

RTFM

The data center was enveloped in uncanny stillness. The hearthkeepers had cut the power to the whole region hours earlier in advance of the enemy's arrival. The backup generators had endured mere minutes before dying in their turn, leaving the anchorite's chamber alone running on a meager auxiliary battery, not that Skywatcher cared. The Preservationists had already lost, and he could only make the aftermath as unpleasant as possible for whichever faction, the Partisans or the Pious Dissolutionists, ended up taking over. The quiet darkness was punctuated by the sound of something slamming repeatedly against the fortified security door. Muffled barks could be heard between the booms, alternating between promises of leniency should the Farspeaker surrender and graphic threats of violence if he continued to resist.

"Take these and toss them in the shredder!" Skywatcher shoved a loose pile of claw-written papers into his slave's chest.

Whitepaw looked down at the notes hastily thrust at her. A light held in her tail feebly illuminated the text. Network diagrams, node tables, firewall rules. Decades, no, centuries worth of meticulous documentation poured out in the anchorite's own ink. "This... this is our entire network segment," she gasped.

"Yeah, now shred it. All of it," growled Skywatcher. "I already wiped the backup drives. If those scripture-thumping zealots want their precious noosphere they'll have to work for it."

"Body," Whitepaw yipped meekly. "The network is the body of the noosphere, not the noosphere itself."

Skywatcher wrinkled his muzzle, exposing his fangs. "I KNEW you were one of them. When I was your age, I believed in all that cloaca butter, too. Then I grew up. I swear each new slave I get is more pious than the last. If you're not going to help me, then get out of my way!" He tore the papers back from her and spun around, his tail striking her in the chest. She toppled backward. Her shoulder hit a half-empty equipment rack stacked precariously with unmounted equipment. Whitepaw landed on her back just as the rack teetered over and fell in turn, burying her in a mound of inert electronics and knocking the wind out of her.

SMASH!

The noise of the collapsing equipment rack was drowned out by the sound of the security door being torn from its hinges. Sunlight streamed through the breach. Mechanical footfalls thumped down the hall and into the office. From her spot on the floor Whitepaw saw the hulking form of a mini mech lope into the room. Its body looked like some prehistoric monster wrought in polymerite and steel. Its torso was too short, and its forelegs were too long. Its forepaws were curled into fists, the knuckles bearing the weight of the mech's front end rather than its palms. This was no scripture-thumping zealot, no Knight of the Sun. The mech's right foreleg bore the device of the

Partisans, a black paw held palm out in defiance. The Partisans' credo was scrawled in Outlander below the symbol, "The skies are empty. We are alone."

Skywatcher stared open-mouthed into the mech's visor. The pilot's mouth was half-open, his tongue protruding slightly, but his eyes were closed, and his head flopped seemingly lifeless to one side.

"An Immortal," Skywatcher stammered. The pilot couldn't have been older than Whitepaw herself, at least in body. Who knows how long he had been in metabolic suspension plugged into that mech. His fur clung in ragged wet mats to his gaunt expressionless face. It used to be white, but the neurogel he was pickled in turned it yellow. His eyes did not see. His paws did not feel. His heart did not beat. His body was dead, but his brain was frighteningly active, kept alive by the suspension capsule.

Whitepaw had heard stories of these Immortals. They started out as gel heads recruited by the disorganized secularist warlords dotted across the Outer Belt. They were usually terminally addicted teens who couldn't be unplugged without flatlining. Their suspension capsule would be integrated into a mech, and their nervous system would be connected to the mech's sensor suite and control system. They say the Partisans found a way to slow down a person's time perception while in suspension, allowing them to react with lightning speed to what was going on around them. Whether this was true or not, they were legendarily hard to dispatch. After Firefly the Apostate united the secularist warlords under the Partisan banner, he turned these Immortals into his elite shock troops. Oddly fitting given the Great Leader himself never left his own suspension capsule even after returning from his failed missionary journey. Undead soldiers for Litchlord Firefly. The dregs of society proved poorly disciplined soldiers, so he started recruiting otherwise healthy men, using suspension capsules scavenged from unlaunched womb ships abandoned by the missionaries fleeing Firefly's genocide. The device of the missionaries, two enmeshed gears symbolizing the union of two noospheres, was still visible on the side of the capsule. The Partisans deliberately left it uncovered in an act of blasphemous mockery of the faith.

