

Columbia State 3: The Weekend Rounds

By: IndigoRho

Eli stared at his computer monitor, scrolling through inventory lists a little too haphazardly. With summer semester over and fall semester still a month away, weekends at the campus clinic were painfully slow for the arctic fox. He scratched at a persistent itch on his sunken chest, frustrating enough that he lifted his shirt up to investigate. His tan and white fur was still thin enough to see the outline of his ribcage. He hoped the itching wasn't a reaction to something in the clinic, or worse, his winter coat trying to grow in early. The poofy solid white fur made him look ridiculous, no matter what anyone else claimed. Friends swore he looked adorable with it, but Riley could be overly polite and Niall was just being an ass. The city rarely experienced a real winter, just a lot of cold rain, so why did his body insist on the transition every year?

Fretting over his fur had successfully wasted a couple minutes, and he returned to pretending to be productive. In a few weeks he'd be begging for this quiet, but right now the fox was bored and open to a distraction. Any distraction. Well, maybe not any. He risked a glance at the large, thankfully empty, plastic bin attached to the far wall. The "Peace of Mind" deposit box. Predators were encouraged to bring any surviving remains or identification of their prey to official drop-offs like that one. Positive identification could help give closure to friends and family, or at the very least confirm the individual wasn't lost or a runaway. A chute connected it to an opening in the alley outside, providing anonymity to its patrons. Not that most predators cared about their actions being public.

The system was practical, an attempt to integrate the bestial practice of vore with civilized society. But to Eli, the whole thing was so...cold. The related service announcements always reminded him of ones for recycling. Polite reminders to clean the remains beforehand, that bones were the only acceptable definition of remains, to contain them in a heavy duty garbage bag for drop off, to include a note if multiple prey were involved. Eli considered the Peace of Mind box the worst part of his job; he was always afraid he'd see someone he knew in there one day.

Lost in thought, Eli didn't notice the entrance of the panda Chad, one of the few active nurses working that night. Well, active in a technical sense. Chad was considered a bit on the thin side for a panda, but still weighed twice as much as Eli. He had admitted once before that he preferred working at the clinic instead of a hospital mainly because it was so small. A lot less walking, lot more downtime. Regardless, the panda always managed to be slightly out of breath. Chad saw Eli staring at the box, and began staring himself. "Ugh, is someone making a deposit?" he asked, startling Eli.

Eli turned away. "No, not right now. Hopefully not at all tonight."

"Oh, good." Chad sighed in relief. "I hate having to check those." All deposits were examined and properly stored before being sent off to official facilities.

"Yeah," was all Eli could think to say.

Chad suddenly remembered why he was there to begin with. "Eli, I need you for a procedure in 110, urgent." He hurried away at an unexpectedly fast pace, which tended to mean he was serious.

Eli got out of his chair and rushed after the Panda. He already regretted wanting that distraction. "Ok Chad, what's up?"

"Rabbit in a tiger, some kind of dare. The tiger, Darren, was inexperienced, didn't have a way to free the prey. He's really shaken up about the whole thing." Chad answered.

"I'm sure the rabbit took digestion in stride," Eli said back sarcastically.

"Actually, there's a good chance the rabbit's still alive."

Eli couldn't hide his surprise. "There is?"

"Yeah. The tiger came here pretty much right after it happened, and has apparently been swallowing plenty of fresh air."

"If you grabbed me, then I assume you weren't able to just induce vomiting." Eli had a good guess about what needed to happen.

"The rabbit lost consciousness shortly after they arrived. Throwing him up could be harmful to both."

Eli sighed. "So you need me to dive in and pull him out."

"As long as you're volunteering," Chad said as they finally reached their destination.

Eli was unfazed by the sight awaiting him. A tiger lay on the examination table, his distended belly fully exposed, gulping down air almost obsessively. Besides the temporary gut he was fairly lean, like Eli, and his lack of belly fat made the outline of his prey unusually clear. Clear enough for Eli to guess the rabbit was larger than the tiger, either in height or weight. Eli quickly headed to an adjacent room, entering it without any further conversation with either Chad or the patient. Chad returned to the tiger.

"Alright Darren, my colleague Eli and I are gonna do our best to get your friend free," Chad said, calmly. "In order to do that, though, you're gonna have to swallow Eli so that he can grab your friend and pull him out."

Darren managed to collect himself for a moment and respond. "That's...that's the only way?" More vore was obviously not what he had expected, nor wanted.

"Yes, unfortunately. Now we need to secure you in place to guarantee everyone's safety during this." Chad began gently strapping down the tiger's wrists and ankles.

