

# Everybody Poops Together

THUMP

I stood next to the wall, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, trying to ignore the increasingly urgent churning growls coming from my gut. There were no chairs in this waiting room, none my butt could sit in, anyway. I took my phone out of my pocket to check the time. The clock was the only thing that worked, no cell towers 25 light years from Earth. I had been standing in this waiting room for nearly an hour with nothing to occupy my mind. For the sixth time I read the large poster written in English hanging on the opposite wall:

“Welcome, human visitors! Remember, our hands are also our feet. Please help keep this clinic clean by removing your footwear before entering: St. Starlight’s House of Healing. ☐☐”

THUMP

Focus hung low on the horizon, its golden rays pouring into the room through the large windows lining the entrance wall. In the hour I had been standing here the shadows cast by the doorframe hadn’t moved an inch, and they never would. On Hearthside, the time of day changed with the latitude. Golden Hour city sat comfortably on the terminator dividing day and night.

THUMP

Perched behind a counter on the opposite side of the room was a fawn-coated receptionist, her HUD specs sitting halfway down her muzzle flashing reflected sunlight back in my face.

THUMP

Despite the poster’s exhortation to cleanliness, the musty smell of a kennel hung in the air. That’s not to say the place wasn’t clean, well, as clean as a species with constantly shedding fur can make such a high traffic public area. I didn’t mind the smell, really. It reminded me of the animal shelter where I picked out my first dog when I was little. It smelled like a friend.

THUMP

It had taken a considerable amount of effort to tune out that incessant thumping. I was sharing the waiting room with a handful of monkey foxes, a family by the looks of it. Three adults—two sires and a dam, travelling with three of their pups, all girls, one of whom was the source of the noise. They had already been waiting for a bit when I came in. All three girls started yipping excitedly upon seeing this hairless ape duck through the doorway, all twelve paws scrabbling on the slick tile to be the first to interact with me.

The three pups managed to approach.

«Wow, wow,» said one, ducking behind me to stare at my backside. «Lookie, they really have no tail.»

«See,» said the second, her nose pointed at my stockings. «No thumbs on their rear paws. Is it true you stand up like that all the time, mister?»

«Just that patch of fur on top of your head?» queried the third. «Is that why you wear those covers like a healer?»

«No, look, sis» barked the first, gesturing with her muzzle up at the meager hair covering my arm, «they do have fur, just not a lot of it.»

«now now, my delights, don't bother the gentleman,» chided one of their sires. They scampered back to their parents, and I heaved a sigh of relief. It took every ounce of my willpower not to scoop them up in my arms and give them all ear scratches and snoot boops. Now robbed of their strange playmate, one of the girls began thumping the wall with her tail, and through the endurance that only youth can provide, had managed to keep it up for the past hour. I wasn't the only one annoyed by the noise. With each thump, the right ear of the receptionist flicked.

Another plaintive gurgle issued from my abdomen. I couldn't wait any longer. It was time to do what no one else could do for me. I glanced around the room, looking for any signs of where a restroom might be. I was on the verge of walking up to ask the woman behind the counter when one of the sires, the same one who had scolded the girls earlier, hopped down from his perch with a sharp clack of his claws on the tile and walked up to the counter ahead of me.

«Excuse me, ma'am,» he began, «Our appointment time was half an hour ago.»

The woman slid her HUD specs further down her muzzle. «And I told you folks when you came in that we were having network problems. My paws are tied until it gets fixed. She whipped her head to one side and barked «Calmwind, is the network back up yet?!»

Through a curtain dividing an adjoining room a dusty gray snout poked out, twitched a few times, then its owner waddled forward. The white noise of server cooling fans escaped the room as he pushed the curtain aside. He was definitely a fair ways up the chonk chart. I think this was my first time seeing a fat monkey fox. He panted a few times as though the effort of walking ten feet from his little techie cave was too much.

«And I told YOU,» said Calmwind as though he had been part of the conversation from the beginning, «It's not a network issue. The payment processor is down.»

«I don't think—» she said, but Calmwind snapped back as though venting years of pent-up frustration.

«Look, It's not the network, okay? I swear it's always the network with you people. Noisy heat pump fan? Network must be down. Light flickering in the bathroom? Better call Calmwind, it's the network again. What does he get paid for anyway?» he mocked.

I made my way up to the front of the room, ducking my head to avoid various ceiling fixtures. This building wasn't built for someone who stood over 30 inches at the shoulder. The sire gave me an unreadable look which I chose to mean "Is this seriously happening right now?" Then he shot a glance back at the other two members of his childermoot. The remaining sire and dam hopped down from their perches and herded their pups out the front door, doubtless to spare them this public display of office politics.