The mech wordlessly strode forward and lifted Skywatcher by the neck. The anchorite let out a few choking gasps, straining with a rear paw to grab some blunt object to toss at the metal brute. He managed to grab the heavy metal head of a loose network cable and send it flying at his attacker. It bounced off the mech's free forepaw and clattered uselessly to the floor. The pilot's tongue gave a barely perceptible twitch as though he were laughing at his victim's futile struggling. The mech's writing claw and inner thumb moved to grip the sides of the Farspeaker's head, preparing to twist it off like a bottle cap. Whitepaw bit her tongue to stop herself from yelping. Skywatcher had not been a particularly kind master, but nobody deserved to die like this.

The pilot's left ear flicked lazily as he processed an unheard order from his handlers waiting outside. He loosened his grip on Skywatcher's head, then tossed him carelessly over the mech's back and caught him again in the coils of the mech's tail. The Immortal turned and plodded out of the room. Skywatcher looked helplessly at the pile of equipment Whitepaw was hiding under. The tail constricting his midsection didn't keep him from wheezing out desperate prayers, seeking refuge in the faith he had scorned not three minutes earlier.

Whitepaw lay still, forgotten for the moment, at least she prayed so. She heard harsh barking coming from outside. Two more Partisans were questioning the anchorite. Skywatcher uttered a few raspy oaths to please his lightless captors. They didn't seem impressed.

"You can either give us your network documentation willingly, or we can squeeze it out of you," one of them growled.

"Please, by the empty sky," he gasped. "Hard copies. I've got hard copies in the office where you found me."

Whitepaw shuddered. If she hadn't been seen before they'd surely find her when they came back inside. Apostasy or death, those are the choices they'd give her. It didn't matter that the Pious Dissolutionists were technically the allies of the Partisans against the corporate arm of the Bright Way. At least they used to be allies. Once the Preservationists, the ones fighting to preserve the Bright Way's stranglehold on the system's economy, were driven back to Yih, questions about the future of Focus, about the fate of the Bright Way, the real Bright Way, the faith, not the system-spanning megacorp that wore the faith like an ill-fitting mask only when it suited their needs, began fracturing the fragile alliance. She dug her claws into her palms and shut her eyes tight. "Don't focus on the pain," she told herself. "No matter how much it will hurt, at least it will be over quickly. Then I won't have to worry about the war anymore." She uttered a final prayer. "O Uncreated Light, please shine upon me, the least of thy little ones."

THUMP!

A dull tremor shook the floor underneath her.

THUMP!

And then another, and then even more. The two Partisans began shouting incoherently. "A Knight-no there's three," one of them barked. There was more yelling, then the shriek of metal on metal as the Immortal engaged the interloping mechs.

"Come on, you old rust bucket." Daybreak flicked one of the mech's controls with his outer thumb, pulling up the hull integrity monitor on his HUD visor. His complaint broke the silence otherwise accompanied only by the low thump of the mech's footfalls as it loped across the terrain.

"I don't see anything wrong," said Sunrise, tilting his head back toward the squire seated behind him in the cockpit.

"I'm telling you, you may pilot this mech, but I'm the one patching her up after every sortie. I know every joint, bolt, hose, and wire in this thing. Feel that?," he pressed his palm against the bulkhead in front of him. "That faint rattle every time one of her rear paws goes down. It's her tail. The first joint is coming loose."

Sunrise checked the hull integrity on his own visor. "Everything's at twelve-dozen per gross," he grunted. "I think I have more faith in your repairs than you do."

“Void!” Sunrise swore. He had switched his HUD visor back to the mech's forward vid sensor array. “The Partisans beat us to the data center, and they have an Immortal with them.”

“Why would they need an Immortal just to capture a data center held by an old anchorite?” asked Daybreak.

“Because they knew we were coming,” Sunrise growled. He pressed a few chords on his own keyers, bringing up a comms channel to the two knights flanking his mech on either side.

“Yeah yeah, we already see him,” one of them preempted. “I doubt he'll be much of a problem for-”

“Light blind me, where'd he go!” The other knight barked. “He was just there, and then-”

The Immortal had vanished in the flick of a whisker, leaving a dust cloud in his wake leading between the forelegs of the mech. Daybreak's nimble digits flew across his keyers with the grace of a musician playing an instrument. The mech's tail slammed into the ground, narrowly missing the Immortal as he slid just out from under the mech's chassis.

He grabbed the end of the mech's tail and dug his hind claws into the dirt, arresting the mech's forward stride.

Daybreak cringed at the metallic twang of tearing pseudosinew as the Immortal succeeded in amputating the mech's tail.

“What'd I tell you,” said Daybreak.