Darren whined a little, close to tears.

"One last thing." Chad began unraveling a hose from beneath the table. "We're gonna fill your belly with air before the procedure. It'll give Eli more space to work in. Have you ever inflated before?"

"N...no," Darren answered.

"Well don't worry," Chad assured him. "It's simple and painless. Now swallow this hose for me."

Darren opened his mouth cautiously, allowing Chad to carefully slide the hose in. His face scrunched from the rubbery taste, but he resisted spitting it out. More and more of the tube was fed to him. The process reminded Darren of vore, much to his disdain. Eventually a stretch with a small yellow marking passed through his maw, prompting Chad to halt.

"Alright, hard part done," Chad promised. "Now, inflating will probably feel weird your first time, but it's completely safe and you won't be in any danger of popping."

Darren suddenly seemed a lot more nervous than before. Before any muffled questions could be asked, Chad turned the nozzle on a large air tank beneath the table. Darren's face twitched from the new sensation. With a muffled hissing noise the tiger's belly began rounding out, his meal's form becoming less and less distinguishable. Darren watched his growth with fascination, astonished that he could actually get bigger. The shifting of the rabbit's body within his stomach snapped him back to reality, rekindling his concern. After only a few seconds he looked as if he had eaten an oversized beach ball, not a person. Chad let the flow of air continue for a short while longer, though. He needed to guarantee Eli some space, but couldn't let Darren's belly get so big it interfered with swallowing. Finally content, Chad turned the nozzle back off and pulled the tube from Darren.

"He's probably a bit bigger than necessary," Eli had re-entered the room, outfitted for the mission. He had stripped down to a pair of faded swim trunks and a thick belt attached to a length of rope that trailed behind him. A small headlamp was strapped to his head, and he wore a heavy dust mask rather than the usual medical one. Eli considered the whole getup immensely embarrassing, but it worked, and that was really all that mattered in situations like this.

"It's hard to be precise with an air tank, man," Chad said with annoyance as Eli walked over.

"Didn't mean anything by it, just saying," Eli faced the patient. "Alright, Darren. What's your friend in there's name?"

The combination of inflation and Eli's odd outfit had confused Darren enough to calm him down some. "Logan. Please get him out, I don't want to hurt him. We...we had a few drinks, and it was

a stupid dare, but we thought it'd be easy to get him out after." His eyes were watering.

Eli could tell the tiger's concern was genuine. "Darren, I'm going to get Logan out, but you'll have to trust me, ok." Darren nodded. "Now I need you to swallow me, no hesitation. I've done this before, so don't worry about me, just keep swallowing till my feet are the only thing left. That should put me in far enough then to do my work, and Chad here will pull me out once I give the signal. If you accidentally swallow too much of me things will be a bit more difficult, but don't panic. I'm attached to a rope so I can still be retrieved." He didn't mention such a delay could likely prove fatal for Logan. "Now open wide."

Darren opened his mouth as wide as he could, just like when he'd swallowed Logan in the first place. Moving to the end of the table, Eli slid his paws and arms carefully down into the tiger's maw. As ordered, Darren began to swallow. Eli lowered his head as his elbows disappeared, allowing his muzzle to follow. The patient's breath smelled surprisingly minty, with hints of alcohol. He had likely downed mints as part of the dare, an attempt to make the experience easier on Logan. Overwhelming a stomach's odor was futile, though. Chad now stepped in to aide in the procedure, lifting Eli by his legs and angling him further into Darren.

No matter how many times he dove, Eli never got used to the experience of being swallowed alive. His instincts were screaming at him to struggle, to fight back, to escape. He forced himself to resist them, remaining still despite his racing heart. Eli was one of the few staff members at the clinic who was small enough and, admittedly, reckless enough to volunteer for these tasks, but taking the risk could save someone from certain death. Could lead to one less drop off at the Peace of Mind box. He had never told his friends about this part of the job, nor his family. The jokes about willingly being eaten so often would be unbearable.

Saliva slowly covered every inch of Eli's body, matting his fur and easing his journey through Darren's gullet. The unbearable warmth also caused him to sweat profusely, to his dismay. He noticed Darren's tongue had remained relatively still throughout the ordeal. The tiger was definitely adverse to vore. During previous dives, some predators had tasted him rather....aggressively. He worried one day a patient would take a liking to him. Fortunately most were either far more concerned with having their meal's released, or far too sedated to enjoy the experience.

