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The Emotional Rollercoaster of a Supply Shortage in Prison

"Do any of you guys have a roll of toilet paper?" Sarah asked the four of us who were seated around the table at the back of the dayroom, waiting to go out to pick up our lunch trays. We were all quiet, and I vividly imagined each of us battling our own ugly selfishness as Sarah explained that her roommate had left hers in the bathroom. Unsurprisingly, it was no longer there when she went back later to retrieve it. With a mix of desperation and wry humor, Rah lamented, "It was all I had!"

At her query, I'd instantly thought to say "No" — despite actually having a couple of rolls in my emergency stash, — or at least keep quiet and hope someone else would offer her a roll... But then my mind conjured an image of myself as Gollum, clutching hoarded toilet paper to my chest and hissing, "My precious..." With a slight shudder as my skin crawled, I quickly offered her a roll to banish the thought of the depraved creature I could so easily become and reassert my humanity. The other gals looked relieved.

Since Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, where I am incarcerated, is a women's facility, residents are each allotted three rolls of toilet paper per week. However, as I write this, it has been twelve days since we've received supplies. And many of us have run out.

For the past three days, we've been told that there is none in the building and that it has to be requisitioned from elsewhere. Each time a box of toilet paper arrives, the people working in the vestibule are swarmed. The tissue is dispatched with alacrity. The floor staff and building lieutenant say they don't know when we'll get more — or more hand soap, laundry detergent, or feminine hygiene products, for that matter.

"When supplies come, we'll pass them out," they repeat like a mantra.

I've taken to carrying my soap dish in my pocket to wash my hands, and I've always kept boxes of detergent purchased from commissary. But I wonder what I will do if they run out before supplies come — and how those who can't afford to buy their own supplies are washing their hands and clothes.

For now at least, humanity is winning, as most of us pitch in to share what we can with those around us, but I can see the specter of Gollum lurking in the corners.

Let's hope supplies come soon.