

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.

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.

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