

# people

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# Tod the Luckless

Tod was hatched into a family on one of the moons of Welinstead. His sires and dams were representative of most Allied Worlds citizens in that they weren't particularly religious. Despite this, his dams insisted they at least go to the local lighthouse on the Feast of the Kindling of the Fire of Understanding every year.

As a pup he was teased constantly thanks to his red coat and black ears. In school he was the favorite target of a notorious bully. The teasing fueled in him a thirst to prove that he wasn't a luckless airhead, and his abuse at the paws of the bully gave him a thirst for revenge. These two driving forces are what lead him to join the Welinstead military upon coming of age.

While in training he excelled at melee combat, but ended up as a pilot ferrying troops and supplies between Welinstead and a base at Moonlitter.

The day of reckoning would come while he was at Moonlitter on yet another routine resupply mission. He entered a public bathroom, and there, just finishing up washing his paws was his childhood bully.

The bully turned and noticed his former victim loping toward him with a look in his eye that could melt a cube of tungsten.

"I'm--" and that's all he got out before Tod wordlessly struck him across the muzzle with his tail.

"I'm--" he tried again, but Tod shoved him against the wall and issued the merciless drubbing he had been imagining since puppyhood. The bully offered no resistance, limply accepting each blow as it came.

Tod eventually exhausted himself, and as he stood over his former tormenter he noticed red lacrimal fluid had matted the dusty gray fur of the bully's muzzle and neck. He was weeping.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Yeah, I bet." Tod spat. "I'm not the scrawny whelp you shoved around in school anymore. You're only 'sorry' because I'm a threat to you now."

But the bully continued, "I don't expect you to forgive me. I deserve every one of these lumps." The bully tearfully recounted his intervening years, how he had found faith as an adolescent, and had signed up with the peacekeepers, risking his life helping refugees fleeing Partisan border conflicts.

"So you're one of those hearth lickers now, eh?" Tod growled, then turned and left without waiting for a response.

Tod spent the next few hours restlessly pacing around his quarters. His head a swirling maelstrom of conflicting emotions. He was surprised to run into the bully at this little outpost so far from Welkinstead. He was a bit nervous about the inevitable dressing down he'd get once his superiors got word of his little dustup, but most of all he was... unsatisfied. Getting roughed up in a bathroom was a nearly weekly occurrence for him while in school. No, that little tussle wasn't even a taste of what he had to go through. They weren't even, not even close. But how was he going to find the guy again without attracting unwanted attention.

Then it hit him--the lighthouse! He had been blathering on about seeing The Light and other such nonsense. Tomorrow morning was when most of the faithful attended their weekly liturgy. Tod would wait for him to leave, and then... he didn't know what, but honestly he didn't care.

# Tod the Luckless, Part 2

Tod made his way to a row of greenery facing the steps leading up to the lighthouse just as Focus spread its distant feeble rays over the ground. He hid out of sight until the front doors burst open, soldiers and locals alike pouring out and chatting amongst themselves. Then he saw him, hanging back as the crowd dispersed, talking with the hearthkeeper.

"You think you can hide behind your stupid little religion!" Tod barked. He didn't care who was watching now. "I lived every day in fear because of you!" He emerged from the bushes and began striding toward the two yinrih standing in the doorway. He was too blinded by rage to notice the fresh lacrimal fluid dripping from the corners of the bully's mouth.

The bully turned to face him, ears wilted in resignation, muzzle pointed earthward in silent anticipation of another well-deserved beating. Tod readied his tail for another blow across the bully's nose. The bully flinched but didn't move.

Till the end of his days, Tod would reckon his life as what came before this moment and what came after. A tiny voice stirred in Tod's soul. "I guess you're the bully now, huh?" He froze. "That used to be you, you know, cowering helpless in the corner."

But Tod wasn't going to let his conscience get in the way of his revenge. "Shut up! I'm only giving what I got. He made my life miserable."

"Is causing more pain going to make your own pain go away?"

"It's not about me feeling better. It's about him feeling worse."

"Then you're no better than he was."

Tod deflated, the flames of vengeance were quenched. The bully looked up, bewildered. It was as though a storm looming on the horizon, crackling with fury, had just dissipated before it could reach him.

But Tod's little epiphany wasn't over yet. "Young man!" hissed a voice from inside the lighthouse. The hearthkeeper emerged and wrapped her tail around Tod's foreleg, pulling him inside like a dam scolding her pup. Tod followed her sheepishly into the empty nave. She stopped at an empty perch and gestured with her muzzle for him to take a seat. "Wait here," she said, then disappeared into the sacristy.

Tod perched alone for the next few minutes. It had been decades since he had entered a lighthouse. The warm glow of the star hearth shone through the sheer sanctuary curtain, casting a soft yellow light on the skulls covering the walls. He felt surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, silently being judged by those who passed before him.

Then a sharp sound broke the quiet. Tod had only heard it once before, when he was a pup, receiving his first, last, and hitherto only absolution. The hearthkeeper struck the ground thrice with a long aspergillum wrapped in her tail. "Little one, give me the burdens that weigh down your soul."