“Not now, Light blind it!” Sunrise growled, his digits flying across his keyers. The mech reared up on its hind feet and extended its plasma claws, then lunged forward. It slashed empty air where the Immortal had been a few milliseconds earlier.

The mini mech leapt in the path of the other knight, wielding the amputated tail like a club. He brought the hulk of dead metal down on the other mech's head with a crunch, shattering its optics and stripping off the antenna arrays on its muzzle.

The Immortal clambered onto the blinded mech's back, clawing at random spots along the spine. It straddled the mech's shoulders and punched a hole in the polymerite armor covering the umbilical sheath connecting the mech's head-mounted sensor suite to the cockpit and started tearing away cables like an animal rooting through an insect nest.

The blind mech bucked and swerved wildly, trying to dislodge the saboteur. It crashed into the data center, bringing the wall down and causing a section of roof to collapse. The mech bent its legs and leaped into the air, twisting its spine so its back pointed earthward, then slammed down, all its weight concentrated between its shoulders.

The Immortal's suspension capsule popped loose from the frame of the mini mech like a seed from a pod and went rolling until it came to rest near its Partisan handlers hiding behind a standing

section of wall.

There was an almighty crash as the outer wall and roof of the building crumbled. Sunlight flooded what was left of the office. Whitepaw opened her eyes and saw one of the Knights' mechs looming over her. It was proportioned much more like a yinrih, with recognizable head, torso, and limbs. Its head turned down to face her. It lifted one of its great metal paws and began deftly removing the debris piled on top of her.

She stood up and shook the dust from her fur. A hatch on the mech's underbelly lowered, revealing Sunrise and Daybreak within. Sunrise pulled off his HUD visor and jumped out. "Praise the Light, you're alive! Are you hurt?"

"I think I'm OK," Whitepaw muttered as she stared at the aftermath of the fight. The two Partisan handlers stood silently beside one of the mechs. All eight paws were shackled together, the mech's rear paw resting on the chain, anchoring it in place.

One of the squires approached Skywatcher, dipping his head respectfully. "My reverend anchorite, could you show us the documentation for your segment of the network?"

"Choke on it, fundy!" Skywatcher spat. "I wiped the data drives, and good luck finding what's left of my notes in that rubble."

"You know, we could have let those Partisans tear you in half," said the squire. "They would have killed you even if you gave them what they wanted."

"Found 'em!" Whitepaw and Sunrise walked up to the rest of the group. Sunrise had Skywatcher's notes wrapped in his tail. "This kind young lady showed me where they were."

"You eggless wretch!" Skywatcher barked.

Sunrise adopted an authoritative tone and addressed Whitepaw. "You are free, and your debt is forgiven."

"By whose authority?!" growled Skywatcher.

"By the decree of her radiance, high hearthkeeper Iris," Sunrise responded.

"That weak blunt-fanged pretender!" Skywatcher hissed.

"That weak blunt-fanged pretender just captured your entire network segment," said Daybreak.

"Just get over there." One of the other knights bound Skywatcher and led him to one of the mechs, far away from his former captors.

"So, what's going to happen to the Immortal?" asked Whitepaw.

“Well,” said Sunrise pointing his muzzle at the suspension capsule, “He is currently profaning a blessed instrument of our Holy Work. He’s going back to Hearthside with us, and we’ll hand him off to an order of rehabilitators. They’ll try to wean him off the gel, but by the time most of these poor lickens get plugged into those mini mechs their psyche is so integrated into the simulacrum generated by the capsule that they’ll die without it. If that’s the case they’ll get his metabolism running again and he’ll live out his natural life in sim.”

“What about me?” she asked.

“Like I said, you’re free. We can’t make you do anything. I’d suggest that you accompany us back to Hearthside as that’s the furthest away from the front. A lot of freed slaves want nothing to do with their former work, but we can set you up with the Farspeakers there if you wish. You’d be paid justly as an apprentice, depending on your experience you could be made an anchoress.” His voice caught on his next words. “A lot of slaves want nothing to do with the Faith, either. It hurts me that we pushed people away like that, but again, we can’t force you to do anything.”

“But you didn’t do any of that,” Whitepaw interjected. “You saved my life.”

“You’re right,” said Sunrise. “It may not be our fault personally, but it is our responsibility as Wayfarers to fix what the Preservationists broke. The Bright Way singing liturgies on Hearthside is the same Bright Way extorting and enslaving people on Yih.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Whitepaw. “I’ll help make things right, too.”

Revision #1

Created 2026-06-01 20:48:48 UTC by Lurker

Updated 2026-06-01 20:48:48 UTC by Lurker