

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.

Updated 2026-06-05 22:51:56 UTC by Lurker