Fear, anger, hatred, pride, they all spewed forth like spiritual emesis. The confessor sat silently as Tod recounted the bitter years of his puppyhood and the burning rage that propelled him forward up to that moment. Yet he still felt the need to justify his actions against the bully

"So should I just forgive and forget? Don't tell me that he had a hard life at home, or that his actions were a 'cry for help' or whatever. I don't care why he did what he did, nothing gave him the right to treat me that way. And where do you get off telling me I should just let him go because he found religion."

"You're right," she said. "He doesn't deserve forgiveness, but none of us do. Even the holiest among us reflect the Light only imperfectly. But think of it this way, does your anger make you feel good?"

"Of course not. It makes me miserable," Tod admitted.

"So why hold onto it then?"

Tod was silent.

"Healing takes time," she said, "and nobody's asking you to make up and be friends." She hopped down from her perch and coiled her tail around the aspergillum again. "I'll be here if you want to talk." She flicked her tail, sprinkling blessed milk on Tod's face. "Go, little one, may this milk nourish your soul for the journey ahead."

Tod re-emerged from the lighthouse and plodded back to his quarters. His superiors never did find out about his altercation from the previous night. Over the next several months he made several trips back and forth between Welinstead and the outpost at Moonlitter, turning over the words of the hearthkeeper in his mind all the while. Occasionally he saw his former bully out and about, and it took a long time before he felt anything other than hatred at the sight of him. Eventually he decided to take up the hearthkeeper's offer and began talking with her. At first he would enter the lighthouse only after the liturgy had ended, but soon enough he found himself perched in the back, passively observing. As the hurt in his soul began to heal, passive observation grew to active participation.

Then the time finally came. Tod was ready to face his bully again. He approached him, once again on the steps of the lighthouse.

The bully spoke first. "I'm sorry. Nothing I can do or say will give you your puppyhood back."

Tod bounded forward and pressed the top of his head against his chest, greeting him like an old friend.

The two grew closer over the next few years, and as Tod's initial period of enlistment was nearing an end, his new friend suggested he join the peacekeepers. The Partisans had been threatening to capture, or "reclaim" as they put it, a small dwarf planet just this side of their border with Moonlitter, and troop movements made it clear that it wasn't just saber-rattling.

Tod agreed, enlisting just in time to help evacuate the population before the Partisans arrived. During the evacuation, Tod met and befriended some of the refugees, a hearthkeeper and a monk, both litter mates, as well as a black-pelted farspeaker. They all seemed in high spirits given the fact their home was despoiled by a hostile foreign invader.

He decided to settle down with his friends in their new home in the Inner Belt. When he heard that they were volunteering to go on a mission, he followed suit, eventually finding himself making history as one of the first yinrih to make first contact with other sophonts.

At first he was pleasantly surprised that the humans thought he was sly and clever rather than a clumsy idiot, but eventually he tired of that, too, and whenever people found out he had been a pilot, they would inevitably ask him if he could "do a barrel roll" whatever that meant.

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This little write-up kind of turned into a story in the middle there. I realized as I was writing that Tod would probably have a lot of emotional baggage thanks to being teased and bullied because of how he looks. It reminds me of an article I read about women named Alexa. Bullying is also a sensitive topic, and I wanted to get across that forgiveness doesn't come easy, but that nursing a grudge is also destructive.

# Stormlight Blackpelt

Stormlight Blackpelt was born to a family of primitive Wayfarers. Primitive Wayfarers strive to live simple lives in small self-sufficient communities. Each community of Primitive Wayfarers has their own ideas about what "simple" means. The spectrum ranges from living like tree-dwellers on one end to almost indistinguishable from modern yinrih on the other.

Stormlight's family lived in a more strict community. They didn't live in trees, but they avoided the use of electricity and the hearthkeeper leading the community tended a bonfire rather than a star hearth.

They also practiced natural brooding, meaning womb-nests are placed somewhere cool and dry rather than being encapsulated in an incubator. While the kits were gestating, a plague struck the community, killing a large percentage of its members, including all but one sire and one dam in Stormlight's childermoot. Among the kits only Stormlight survived to hatch.

The community disbanded after the plague. Some members joined other Primitive Wayfarer communities, but Stormlight's family left altogether and rejoined mainstream society. His sire and dam had a hard time adjusting to modern life, and carried the pain brought on by losing all but one of their kits and the rest of their childermoot in one fell swoop. Stormlight also carried this sadness with him. He would see his peers playing with their litter mates and mourn the siblings he never knew. His parents were overprotective of their son, and this made it hard for him to make friends. It's a minor taboo in some yinrih cultures for a single sire and dam to form a childermoot, and even though they didn't start out that way, Stormlight was teased by other pups who thought he was inbred\*.

Stormlight's misfortune attracted the attention of another pup in the local lighthouse. Just as he did with his sister and Pascal, Lodestar came to Stormlight's defense whenever he was harassed by his peers, and the four pups formed a tight circle of friends.

