'll probably ever see herself wearing. It's not wet or hot like she expected it to be—truthfully, she assumed it would be something like partially coagulated blood. But it's smooth and cool, like a stone polished stone.

Something more solid passes through the liquid's origin point.

The rice, sticky and compacted into a ball.

*Why*, Famine echoes. *Why, why, why, why why.*

“Oh,” is all she can think to say. That was why.

Never satisfied. Never full. Unable to hang onto anything properly, or wring resources of their values for her own use. It could eat anything it wanted, as much of it as it wanted, and it would still do nothing but add to the liquid void slowly filling the room.



She probably would have been able to eat that second portion, if she had asked. But she needed to see something awful instead. She needs to drown in it, feel it all around her so that she *understands*. What else would there be, after all? Had she been born lucky enough to be a valued aristocrat looking down from the top, there would be no concerns of a rising flood.

The liquid continues to flow. Famine rumbles, a sound like static in her ears. It overtakes the silence. It laps up her legs, hips, body. She presses a hand down onto the surface, unable to break the tension. It smells like scorch marks left on cotton.

*There will not be enough.*

*There will never be enough.*

*Is there enough?*

*Enough, enough, enough, enough.*

...

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*Are you hungry?*

*Then feast.*