Meanwhile, Calmwind had plucked the HUD specs from the receptionist's muzzle. «See, I told you, you've been browsing the internetwork this whole time. It's not a problem on our end. You need to send a message to the payment processor.»

«I'm a receptionist, not an office manager, I get one paycheck but everyone expects me to do the work of two people!» she hissed.

"What can you do." I said in English, shrugging at the sire standing next to me. He flicked his ears back, returning my shrug with his species' own gesture of resignation.

A loud grumble issued from my gut, catching the attention of all three yinrih.

«Are you feeling well, human?» asked Calmwind, out of breath from arguing.

"Are YOU feeling well, big chungus?" I said under my breath in English, then pulled out my synth and continued in Commonthroat. «Pardon me, but do you know where the restroom is?»

«It's a bit down the hall and to the right,» he said, tossing his muzzle to one side indicating the hallway nearby.

I ducked into the hallway and started jogging, I heard one last snatch of conversation from the waiting room before turning the corner. The sire, in an attempt to de-escalate, changed the subject. «Amazing how fast they can run on just those two long hind legs of theirs.»

«I know, right?» answered Calmwind, «and with no tail for balance and as tall as they are, you'd think they'd be falling over all the time.»

I rounded the corner and was met with another long hallway. My gut rumbled in protest again, my jog having made my situation even more dire. I continued at a brisk walk, accumulating a few bruises from the fixtures hanging from the ceiling. Finally, I came to another doorway. I could hear running water from behind the thick curtain. I could wait no longer.

I pulled the curtain aside and stuck my head through the doorway. A washing pool sat to the left of the entrance under a flickering light. Wading amid the water laving her paws was a healer. My face reddened. Before I could make a discrete exit, she turned and noticed me.

«Ah!» she chuffed cheerfully. «Light shine upon you, friend!» She hopped out of the water and trotted up to me, leaving a trail of wet paw prints in her wake. «You must be my human volunteer. My name's Doctor Shortclaw.» She extended a dripping wet paw to initiate a human handshake.

I hesitated. This wasn't the response I expected to a man bursting into the women's bathroom.

She extended her paw further. «This is the right way to do it, yes? Right forepaw, digits extended, palm facing to the side?»

“Yes, ma'am—er doctor,” I said in English before hastily grabbing my synth and repeating my confirmation in Commonthroat. I reluctantly accepted her waterlogged handshake. «I'm so sorry,» I said, hastily drying my hand on the curtain, «I must have the wrong bathroom.»

She tilted her head in confusion. «Wrong bathroom? This is the only one on this floor.» I slipped back into the hallway. The sign over the door, overlooked in my earlier haste, simply said «WASHROOM», with no qualifiers. Was this a private bathroom? She didn't seem to object to my presence. Whatever the case, I needed to get her out of there before the chocolate factory had a meltdown.

I brought the rest of my body through the doorway. We were standing in a vestibule, the washing pool was off to the left in an alcove. The wall to the right was adorned with the sort of nick-nacks one would expect to see in a Terran bathroom: pictures, a shelf with what I took to be an air freshener. The floor was flagged with tiles of various shapes and textures, designed more to be pleasant to the touch of a yinrih's bare paws than with an eye to visual congruity. A shallow lip separated the vestibule from the rest of the bathroom, which was currently unlit. The flickering light over the washing pool failed to illuminate the area where the toilet was.

I looked down at the little alien medical professional. She was furless save for her whiskers, as expected of a healer, with gray-black skin on her snout and paws giving way to ruddy flesh over the rest of her body. Her limbs and back were dense with musculature that would normally be hidden by fur. I caught a flash of saturated blue as she slid a pair of bandpass membranes over her eyes, scrutinizing my form under light my feeble human eyes couldn't hope to see.

Another rumbling burble emanated from my gut, causing doctor Shortclaw's large hearthsider ears to perk up. «Fascinating,» she yipped, pulling a notepad from a band around her foreleg.

«Look, I really have to use the restroom,» I explained.

«Even better!» she barked. She flicked her writing claw a few times and began jotting down some notes. «Do you mind if I observe? I was fascinated by the human digestive system while studying your medical cadavers. I'm anxious to see how it operates live.»

“Yes I mind!” I burst out in English, causing her to flinch. «Sorry,» I synthesized, «If you want samples, I'll give you samples, but I didn't sign up to be stared at while I poop.»

«I see,» she mused. «That might be a problem.» She crossed the threshold separating the sink area from the rest of the bathroom. Motion-activated lights banished the darkness. For the first time I beheld a yinrih toilet, and I did not like what I saw.