Stormlight was fascinated by the ansible network from puppyhood, and it was a no-brainer for him to become a Farspeaker when he came of age. However, he was conscious about the depersonalizing effects that online culture had on society. As awed as he was with the body of the noosphere, he harbored some guilt that he was perpetuating this spiral of loneliness. That being said, the network is a tool, and its up to its users whether it's used for good or evil.

Stormlight and his friends were evacuated prior to the glassing of their little dwarf planet home by the Partisans. They met Tod during the evacuation and quickly integrated him into the group.

Stormlight holds the honor of being the yinrih to make First Contact with a human. As a farspeaker, he was in charge of the Dewfall's communication system, and found Bob's CQ while searching for a way to contact the sophonts on the planet below. There are a few reasons why he seized on Morse code as the method of choice:

- it's not an analog voice signal, meaning you don't have to understand the language.
- It's also not a digital signal, meaning you don't have to decode anything.
- The Continuous Wave modulation used to send Morse is very easy to generate compared to other emission types.
- Since Bob was using a straight key (the old timey telegraph keys you see in Westerns and Civil War documentaries) Stormlight picked up on the subtle variation in timing resulting from manual sending--what hams call a person's "fist"--and was able to piece together that a warm body was forming the signal rather than a computer.
- Calling CQ is a very repetitious process, and Stormlight's "contact" involved spamming "CQ CQ CQ CQ CQ CQ CQ" over and over again. When Bob responds with frustrated bewilderment, the missionaries interpret this as a successful communication and land near the source of Bob's signal.

Stormlight becomes very interested in this primitive wireless communication system, assuming it to be part of the body of humanity's noosphere. Bob offers to host him, and he wastes no time joining the local ham club, along with Tod, as can be seen by one of my previous stories.

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\*The size of a childermoot is a question of good vs better. You can have a perfectly healthy litter with a single sire and dam, but the preference is for higher genetic diversity.

# Lucy

Lucy is the human-pronounceable name of the high hearthkeeper in office at the time of the *Dewfall's* arrival on Earth. She is the successor to the High Hearthkeeper who tried to once again put a stop to interstellar mission work that caused Pascal to lapse out of scandal and Iris to go in with the traditionalists among the missionaries.

She was given the name Lucy at the first interspecies ecumenical conference in the City of Eternal Noon. Rather than risk offense or ridicule by picking a name herself, she asked one of the human attendees to name her. The name is likely a reference to Saint Lucy, given in honor of the Bright Way's affinity for light.

I have yet to decide on her personality and outlook. There are two contrasting options:

- A traditionalist who would rather lead a smaller, more faithful litter than an organization that's a mile wide and a foot deep. She sees her predecessor's attempt to suppress the missionaries as compromising the religion's identity for the sake of getting bellies on perches at the lighthouse. Ill-liked by the secular media and perhaps lacking in charisma.
- A reformer who, until the *Dewfall's* landing is all set to finish her predecessor's work of disbanding the missionaries in order to focus on more conventional philanthropic (philocynoidic?) endeavors. Treated much more positively in the non-Wayfarer press.

In either case, her priorities immediately shift to "holy crap we actually found someone!" after Earth is discovered, and, irrespective of her previous outlook, finds herself shepherding the Bright Way into a renaissance. She's the strongest advocate for humanity at Focus, and is responsible for opening Hearthside to human settlement. She's the first authority figure outside of Wayfarers' Haven that has any dealings with humans, and is the figure responsible for passing so-called *Ludd Laws\** within both Hearthside and the Allied Worlds.

\\* laws that strictly limit the export of monkey fox technology to Earth, to be explained in a later post

# That's Some Accent You Got There

Even though Tod is the only native Commonthroat speaker among the missionaries, his Moony accent makes it difficult for others to understand him at times. The other missionaries are L2 speakers who learned by consuming media from the AW as pups and with formal schooling later, giving them a more standardized accent. Tod's friends joke that they speak Commonthroat better than him, and if you define "better" as being closer to a high prestige standardized dialect, then they're technically right.

# Puke Paws

Military nicknames are, I am told, not terribly flattering. They usually stem from inside jokes or embarrassing incidents. Here's how Tod got his.

He seems to embellish more and more details each time he tells the tale, but it usually unfolds like this. He's hanging out with some other recruits after hours. While many of them are moonies like himself, some are from cosmopolitan urban centers on Welkinstead proper. These city folk have tasted the many and varied delights and temptations that have taken root on Welkinstead from around Focus, and they have a mind to corrupt their more rural brothers in arms.

One of these more worldly recruits shows up with a heaping bowl of wind fruit. Tod, innocent of the fruit's intoxicating properties, devours nearly the entire bowl. Keep in mind that a single fruit is enough to get a yinrih drunk. Tod staggers outside, three sheets to the wind, and promptly does the technicolor yawn several times, painting the pavement with the contents of his gut. Then he stumbles through the puddle of his own sick, covering all four paws with his own vomit.

