

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. Cloudbearer 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.

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