The smell was getting worse, so Eli knew he was nearing the stomach. On cue his fingers slipped through to open air, followed quickly by the rest of his arms. As soon as his head left the esophagus he aimed his light at Logan. The shirtless rabbit was curled up in a fetal position, laying in a pile of unrecognizable mush. Darren may have eaten some food after swallowing Logan in an attempt to soak up digestive juices or sober up. Whatever his intent, the action was likely protecting the rabbit from serious digestive injury. Logan was definitely fatter than Darren, with a prominent pot belly. He was also definitely unconscious. Eli pushed against the stomach's walls, forcing more of himself into the inflated cavern, and reached out towards Logan in search of a pulse. With two fingers barely against the neck, he felt nothing. He inched closer, needing confirmation. This time he pushed harder, and was relieved to feel a faint pulse.

Eli carefully wrapped his arms around Logan's chest and clicked his feet together three times. Darren's swallowing ceased. Eli felt himself slowly moving backwards through the esophagus. He held on tightly to Logan and closed his eyes, more and more of his body being released from the tiger. This was the most difficult phase of the retrieval. His grip was always awkward, and if he loosened it for even a second the patient would end up right back in the stomach. Mistakes like that could be fatal. Such occurrences were incredibly rare, but Eli remembered each one clearly. An otter eaten by her abusive boyfriend, a coyote who snuck into a concert via his friend's stomach, the jaguar nurse ambushed in their parking lot. He could still see each of them slipping away, sucked down towards boiling stomachs. He dug his claws a little into Logan, and the bright lights and fresh air of the clinic room soon welcomed them both. Free, Eli collapsed onto the floor, breathing heavily, damp and reeking of digestion.

Chad managed to pull the rest of Logan out of Darren, and immediately began CPR. A few strong pushes and puffs brought the rabbit back, though he was just barely conscious now. Chad began checking for signs of obvious digestion damage. His shorts were riddled with tiny holes and there were light burns on the pad of his right foot, but the rest of his extremities appeared fine. Logan had escaped his ordeal relatively unharmed. At least physically.

Darren, still strapped down, was frantically turning his head to try and see the others. "Is he ok? Please tell me he's ok!"

Eli picked himself up off the floor and looked at Chad, who gave him a quick thumbs up before returning his attention to Logan. "Your friend's alive, Darren," Eli answered with a sense of relief. "He'll probably just need some rest, and a fresh set of clothes."

Darren began crying, too happy to say anything else.

"And buddy, next time maybe you should try out inflation instead. It's a lot safer." He gave Darren's still-inflated belly a light pat before slowly walking towards the exit. A shower was in order.

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Eli sniffed his arm and cringed. The scent of stomach odor was still noticeable, even through all the shampoo and soap he'd used. He would have to take a long bath once his shift was over. The clinic still seemed quiet, and he hoped Darren and Logan would be the only real incident that night. Skimming through inventory lists was suddenly very appealing to Eli. Further down the hallway, though, Chad was leaving an examination room. The panda spotted Eli, and looked overjoyed in a way that immediately made him uncomfortable.

"Good, good, you're all cleaned up." Chad said cheerfully. "We just had a little burst of activity, and I need you to handle a patient for me real quick."

Eli groaned. "Sure, sure, what do you need?"

"Again, nothing much." Sometimes Chad actually meant that. "Just a simple case of indigestion with a predator in 112. Said he took something already, but it isn't working well. Doubt he needs anything more than a bottle of the stronger stuff."

"Sounds great," Eli replied sarcastically. "Just saved one patient from digestion, now I get to ease some poor pred's tummy ache."

Chad glared at Eli. "We don't get to pick and choose here. We save people whenever we can, but sometimes you have to ease a predator's pain, too."

"I know, I know," Eli said reluctantly, heading towards the room Chad had just left. Indigestion was the most common vore-related issue they treated at the clinic. Plenty of college kids either experimenting with vore or eating too much or eating things they shouldn't have. The clinic usually just sent them back home with a bottle of heavy digestive relief medicine and a reminder to eat responsibly. Few listened. At least it would be a quick ordeal. Throw them a bottle, tell them where to buy more so they didn't have to come back, and pray their meal's no longer alive. Eli shuddered. Well, might as well get it over with quickly.

Eli opened the door, preemptively addressing the patient to speed things along. "Hello, my name is Eli and I'll be..." He stopped, confused.