His fellow soldiers call him "Puke Paws" from that day forward. One would think he'd be embarrassed by it, but he wears it with pride since it has nothing to do with his red coat or black ears.

# More on Firefly

So I've decided that Firefly is going to be more literally lich-like. Instead of the Eternal Womb being located in a lavish throne room, it's squirreled away somewhere deep within the cavernous capital complex, which occupies the entire surface, and possibly interior, of a dwarf planet. It's true location may have even been forgotten over the millennia, or may only be known to an inner circle that perpetuates the myth that the Eternal Womb's location is lost to dissuade people from trying to find and disable it. Firefly himself may no longer know where his body is. When he wants to make an appearance, he uses remotely operated robotic avatars or digitized recreations of his likeness projected onto vid screens.

He doesn't appear often, which only fuels conspiracy theories about him actually being dead, with the Partisan leadership using his image as a Big Brother figure and the locus of a cult of personality. A more plausible explanation for his reclusiveness is that he's developed dementia over the course of the 33 millennia he's been alive, since the vulpithecine psyche isn't equipped to store memories for that long. He drifts in and out of lucidity, only showing himself during these brief windows of sanity. (Recall that the seat of his consciousness is still within his physical body, not uploaded to the network, so he can't just offload memories or acquire more space.)

There is also a rumor among Wayfarers outside PT that Firefly regrets his actions as the Great Leader and wishes to bring an end to his unnaturally prolonged earthly life. These rumors only grow more numerous after First Contact. Whether he's crazy or contrite, it's clear to everyone that he's no longer in charge of day to day decision making. The vast majority of actions are done "according to his will", with only a pretense of seeking the Great Leader's approval before moving forward.

Speaking of cults of personality, a literal cult has arisen that worships the lichlord under the title The Master. Partisan leadership dithers between persecuting the sect as "dulls" (a derogatory term Partisans use to refer to people of faith) and promoting the cult as a means of control. Partisan policies on this and other matters can swing between extremes depending on who holds sway over the party at the time.

# On the Internet Nobody Knows You're a Monkey Fox

During the first year after first contact the missionaries interact with humans online a lot because it allows them to be on equal footing rather than having to slog through the "holy crap you're one of those aliens" reactions at every turn. They don't hide the fact that they're yinrih if the topic arises naturally, but sometimes they want to be able to mingle without the fact they're the only sapient nonhumans on Earth getting in the way.

They all have usernames that reflect their understanding of human culture. Not sure what the others are, but Tod's is definitely zorrillo\_dorito.

# Sighted Guide

Image

Lodestar serves as Ron's sighted guide. Correct posture (when the guide is a human, anyway) is to have the blind person walking behind and slightly to the side, with their hand on the guide's shoulder or upper arm. If the way forward becomes narrow, the guide puts their hand behind their back, and the blind person slides their hand down to hold the guide's wrist and moves to walk directly behind the guide. When handling a guide dog, the dog is on the left and the person's arm is slightly forward, with the dog leading the way but not pulling (unless the dog hasn't been worked in a few days in which case they'll be pulling for sure because they're excited to finally be working again). Lodestar wraps his tail around Ron's arm and tugs gently to alert him to narrow passages.

After the mass router trunk between Sol and Focus is established many other Knights of the Sun volunteer as sighted guides. The difference in lifespan means yinrih can commit to help a human for life.

# Update on High Hearthkeeper Lucy

New lore regarding High Hearthkeeper Lucy. Recall that I wasn't sure how to portray her, as a traditionalist or a modernist. I've decided that generally she leans traditional, but she considered temporarily suspending interstellar mission work. Prior to her accession to the high perch, she was a research monk on Yih working on the mass router project. She was confident that the mass router would be ready for general use very soon, and saw the suppression of womb ships not as a rejection of tradition but as embracing new technology that couldn't be abused like neurogel had been.

It's possible this was also High Hearthkeeper Brightsun's motive for suppressing interstellar mission work, but she was unable to control the narrative in the face of secular media who painted it as a rejection of "useless and antiquated busy work" that only served to create gel-heads. Brightsun reversed course precisely because she saw the scandal it was causing. This would make Pascal's lapse rather tragic, since he assumed the move was a compromise to make the faith more palatable to a modern secular audience.

# How Lodestar got his mech

I previously said that Lodestar used the pocket change accidentally left in his impedimenta to buy the raw materials to build his mech. However, since it's sacrilegious to bring money on a missionary journey, Lodestar probably wouldn't be the one to take advantage of it. Perhaps Ron is a bit of a numismatist, and Lodestar gives the pawful of alliance tokens and SC mineral notes to him as a gift, not realizing that the money is worth millions of times what it would be back at Focus.

Later, Lodestar waxes nostalgic about his mech pilot training days with the Knights. Ron gets an idea. Unlike Lodestar, Ron is very aware of the money's market value on Earth. The alliance tokens are made of polymerite, a hyper-exotic material as far as humanity is concerned, and both the coins and the mineral notes are technically alien artifacts, practically priceless prior to the introduction of the mass router. Ron innocently uses the handful of doggo dollars to buy the tons of raw materials needed, and approaches the other missionaries to help fabricate the parts needed to assemble the mech as a gift for Lodestar.