For starters, I was very wrong about it being a private bathroom. Four stalls lined the left wall, though calling them “stalls” was exceedingly generous. They were mere partitions extending up

from the floor, not even tall enough to obscure a yinrih's head. None of them had doors, either. The toilets themselves were simple holes in the floor. What might have been toilet paper dispensers hung above each latrine, positioned to be manipulated by the tail. Most of the floor was lined with more of that mismatched tile, but the area immediately surrounding the latrine itself was coated in a uniform rough texture to tell the user backing into the stall not to plant a rear paw in the hole. There was a noticeable grade to the floor of each stall sloping backward into the toilet, which I assumed was to guide any errant excreta to its proper destination. Sitting in the far corner of the room was a standard yinrih perch, positioned so the user faced the stalls.

«Our bathrooms probably aren't what you're used to on Earth,» she said apologetically. «We're inclined to be chatty while doing our business. We feel vulnerable while eliminating waste, and feel more comfortable when there are other group members watching out for us.

«This is a learning experience for both of us. My partners and I want to make this a human-friendly clinic, and any input you can give will help us make this place comfortable for both species. It sounds like humans need privacy when using the washroom, is that right?»

«Yes, doctor,» I said, nodding vigorously for emphasis.

«I see, I see,» she whined softly to herself, writing down more notes. «We're planning to make major renovations to accommodate your height.» She craned her neck upward to look at my head tilted forward to avoid hitting the ceiling. «I'm sure we can install species-appropriate facilities as well.»

I shifted uncomfortably on my feet, which Shortclaw noticed immediately. «But I suppose that's not going to help you right now, is it? How's this, I'll stand outside the door and make sure nobody else comes in. Take as long as you need. Oh, and no need to worry about any samples.»

«Could you?» I answered. «Thank you very much.»

She turned and walked through the door, brushing the curtain aside with her snout. I waited for her long sinewy tail to slither out of sight, then turned to face my destiny.

I took a deep breath. Credit where credit is due, the place was immaculate. Everything from the grout between the tiles to the walls to the floors inside the stalls looked clean enough to eat from, and this room smelled by far the least canine. "OK, you can do this," I told myself. "You were in the Boy Scouts, you know how to use a latrine, and you don't even have to bury it this time."

I entered the furthest stall from the doorway, undid my belt, squatted down, and prepared to restock the pond with corn-speckled brown trout. I waited, and waited, and waited some more. My colon had gone from Mt. St. Hellen to a space station airlock. "No big deal," I thought. "I just need to relax."

I let my mind wander as I surveyed my surroundings. There was an icon hanging near the entrance to the toilets, positioned to be visible from the stalls. Not an unusual sight here on Hearthside. There was an icon of the clinic's namesake hanging in the waiting room, too. The saint himself was all white save for a dark red stain on his abdomen. He was reared up on his hind feet, an upturned

drinking bowl under his right rear paw, reaching with his foreleg to pull a pup out of what looked like a pond of green sludge. Behind the saint's head was the gilded arch which served as the Claravian answer to the halo.

I heard Dr. Shortclaw politely ward away one of her conspecifics. «Sorry, our human volunteer is in there.»

«Are you sure he's OK in there by himself?» asked the interloper.

«He's got Saint Clearwater looking after him,» she answered.

«Fair enough,» said the other. The click-clack of his claws had just faded away only to be replaced by the sound of four more paws skittering toward the bathroom from the other end of the hall.

«OUT OF MY WAY!» barked an unfamiliar voice. To my horror, the curtain was thrust aside and a scrawny sandy-furred fellow burst into the bathroom. His momentum was checked only briefly as the good doctor's paw grasped futilely at the tip of his tail, relieving it of a few hairs.

«STOP! There's a-» barked the healer, but the intruder had already vaulted over the threshold between the sink and the toilets in a stunning display of agility.

«MY TEETH ARE SWIMMING!» he shot back. He took up residence in the stall next to mine, laid his tail across his back, and started putting out a fire. After heaving a contented huff, he turned and became aware of my presence.

«Oh, a human!» He tapped the partition between us with a claw. «My name's Coolsand. I'm a junior administrator here at the clinic. I think you saw my boss back in the waiting room.»

I suddenly became very interested in that icon hanging on the wall.

«Ah, that's old Saint Clearwater. They say he watches out for folks who have to use the bathroom alone. Well, that's what my sires told me growing up, anyway.»

I moved my gaze to the perch in the corner, staring at it as though it held the secrets of the universe, desperately willing my colon to finish the job. Coolsand did not interpret my silence the way I had hoped, and launched into a monologue.

«It's kind of funny, how Saint Clearwater got associated with bathrooms. We don't know much about his puppyhood, though I'd wager it wasn't a happy one, given that the first records we have that mention him are police reports involving bar brawls and public drunkenness. He was an alcoholic, you see, that's what the drinking bowl in the picture symbolizes.»

I uttered a half-interested grunt.