Sitting on the examination table, cradling a massively distended—and fortunately motionless—belly was a raven. His belly was relatively round, with only a few odd lumps exposing his predation, but in general he didn't look fat anywhere else; a tell-tale sign of an active stomach full of acids. Eli recognized him almost immediately, but still couldn't believe what he was seeing. The raven was Adam, the roommate of his friend Victor. Eli had only met Adam a couple times before, and admittedly hadn't really talked with him much then, but he was under the strong impression the raven hated predation. Though a few months earlier he'd apparently been attacked by a predator and had managed to eat him in self defense. Victor claimed Adam felt horrible about it, and had been suffering from nightmares ever since. What had happened this time?

Adam was aggressively avoiding eye contact with Eli, and beginning to sweat. Eli guessed the recognition was mutual. "Hey, uh, I'm Eli. I'm one of Victor's friends. Adam, right?" Eli said.

"I...I didn't know you worked here." Adam managed.

Getting closer, Eli finally noticed more about the raven than his belly. He could just barely make out Adam's black eye, fairly well hidden by his dark feathers, and the numerous bandages on the fingers of his right talon. He had obviously struggled with someone. Eli wasn't supposed to pry into patient's lives, but the urge was overwhelming in this case.

"Adam, are you alright? What happened to you?" Eli asked.

Adam was looking increasingly uncomfortable. "It's nothing, I...I really don't want to talk about it."

"This isn't 'nothing'" Eli urged.

"I...ugh," Adam tried cautiously rubbing his noisy stomach. "It's not your problem."

"I'm sorry, forget it." Eli didn't want to overstep his bounds. "The nurse before me, Chad, he said you were suffering from indigestion?"

"Yeah, I...I was nearby and none of the pharmacies were open so I came here. Heard they accept non-students while school's out."

"Alright, was there anything unique about your, uh, meal?" Eli walked over to a cabinet. "Something like horns, venom, unusual clothing, or medication on the prey?"

Adam took a few moments to respond. "No, I don't think so. He just looked like a normal, um...wolf. Is all this really important?"

Eli grabbed a bottle of the usual digestive aide. "Yes, actually. You'd be surprised by how many different medications we have for treating indigestion. You should be fine taking the normal stuff, though."

Adam accepted the bottle and carefully slid off the table, wincing as he got to his feet. "Thanks," he said, walking away with a barely noticeable limp. Eli saw something blue poking out of the raven's back pocket, maybe a scarf or beanie. Neither were things he'd seen him wear before.

"No problem," Eli replied.

Adam stopped, looking down at his stomach. "Eli, would...would you mind not telling anyone about my visit. Especially Victor."

"Confidentiality is kind of important in my job, don't worry." Eli assured him.

"Thank you." Adam left the room as quickly as he could considering his weight and injuries, leaving Eli alone to his thoughts.

Eli procrastinated for as long as he could, straightening equipment and pretending to care about the contents of various drawers. He didn't want to run right back into Adam. Any further conversation would be awkward, and Eli knew the raven just wanted to be left alone. Content that enough distance was between them, he exited the room himself, walking back to the office. He couldn't get Adam off his mind, though. Had he been attacked again? One issue complicated that theory, though: Chad's claim that Adam had taken something else before coming to the clinic. Adam and Victor's apartment wasn't nearby, so he must have had some digestive aide on him already. Something most people didn't keep on them while going out. Well, except for hunters.

The thought was troublesome, and he brushed it aside as best he could. He could only imagine how worried Victor would be once he finally saw Adam himself. Even Eli knew Victor had a crush on his roommate, one that was apparently mutual from time to time. Niall liked to say the pair were always a couple extra drinks short of needing a room. Of course, Niall tended to exaggerate often.

There were no further interruptions from Chad, and Eli was soon sitting back at the desk, desperately trying to distract himself once more. Now, though, he fought off rampant speculation rather than boredom. He really should have been content earlier. A familiar, screeching, metallic noise interrupted his thoughts and made his heart sink a little on instinct. Eli turned towards the Peace of Mind box, desperate for a false alarm.

A white garbage bag fell down the chute, clattering upon the box's floor and slumping to one side. Even from this distance the bag was translucent enough for Eli to see the skull staring blankly back at him amidst the jumble of other bones. The colorful, blurry rectangles scattered about were likely whatever the predator didn't want from their prey's wallet. At least identification would be simple. The family might even be able to hold a funeral within a week.

Eli buried his head in his paws. He didn't want to consider this normal, it all felt so wrong to him. For years he'd hoped things would change, that sensibility would win out. Instead, the status quo had shifted just enough for vore to be ignorable. Eli thought of Logan, the rabbit he saved earlier. Had he actually given him a second chance at a long life? Or had he merely delayed the inevitable for a few more months? In moments like this he almost regretted not being more like his family or Niall. They always made it seem so easy to simply not care.