After they chew Ron's ear off for his act of sacrilege, the others acknowledge what's done is done and there's no returning five tons of aluminum powder and plastic pellets, so they might as well go ahead. And that's how Lodestar gets a mech to stomp around in while on Earth.

# Sunshine of Hearthside

I'm busy writing part 2 of *Beating the Heat*, and I'm starting to do "real" writer-type stuff that I swore I'd never do because I'm not a writer and this isn't a writing project, like outlining plots and writing character profiles. So here's what I have on the *Dewfall's* healer.

Like other natives of Hearthside, Sunshine has larger ears than the average yinrih. This is an adaptation to cope with the sweltering heat of the day side of the planet where most people live. One of her sets of bandpass membranes (secondary eyelids that filter incoming light) is a rich glossy blue rather than the metallic specular appearance expected of other yinrih. This is the other physical characteristic that sets Hearthsiders apart.

Like all yinrih healers, she takes drugs to keep herself hairless in order to maintain medical hygiene. Yinrih otherwise have an undercoat and dander that sheds constantly. Her bare skin is a little darker than similarly pigmented human skin thanks to yinrih blood being maroon. Her paws and muzzle are covered in black splotches. The balding drugs remove all fur, but leave the whiskers, which are very important tactile sense organs. When not taking the drugs, her fur is red like Tod's, but she lacks Tod's black ears. She's about 55 lbs. Humans often compare her to a Xoloitzcuintle.

She's very friendly and talkative. She likes to go for walks around the apartment complex where her host Sarah lives, as well as the surrounding neighborhood, stopping passers-by to ask innocently insensitive questions about human biology in general and their personal medical histories in particular.

While out and about, she typically wears a shear, flowing garment common to Hearthsider healers that covers her entire head, body, and tail save the paws and muzzle. This is meant to protect her naked skin from the sun.

She tends to be overconfident at first, jumping head first into something only to realize she's in over her ears and needs help. Nevertheless, she's a master when in her own element. She has to be in order to be chosen as an interstellar missionary.

Her "job" as a missionary is to catalog as much info as possible about human biology and health. She regularly reports her findings back to Wayfarers' Haven, where the town healer, who was also the mistress of novices of the healers' college Sunshine attended, organizes and publishes her findings to the wider yinrih medical community.

Like the other missionaries and Wayfarers generally, Sunshine is very excited to finally meet other sophonts, and wants to help us humans in whatever way she can. However, she's still pretty naive and ignorant of human anatomy and medicine, as can be seen from my last story.

# Sunshine's Hame

A bit of a retcon regarding Sunshine's clothing. She may have been given a hame as a parting gift by her mentor before departing Wayfarers' Haven on the *Dewfall*. This hame is the pelt of a healer saint who died while caring for victims of a certain epidemic on an orbital colony. She came out of retirement to ease the burden on her fellow healers and contracted the disease from her patients.

Sunshine likes to go for walks around the neighborhood while Sarah is away at school or asleep. She begins tagging along with Manny (the maintenance man from Beating the Heat) as he does his rounds, as she's insatiably curious about human tools. Manny in turn begins picking up Commonthroat.

Spring turns to summer turns to fall, and Sunshine breaks out her hame to cover her furless skin from the autumn chill. Now Manny is not familiar with vulpithecine funeral rites, and only sees a fur coat. He chuckles at the image of a normally furry creature shedding her fur only to put on a fur coat, and after the expected comments about staying away from PETA, he casually asks what animal the coat is made from.

"You mean 'WHO', not 'what'," says Sunshine.

Gears turn in Manny's brain, and after half a minute of stunned silence, he says, "...and what did they do to deserve THAT?!"

"What did she do? She single-handedly saved hundreds of lives during the outbreak of spacer's pox on Frithberg. I'm blessed to bear her holy pelage."

# Lodestar in his mech

Image

Here's the final update to my drawing of Lodestar in the cockpit of his mech. To the previous image is added a bank of tail-actuated switches at the base of his seat.

# Firefly

Firefly was hatched on a dwarf planet in the outer belt in the waning centuries of the age of decadence. His sires and dams were active with the missionaries. Although none of them had been selected to go on a mission, they assisted in other ways like mission control and wayfinding (searching for potentially habitable planets to send future missions to.) It was their greatest hope that one of their pups would be selected to go on a mission someday.

By all accounts Firefly's puppyhood was a happy one. He was beloved by his parents and litter mates, and was especially known for his piety. He was seldom seen without a prayer ring, and attended liturgies daily, sometimes more than once a day during important feasts.

In addition to his strong spiritual life, Firefly demonstrated strong leadership skills, even at an early age. He could frequently be seen leading the other pups in his lighthouse in meditative prayers, and he helped run retreats for his fellow youth as he grew older. Even adults were inspired by the fire in his soul.

Surrounded as he was by fervent Wayfarers, he was shielded from both the less exemplary side of the clergy as well as the growing secular antagonism elsewhere in the outer belt. This all changed as he was approaching adulthood.