«Anyway, he was a raging alcoholic, like I said, and eventually found himself in front of a judge. He was ordered to attend a recovery program hosted at a nearby lighthouse. By all accounts he put his whole gut into it, and seemed to be making progress, but eventually relapsed.

«This cycle would continue, where he'd try to get sober, fail, wander off, then show up at the lighthouse a few decades later seeking absolution. Since he wasn't getting any better, the hearthkeeper eventually kicked him out altogether, assuming he wasn't putting in the effort.

«He ended up homeless living in a local park, begging for food and getting his fix from the wild wind fruit bushes that grew in the area. This park became notorious, not just for hosting a perpetually liquored up bum, but also for stinking of raw sewage. Turns out that a sewer main had burst, filling an underground pond with, well-» he slapped the textured edge of the latrine with a rear paw.

«Anyway, one day, a bunch of pups were playing in this park. Some stories say they were a litter, others say it was a school on a field trip, and others say the pups were just local kids. Out of nowhere, this sinkhole opens up, and all the pups just fall into this massive lake of-» he slapped the latrine again.

«Now there were a ton of grownups around. These pups' childermoot, their teachers, or whoever, but every account says that a bunch of bystanders saw this happen and just stared. They usually get painted as the villains, but you know, I'm not sure what I'd do if I were standing on their paw prints. They always tell you not to dive in after a drowning person, especially when you're not trained for it, since they'll pull you down with them and two people will end up dead instead of just one. And, besides-» for a third time the claws of his rear paw clicked against the side of the latrine.

«Anyway, out of nowhere, Clearwater, who's stinking drunk mind you, runs up and starts pulling the pups out of the hole. He manages to get most of them, but there are still two struggling toward the middle. He dives in after them. Well, the pups are still panicking, so they push him under while trying to climb out. The kids are able to get out, but Clearwater ends up drowning.

«So this naturally makes the news, and Clearwater is hailed as a local hero. The hearthkeeper that kicked him out of the rehab program realizes that he genuinely tried to sober up, but just couldn't do it. He did keep coming back, after all, and he did seem to try his best, but-»

«He kept falling off the wagon,» I interjected, now invested in the story.

Coolsand executed a quizzical head tilt.

«Sorry, it's a Terran expression.» I repeated the phrase in English and then again in Commonthroat.

«Well,» Coolsand continued, «That hearthkeeper has a change of heart and starts advocating for his canonization. And not just regular canonization, but she wants him declared a martyr. That's what that blood stain on his belly means.

«So even though it's a bit controversial calling him a martyr, since he didn't die while trying to fulfill the Great Commandment, he gets the title anyway. He's got quite the portfolio, as you can imagine. I suppose it's pretty obvious, his connection with restrooms, if a little morbid. But you also see little statues of him in bars, as he's said to help drunk people get sober.»

Coolsand's hagiography finished, I quickly cleaned myself up and redid my belt, but he insisted on continuing the conversation.

«I'm really into human stuff, and so is Calmwind. We both know English. He's the one who made that poster in the waiting room. If I knew you'd be here I'd have brought my synth so I could practice. I really want to visit Earth some time.»

I walked out of the stall and made a move toward the washing pool. Coolsand quickly finished up and followed. A few seconds after we had vacated the stalls, there was a whirring noise, then a cascade of water smelling mildly of bleach rushed out of a grate spanning the entrance to the previously occupied stalls and rushed down the slope and into the latrine, simultaneously flushing it and sanitizing the floor.

"Well," I said in English as I squatted in front of the washing pool scrubbing my hands, "Nice meeting you, Coolsand. But let me give you some pointers on men's room etiquette whenever you visit Earth. Not sure how you'll negotiate our toilets; I'm sure you'll figure it out. But whatever you do, remember these words: shut up and stare straight ahead."

«Wait, humans don't chat in the restroom?» I could almost feel him blushing behind his khaki fur. «Did I offend you? I'm sorry if I did, It's just-»

"No, no we do not."

«So that's why the old bald-back was guarding the door.»

"Yes... Look, it was nice meeting you, really, don't sweat it—uh pant it—I mean don't worry about it. I think these little psychological quirks that we don't share stick out only because we have so much else in common."

«I guess that's what the Great Commandment means by 'bone not of our bone and flesh not of our flesh'.»

"Just look out for that doctor next time. By the way, my name's Greg." I attempted the yinrih's traditional greeting, patting myself on the abdomen twice with the left palm, then turned to leave.

Dr. Shortclaw was still standing outside. She looked up at me sheepishly.

«Sorry about that,» she said. «Like I said, we're talkative in there. That's why that perch is in the corner.»

«I hope you're a better doctor than a bouncer,» I said as we walked down the hall to the exam room.

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