

The Farspeaker's Apprentice

The main core of the network stretched out before me: rack upon rack of black boxes extending into the distance, their chassis scintillating with link lights blinking softly as packets rushed in and out of each interface. Meticulously bundled cables of various colors spilled forth from the racks and ran here and there along runways above my head. A cold breeze from the heat pump rustled my whiskers. Permeating this cavernous chamber was the rushing white noise of thousands of cooling fans. I turned my muzzle up, taking in the whole scene. This chamber so huge that I couldn't see the far wall, it was all but a tiny ganglion in the vast interplanetary nervous system, the body of the noosphere.

My mind wandered back to my puppyhood, to a catechism class where I was taught about the farspeakers, the ones who labored ceaselessly to maintain this network. They said that the sophonts who dwelt among the stars, whose bone is not of our bone and whose flesh is not of our flesh, that they must have internetworks of their own. Sapience, I was told, is much more likely to arise in a social species with an intrinsic need to communicate among themselves, and so a noosphere must in time fashion a body for itself as the species spreads across its homeworld and hearth star, and these sophonts find themselves needing to cast their thoughts across far flung space and deepest time. It was the Farspeakers' duty to tend to the body of our own noosphere, so that one day they could fulfill the Great Commandment by uniting these alien internetworks with our own. And now, I suppose, it was my duty as well.

I made my way to one side of the room, where a thick curtain separated the anchorite's chamber from the data center. I pushed the curtain aside with my snout just enough to poke my rhinarium into the room. I smelled an older woman. She must have seen at least six centuries by the scent of her. Over top her musk I detected the odor of a strong perfume, the sort that barked "leave me alone!" The roar of the machines outside became muffled by the thick cloth in the doorway as the rest of my head followed my muzzle into the chamber. The anchoress's large Hearthsider ears were silhouetted against the green glow of a terminal. Her right ear flicked as my claws clicked against the raised tile floor, and I detected a slight note of annoyance in her musk.

"You're finally here," she said, not looking away from the display. "So, the hearthkeepers pressed you into their service since you could not pay your tithe to your lighthouse."

I tilted my muzzle upward, though she didn't see my affirmation.

"We bought you," she spat the words with disgust, "for a hefty price off of those witches on Yih. They wonder why so many are wandering from the path. The Outer Belt is filling with apostates scandalized by the clergy's decadence. They blot out The Light's Truth with their sins!" she barked. "Forgive my outburst," she said more softly, "On Hearthside the faith flourishes while the slothful hierarchy allows it to rot across the rest of Focus. The Missionaries who dwell past Moonlitter are the only others who keep the old traditions."

She let out a sigh, and I could smell her trying to calm herself. "If it is any comfort to you, I detest your presence here as much as you do. We anchorites prefer to keep no company. But if our holy work is to continue, we must pass down our knowledge to those whose muzzles are not silvered by age." She at last turned to face me. Her frosted snout contrasted with her sable pelage. She reared up and performed the holy greeting. "Light shine upon you, friend."

"Mistress—" I began, but she cut me off. "That's not my name! And your name isn't 'pup', or so I guess they called you on the homeworld. You will call me Seabreeze, or Breezy if you are not one for formality." I took a breath to speak, but she plucked the words from my throat. "I know, a strange name for a Hearthsider. A few of my dams were from Sweetwater. It is a tediously common name there, but quite refreshing here in the Nightless Desert. And you, sir, what is your name?"

I blinked all four pairs of bandpass membranes in astonishment at her deference. "It's Littlepaw."

She examined me nose to tail. "Littlepaw, eh?" Her earlier harshness had softened into a more maternal tone. "It suits you. The runt of your litter, were you?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Splendid!" she yipped. "A meager frame is an asset for a farspeaker. You'll be crawling through narrow conduit pulling cable in your tail."

My ears wilted. I had hoped that I could leave hard labor behind by becoming a Farspeaker's apprentice. Seabreeze saw my apprehensive expression and took pains to reassure me. "I won't ask of you more than you can give," she said gently. "We're not so mercantile here on Hearthside as they are on Yih. We take time to do things right, and that includes making sure you feel rested and ready. Of course you're not ready yet. You need to be trained first." She reached under the table, and giving voice to a grunt, I guessed for the weight of the machine, she pulled out a black box like the ones fastened to the racks outside. "This is an internetwork node," she said patting its metal chassis with her tail as a dam would a pup she's particularly pleased with. "You need to get comfortable with this before I turn you loose on the nodes out there. I'll give you the honor of turning it on."

I reached forward and depressed the power switch with my writing claw. The machine roared to life like a shuttle taking off. I couldn't help but pin my ears back and open my eyes wide with puppyish glee. The hearthkeepers back home would never have so much as handed me a wrench, but here I was going to be in control of that network node. It was an empowering feeling.

Seabreeze matched my expression, as though she herself were just beginning to uncover the mysteries of the noosphere again. Then she cleared her throat and her face grew solemn, and she began what sounded like a long rehearsed preachment. "The impious accuse us of obscuring plain facts behind a curtain of mysticism. We do no such thing. The noosphere is a complex and many-faceted thing, and its body, which we farspeakers are charged to attend, reflects this complexity. One cannot grasp its wonder in a day, indeed, so intricate are its inner workings that no single farspeaker understands it from nose to tail."

I thought about the endless rows of nodes outside, about the arcane protocols that governed their interactions, about the impossibly complex web of cables and wireless uplinks and Underlay tunnels that connected everything together. The task before me suddenly seemed insurmountable. If no one, not even an anchoress like Seabreeze, could fully grasp the extent of the noosphere, what chance did I have?

Seabreeze smelled my apprehension. She looked at the node now humming quietly, having finished its boot sequence, then back at me. "You're a young pup climbing his first tree. You will fall many times before you reach even the lowest branch. Each time it will hurt, but don't let the pain discourage you. You stand atop my own paw prints. You won't be judged by how many times you fall, but by how many times you pick yourself up, shake the dust from your fur, and start climbing again."

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