One peculiar custom seen in some parts of Moonlitter and the Outer Belt, even to this day, is a requirement that pups reaching adulthood must take a public-facing job for some time in order to instill empathy for those working in customer service. Firefly found himself working at the repair desk of an electronics shop. It was here where he was exposed to the "real" world. One thing he noticed right away was how rude the customers could be. He particularly noticed that his fellow Wayfarers, who he had grown up to regard as kinder and more understanding, were just as rude as the secular yinrih who visited the store.

This planted a seed of doubt in his mind. What good was the Bright Way if Wayfarers acted no different than their secular peers? This seed was further nourished by Firefly's first exposure to the rest of the Bright Way, those corrupt clergy whose only interest was maintaining their monopolistic grip over the system.

One day, while seeking absolution, he confessed his doubts to the hearthkeeper of his childhood lighthouse. A patient and gentle confessor, she encouraged him to see these difficulties as an opportunity for growth. "Faith is not a feeling," she said. "You were a very faithful pup, but much of that was your sires' and dams' teaching you how to live. Now's your chance to own that faith as an adult." Yet his doubt lingered even as he continued his outward devotion.

Around this time, the wayfinders discovered perhaps the most promising exoplanet in the history of the missionaries. It was not only overflowing with biosignatures, there were even rumors that long range imaging had picked up city lights on the planet's surface.

Every now and then, the wider clergy liked to parade the missionaries around in order to reinforce their rule by reminding everyone of their divine mandate to find other sophonts. This was one of those times. News of the promising new exoplanet was spread far and wide, to the point that it was almost a foregone conclusion that they would finally make First Contact. Clodbearer the Heresiarch had made his famous repudiation of the Great Commandment not too long before, and the ruling clergy found their grip on power slipping, but the news that the yinrih might not be alone in the universe after all was the perfect opportunity to remind the public that the clergy were still relevant.

Firefly's confessor encouraged him to apply to be a missionary to this new world, hoping that it would help him get over his doubts. Prospective missionaries are subjected to a battery of physical and mental health tests to make sure they're fit for the rigors of long-term suspension. The sensory input generated by the amnion as the nervous system is plugged into the ship's network can be addictive, and some people can be psychologically harmed to the point of madness by the alteration of time perception required by centuries of suspension. Firefly did pass these tests, but only just. The mission directors were all set to turn him down, as they were extra keen to ensure this all-but-guaranteed First Contact went smoothly. Firefly's confessor urged them to approve him, saying he was a man of great faith who was unlikely to succumb to addiction or madness.

And so Firefly was selected to go on the mission along with two others. His sires and dams were overjoyed that their dream of having one of their litter go on a mission was finally becoming reality. This joy was tempered by the sadness of knowing they would never see their little pup again, as they would be gone before the mission even arrived at this distant world.

As was the ancient custom, a living funeral was held for Firefly and the other missionaries so that their sires, dams, and litter mates could say goodbye to them one last time. A tiny sliver of bone was taken from each missionary and put in a reliquary, which was given a place of honor in the local lighthouse, as it was assumed they would spend the remainder of their lives on an alien planet, and it would be even longer before other Wayfarers would arrive and give their bones proper respect.

So with mingled joy and grief, Firefly's family and friends bade their last goodbye to him as he climbed into the amnion aboard their little womb ship.

To Firefly and the other two missionaries, the next several centuries passed in a few days. In that time, their sires, dams, and even their litter mates reached the end of their lives, and mission control passed from one set of paws to another as crew grew old and retired.

What happened next is a matter of considerable historical debate, and accounts differ depending if you're talking to partisan propagandists, Wayfarers, or Allied Worlds historians, but this much is agreed upon. The missionaries arrived in orbit around the planet and were pulled out of suspension, expecting a verdant garden of life, only to be met with yet another barren rock. It was even discovered that the little tidbit about city lights being detected was a crock of cloaca butter churned out by the clergy in a desperate attempt to hold onto power by making the prospect of finding other sophonts seem more likely. The missionaries had given up absolutely everything, and it turned out they were just chasing the end of the ring, just like every mission that had gone before them. On top of everything else, they had been used by a corrupt hierarchy to maintain

their stranglehold on Focus.

While all three missionaries were sad at the absence of sophonts to befriend and angry at the clergy for using them, this was the final straw for poor little Firefly. Ever since his miserable experience in that shop as an adolescent, he had been staring into an abyss of nihilism. For years he fought tooth and claw not to fall in. He prayed, he fasted, he meditated, he sought spiritual council, but nothing could remove that doubt gnawing at his gut. He willingly gave up ever seeing his beloved family and friends again, and was all but promised that his difficulties would be put to rest by finally making First Contact. It was a lie.

