

# A day at the market

Here's a bit of lore since I'm feeling a tad better (at least about my testing issues, I always have some worry gnawing at my gut).

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Hearthside does not have stores as they exist in the US, where you have a cart and shelves acting as both storage and display for products. For groceries, there are two separate businesses that are usually colocated. A market selling fresh produce and meats, and a grocery store selling premade, processed, and frozen items. The market is usually outside under a pavilion if climate permits, much like a farmers' market. The grocery store is more of a warehouse optimized for storage rather than sale.

Fresh produce and meats can vary in size and quality, so it makes sense that a shopper would want to smell, feel, and see them before buying. So such things have browsable market stalls. One box of processed snacks of a certain brand is the same as the next, so there's no reason to waste real estate to display them for the public. That said, sample booths such as one sees in Sam's Club and Costco are a common site between the open air market and the grocery store, so if you want to try that box of processed snacks before buying, you can.

A typical family shopping trip goes like this. You and your fellow sires and dams pile into the train to go from your house to the business district. You have 20 little mouths to feed, so there's a lot to buy. A few of the sires are wearing draft harnesses. You are carrying one or more collapsible carts that the sires will pull behind them like a team of oxen. All 20 of those furry little terrors are traveling with you. On Hearthside it's considered proper to take your pups along with you when doing family business.

Once you arrive, you fold out the carts and hitch them to the sires' draft harnesses. The sires will not be touching the food. There is a net hanging under a low roof. After washing their paws, the dams leap up and grab hold of this net with their rear paws and tail. They hang upside down with the clean forepaws used to sample the wares and the rear paws used to navigate around the market. The sires will follow along on the ground, ready to catch any produce tossed into the cart by the dams. You and your fellow parents work in parallel, scattering throughout the market to fetch fresh fruits, firefly honey, spiced wormcow meat, and some fermented steadtree fruit juice for the fast preceding an upcoming holy day.

Kits will cling to their parents' backs, either dam or sire, though it's considered healthy and stimulating for a kit to cling to the back of a leaping and brachiating parent, so you see many dams nimbly vaulting around, each with one or two little fluffballs holding fast to their back or belly.

While it is more common for the dams to gather the produce while the sires man the carts, this is by no means a hard and fast rule. Men tend to be larger and stronger, while women tend to be smaller, quicker and more nimble, so parents tend to settle into these roles, but you see plenty of

ladies pulling carts and gentlemen flying around above.

Haggling is common. A dam hangs down by her tail, brandishing a gourd in one paw, a fistful of plastic tokens in the other, both forelegs gesticulating energetically. A kit is snuggled into her chest, lulled into torpor by the thrumming of his dam's vigorous negotiation. The vendor's strange accent and hefty build betray his Sweetwater heritage. Hearthside has a sizeable immigrant population seeking a better life unattainable on the surface of Sweetwater, and these "salty pelts" often find themselves working as merchants.

Her transaction complete, the dam bounds off to find the next item on the shopping list. But the kit, stirred to alertness by her sudden movement, begins yipping hungrily. The dam makes her way to a row of nursing couches. She drops straight from the netting onto the couch, lies on her back, and cups the kit's tiny head in her forepaw. He licks enthusiastically at the lactation patch between her paw pads. Stimulated by the kit's saliva, the patch begins sweating bluish-white milk. Once the kit has lapped up his fill, the dam rolls off the couch, washes her paws and tail again, and then leaps up to resume her shopping spree.

Meanwhile, you've finished your allotted errand and are waiting just outside the pavilion for the rest of your childermoot.

"sample. free." yips a fellow to your right, gesturing down at a tray full of sweet cakes covered in some synthetic blue frosting that's just a couple atoms away from being plastic. He has the same chunky frame and smaller ears, but a completely different lilt to his voice. It seems like there are as many throats as there are people on Sweetwater.

You accept his offer, skewering a morsel with your claw and popping the cake in your mouth. Your kit peers curiously from between your ears at the glob of blue icing remaining on your paw pad. "Oh, here you go," you say with mock reluctance as you reach up and let her lick your paw clean.

"Too small!" the vendor grunts, his ears flattened in disapproval. "Only milk for one so young!"

You scent the air. "Well when you lay your egg you can feed your kid whatever you want," you say as you walk off to meet the rest of your childermoot, now wending their way ahead of you to the grocery store to pick up the rest of the week's necessities.

Compared to the chaotic din of the open market, the grocery store is a much quieter and more orderly affair. Normally there's a tidy line of folks waiting to pick up their orders, some made online ahead of time, others printed on a list of product IDs and quantities and handed to a clerk to process.

Today, however, there's a knot of folks clamoring around a towering figure. "It's a human!" an older fellow barks back at you, having smelled your curiosity as you approached. "I've worked with 'em before, but I never thought one would visit our little shire."

The human turns to you. "¡Oooo!" she coos, bending over you and reaching with her smooth, pentedactyl, furless forepaw toward your kit. "¡Qué Precioso!"

Your pheromones are shouting in protest at this unwanted intrusion but the human is oblivious. You take a step back and bare your teeth. "Do NOT touch my daughter!" You growl.

"¡Ay! ¡No tóquesla, porfa!" The older fellow has equipped a synth and is attempting to defuse the situation. He explains the woman's faux pas to her in her own language, of which you understand not a whisper. The old man seems fluent though, at least going by his rapid speech and the woman's long responses. He smells much more relaxed now. "Lo siento," she says repeatedly.

"No te preocupes," he says before turning to you. "She's real sorry. Humans have an odd fascination with furry critters, like to run their paws through their coat. 'petting' is what they call it. Ya see, humans don't got any fur of their own, as you can see, well ignoring that stuff on their head. But they used to have fur, back when they lived in trees and had proper rear paws for climbin'. Anyhoo, back then they used to pick bugs outta each other's coats. Allogroomin' is what they call it."

The man rambles on as the line inches forward, giving an unnecessarily comprehensive survey of human evolution and biology. "And that's where human babies come from!" He barks enthusiastically. "Ooh, Looks like I'm up." He approaches the window and hands the clerk his order. The employee disappears for a moment before returning with a box of the same blue snack cakes you sampled earlier. The old man hefts the box onto his back. "You gotta try these," he says patting the box with his tail.

"uh..." you stammer, still trying to process the old man's biology lecture. "Light, why can't they just lay eggs?" you grunt under your breath as the old man trots away.

"Next!" You hear the clerk barking behind you. You turn back to the window and pull a slip of paper from the wallet around your foreleg. You reach out to put the paper in the clerk's open paw but yank it back at the last second. "Oh, sorry, one more thing." You flick your writing claw a few times and scribble a number onto the paper, then hand it back to the clerk.

He scans the list and disappears as before. He comes back, a few boxes resting on his back. He picks them up with his tail and places them on the counter. "Oh," he glances at the paper, "and here's that box of snack cakes." He grabs another package of the same blue sweets and adds it to the pile.

You join the rest of your childermoot, some laden with the weeks groceries and others covered in geckering kits overstimulated by all the new smells.

"Well, let's go home." You and yours turn around and start walking back to the train station, the sun still frozen near the zenith, just where it was when you arrived hours ago.

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