

# The House of Friendship

Standing a mere stone's throw from the Eternal Hearth, the edifice was supposed to be a monument to the friendship between the only two sapient species in the galaxy, and to the yinrih who built it, it was just that, but to most humans visiting the holy world of Hearthside, it was—well—a tower of human skulls.

We had offered a large supply of medical cadavers to our new galactic neighbors so that they might better understand human biology. It was thought that the yinrih, who had terraformed every suitable body in their star system dozens of millennia before we humans put plow to earth for the first time, could bestow upon our primitive species all manner of medical miracles, after, of course, dispelling their ignorance regarding our anatomy. When the human ambassador was asked what ought to be done with the bodies after they had been studied, “Treat them as you would your own dead.” seemed to be the culturally appropriate response.

What we didn't know at the time was what exactly they did to their dearly departed. Bury them? Cremate them? Nope, turns out the answer was dissolve the soft tissue with acid, then use the bones to build with. Of course, not every structure had the honor of being made from the remains of your friends and family. In more traditional corners of the system, such architecture was reserved for houses of worship. In more secular parts, this peculiar building style extended to monuments, libraries, halls of learning, and centers of political power. In the most general sense, the best way to make your building scream “this is important!” was to cover it in skulls.

The yinrih healers studying our anatomy had mountains of alien remains to deal with, and also wanted to show us weird flat-faced hairless bipeds that they saw us as friends. Building a library to house the newly acquired medical knowledge in the traditional ossuary style seemed to solve both problems neatly. So there it was, bones bleaching in the perpetual noon of a tidally locked world, containing the musings, anecdotes, theories, and observations of an intelligence that was not our own pondering the peculiarities of the human form.

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Aurora sat politely at the door, ready to greet any passing visitors, human and yinrih alike. She always found it interesting how differently the two species reacted to this little library. Her fellow yinrih would hurry inside, passing the facade of grinning alien skulls without comment, but eager to peruse the shelves, learning as much as they could about these large tailless creatures. Humans would stare open-mouthed at the outer walls encrusted with the skulls and bones of their conspecifics with a mixture of disgust and fascination. Or at least that's what she gathered from their comments. The nuances of human body language still escaped her.

There was one memorable exception. He was a cleric, or at least he looked like the pictures Aurora had seen of human clergy. He approached her, teeth exposed in the way humans did to show they were not a threat, extending his arm to grasp her forepaw in a greeting gesture. After quickly remembering not to expose her own teeth, she reared up on her hind legs to better meet his gaze,

wrapping her tail around the pillar behind her for balance. She politely refused the handshake. The human was positively drenched in that pungent excretion, “sweat”, she thought they called it. The unforgiving heat of the nightless desert apparently did not agree with this alien visitor. It was just a brackish solution used to regulate body temperature, exuded by glands just under the surface of the skin, odorless on its own. It was the bacteria living on the skin that caused the smell. Whatever it was and however it smelled, she was not eager to get it on her pelt.

“Good, uh, morning?” said the human, quickly glancing up at the star perpetually frozen at the zenith. “Sure is hot today.”

«Hello,» Aurora yipped. «It's like we say, 'On Hearthside, if you don't like the weather, too bad, it's not going to change.'»

“Quite the monument you've got here. What's it for if you don't mind me asking?”

«Not at all. I'm actually a volunteer here. This is the House of Friendship. It's a little medical library, all books on human biology and medicine.»

“Ah,” the cleric responded. “And the skulls are real, then?”

«...yeah,» she hesitated. «It's considered the respectful thing to do here. You guys gave us all these cadavers to study, and we wanted to do right by you when we were done with them.»

“Fascinating.”

«You're not offended? Most humans seem to think it's morbid.»

“We build our altars on top of the bones of saints. It's really not all that different, I guess. We even have a few chapels that look just like this. We usually bury our dead first, but after a few hundred years it builds up and we need to make room. The bones get dug up and they need to go somewhere.” He gestured at the facade.

«Interesting,» said Aurora, ears tilted forward in attention.

“A lot of us humans still think that stuff is morbid, too. I don't know, I guess it can be, context is everything. But in a way I can see why you find it comforting. Being surrounded by friends and family. Being reminded of one's mortality also keeps your mind on the important things.”

«Exactly,» Aurora barked happily, glad to finally see a human recognizing her species' gesture of kindness. «You know we've been searching for other sophonts for so long. It's kind of the whole point of all this.» She waved her paw in the direction of the Eternal Hearth and surrounding religious buildings. “We're just happy we're not alone anymore.”

“Thanks,” said the human. “We're just as glad as you are.”