No, not just the thing about city lights, the whole Bright Way. Those secular agitators were right. It was all a ruse, a deceit concocted by the clergy to gull superstitious masses into submission. That confessor of his was probably in on the whole thing, too, putting on a mask of compassion to manipulate him and the rest of her congregation. Damn her greasy fur! There was no Light, no soul, no free will. From the day you hatched you were just rotting away a little each day until your insane fluke of an existence was snuffed out. The universe would go on reeling forward, shoved inexorably toward heat death by the blind force of entropy as though you never were.

It was in this state of existential turmoil that Firefly had to re-enter suspension for the journey back home.

# The Birth of the Partisans

During the centuries that the missionaries were making their way to the exoplanet, the Outer Belt saw a period of quiet, with the Bright Way regaining control over much of the region. The clergy's little PR stunt painting First Contact as an inevitability seemed to work. The secular insurgents were holding their collective breath. Perhaps Cloudbearer was wrong after all. The traditionalists within the Bright Way were hoping that First Contact would reorient the wider clergy back toward their original goal of finding and befriending other intelligent species, abandoning their monopoly over the system's infrastructure that had distracted them for nearly sixty millennia.

But you know what they say, no, not "All toasters toast toast". "Nobody gets in trouble for lying. They get in trouble for getting caught." When the missionaries arrived at what turned out to be another lifeless lump of rock, and the news made its way back to Focus through the ansible network that the hierarchy had lied, all hell broke loose in the Outer Belt. The hierarchy lost in mere days what they had spent centuries building back up. Not just the territory in the Outer Belt, but what little good will they had left, even from the traditionalists among the missionaries and on Hearthside. The clergy were expelled from the Outer Belt, and the region balkanized into a patchwork of warlord states consisting of competing secularist factions. The missionaries, hitherto tolerated by the secularists thanks to their shared enmity with the corporate arm of the Bright Way, now found themselves the targets of harassment and violence. The secularists blamed them for being complicit in the hierarchy's deception, knowingly or not. The missionaries are what gave the hierarchy legitimacy, and their servile obeisance to the hierarchy could only stop with their eradication.

The mission control team managing the now disgraced mission found themselves especially targeted. Protests escalated to death threats, some of which were followed through on. For the next several centuries, the team had to move from safe house to safe house, relocating when their new base of operations was discovered and attacked. Their fellow traditionalists on Hearthside made several offers to give them a place free from persecution where they could monitor the returning womb ship in peace, but Firefly and the others would eventually have to cross the Outer Belt once they entered Focus, and the control team thought it best that they had a safe place to dock upon their return.

This decision would be their undoing. After centuries of dodging bullets both metaphorical and actual, the control team's latest safe house was raided by a cell of secular insurgents. While the team itself survived the encounter, their management computers and the ansible connecting them to the ship had been stolen. Worst of all, the tailstone monocrystal connected to the womb ship's own ansible, the single most precious object to the entire mission, was also found and taken. They could lose their management computers, they could lose the ansible itself, but as long as they had more of the tailstone connected to the womb ship they could rebuild. Now they didn't even have that. The little craft was flying blind.

Here's where the history slips into speculation, with urban legends, propaganda, and guesswork

being the only guideposts. This is the version of events that most historians think is most plausible. With no warm bodies monitoring the logs coming back from the amnions aboard the womb ship, and with years passing in mere seconds for the travelers themselves, system errors and hardware failures slowly built up over the years until two of the three amnions failed, allowing the occupants to slip into unconsciousness, causing brain death. Firefly was the only survivor. Folk history among Wayfarers says that, given system control would have reverted to Firefly on the event that comms with mission control were severed, and knowing he wasn't in the best headspace going into suspension, he killed the other two missionaries in a nihilistic rage. Partisan propaganda says that he struggled mightily to save his crewmates, making a final plea to The Light to allow them to survive. A plea that went unanswered, convincing Firefly once and for all that religion was a poisonous lie.

Meanwhile, the hierarchy had their paws full trying to hold on to the rest of Focus. The outskirts of the Outer Belt had collapsed completely, with the territory of Moonlitter forming a stagnant battle front between the disorganized secular forces and the considerable might of the Knights of the Sun. This remained the status quo until a few years before Firefly was due to return home.

Firefly found his subjective time perception pulled back into sync with the outside world years before he was supposed to reenter Focus. He was reborn. The fire in his soul was no longer fueled by faith, but by a burning hatred for those that had wronged him. His sires and dams were dead, his littermates were dead. The world he was returning to was utterly unlike the one he left. And all of it was for nothing, for worse than nothing. For some time after his time perception normalized, Firefly had only the monotonous diagnostic data pouring into his mind from the ship's systems to keep him company, but soon that was joined by the voices of other yinrih. It seems the womb ship's ansible had regained contact with its twin at Focus. The messages flooding the ansible were not from mission control. The secularists who had stolen the tailstone had used it to manufacture another ansible and reconnect with the ship.

At first the messages were cruel, mocking Firefly for his blind faith, but soon the insurgents discovered that the erstwhile pious missionary had become sympathetic to their cause. For the insurgents, this was a boon of colossal proportions. A former champion of the Bright Way was now one of them. At first they planned to use him as a figurehead, a symbol of everything false and deceptive that was the Bright Way. Firefly was to be a standard bearer around which the fractured secularists could rally to finally push beyond the orbit of Moonlitter. But Firefly proved more than just a figurehead. He used his charisma to climb the ranks of this particular group of insurgents, using his extensive knowledge of the missionaries and the larger Bright Way to strike where they were most vulnerable. He became a trusted leader, first to the little cell that had secured the ansible, and then as those insurgents proved frightfully successful at targeting the Bright Way, other groups of secularists gathered around him until he found himself at the top of an entire movement, and all before crossing into the Outer Belt, indeed without leaving suspension.

By the time he re-entered Focus Firefly had single handedly rallied the previously disorganized secular warlord states behind a single terrifying banner. They were the partisans, and he was their great leader.

# Pascal the Wanderer

Pascal is one of the crew of the Dewfall. His Commonthroat name is rLPqsggrp /chuff, long rising strengthening grunt, huff, yip, short low weak growl, chuff, short high strong grunt/ which means "ring light", referring to sunlight reflected off of Yih's ring on summer nights. He's the odd man out among the yinrih who find Earth, as he's not a Wayfarer, or at least not a committed one. Humans might call him a doubting Thomas.

He's an average size for a yinrih, with mostly white fur with a few large black patches, including one around his left eye.

Historians studying the events of First Contact frequently compare Pascal with Firefly. They have shockingly similar life stories. Like the perpetual Partisan potentate, Pascal was hatched in the Outer Belt within the borders of Moonlitter. His sires and dams were very active in the missionaries, and Pascal was noted to be a very dutiful pup when it came to matters religious. Unlike Firefly, however, Pascal was quiet, bookish, and lacking in social intelligence. On the rare occasions he did speak, he could be rude, blunt, or even offensive, although almost never on purpose. He was just bad at reading the room, and he would apologize profusely when the inappropriateness of his comments were pointed out to him. He could also show surprising flashes of empathy. Once, upon hearing that a neighbor's pet had run off, Pascal spent hours searching for the critter in the pouring rain.

Also like Firefly, he took a mandatory customer service job as an adolescent (at a restaurant in this case). He noticed that his fellow Wayfarers could be just as rude, if not more so, than the average diner, which caused him to question whether the Bright Way was any good after all.

But it was an internal controversy within the Bright Way that cemented his doubts. The high hearthkeeper was once again entertaining the idea of halting interstellar mission work, rejecting the Great Commandment. This provoked a nagging question in Pascal's mind: "If the clergy doesn't care, why should I?"

Despite Pascal's ebbing faith, he didn't feel like he fit in with his secular peers, either. Most of his friends were still committed Wayfarers. Two of his friends, a pair of litter mates who attended the same lighthouse he did as a pup, even pursued religious vocations, with Iris becoming a hearthkeeper and Lodestar joining the Knights of the Sun. The three of them remained close even after the Partisan invasion of their planet and subsequent relocation of the population to a colony in the Inner Belt.

Pascal had suffered from depression in his youth, and without his faith acting as a bulwark against the darkness, he found himself drifting aimlessly through life as a young adult. Some time after he and his friends settled down at Wayfarers' Haven, the community decided to sponsor a mission to a newly discovered habitable planet, and Iris and Lodestar volunteered, and suggested that Pascal do the same.

Pascal protested, saying that it made no sense for a non Wayfarer to go on a mission, and at the end of the day, even if they did find other sophonts it wouldn't prove that the Bright Way was right. Iris countered by saying that his entire circle of friends was going on this mission, so he'd be alone once they left. He had shown no interest in joining a childermoot and hatching pups, and he wasn't exactly in a hurry to start a career. "Besides," she said, "The Light believes in you, even if you don't believe in the Light. Let's say you're right and the Bright Way is nonsense. You will have lost nothing by obeying the Great Commandment. But if I'm right, you will have gained everything." This persuaded him to join the mission.

Iris had an uphill battle getting the local overseer to approve Pascal's presence on the mission, as it was unheard of for a non Wayfarer to be a missionary. Iris managed to convince her superior by quoting the old missionary maxim "what healer does not abide among the sick?" So, along with Tod, Stormlight, and Sunshine, Pascal and his friends embarked on the mission that would, after a hundred millennia of yinrih history, finally make First Contact.

Upon landing on Earth, Pascal ends up lodging with one Fr. Shaheen, pastor of the local Maronite church and brother of one of the hams that first encounter the Dewfall. The priest originally offers to host Iris, as he wants to compare notes with the alien cleric, but Iris insists Pascal lodge with him instead, not because she's not equally interested in what sort of faith these hairless bipeds have, but because she hopes the priest will rekindle some sort of faith in the wandering yinrih.

Upon relating his reasons for coming on the mission to his host, Fr. Shaheen gives the yinrih his human name, "Pascal" as a reference to the French philosopher.

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Here's a random factoid: Blaise Pascal was born in 1623, and given the average age of the missionaries of about 150 plus the 250 years of suspension, that means Pascal was hatched 3 years after his namesake was born.