

When Urs finally returned from that pointless charade of a mentor meeting, he opened his wide mouth, teeth gleaming in the stolen electricity from the topside, and laughed a horrible echoing laugh that made all the exposed napes stand on end. He knew from the start that Giyas would be just as useless as all the other mentors puttering about like senile flies around a shambling corpse. The stink of stagnation and decay seeped out of every crack in their mental defenses.

Their efforts to make the world a better place rang hollow when every single one of them could seamlessly transmit their knowledge without even thinking too hard about it. Into the hivemind, into every cccat that walked this world, even into places that hadn't been seen in a long time. The fact that they guarded their information so jealously made Urs's skin crawl. How powerful could he be if he had access to every mentor's ability at the same time, but they touted their false equity spiels.

They didn't care about equity. If they did, they wouldn't be so hard to track down. No, it was the natural selfishness of creatures that had gone unchallenged for too long. Killing them was just as pointless: why waste the knowledge?

"Sir?"

Urs fell silent, his mind racing with thoughts of domination. There wasn't a cccat alive that could beat him back once he set his sights on them. Giyas was "nice" and nice meant they would succumb to pressure if there was enough of it. If he had a few dozen more drones in his hive, a few more soldiers, it would be easy to isolate the mentors who already wished to be alone and subjugate them. In fact, Urs already saw the holes in Giyas's heart.

Easily triggered, that one, he thought. He imagined poking his sharp claws into those mental holes and tearing them wide open, dumping hundreds of years of collective sensory input into the new funnel of his own design. Every poisonous thought from every single one of his drones in an endless barrage. Giyas couldn't parse, that much Urs knew. Most cccats couldn't. It was a rare trait.

Mental shielding also didn't stand up against nearly infinite pressure. His drones, their old "family" and their "friends", all of those senseless

thoughts could be fashioned into a spear and pierce directly through the channels in search of total surrender to him. Wouldn't that be nice?

However, he had other things to attend to.

He didn't have to speak to be heard. With a simple flick of his mental attention, his peon drone cowered before him, flinching just enough to show reverence to his superior, but not so much that it looked like a snivelling and spineless pissant. Nobody wanted a totally incompetent stooge bowing down to them. Stooges were better used for distractions and sacrifice.

Reams of information traveled across the mental link, the peon offering everything it had gathered from the scouts out in Fever; a wasteland of everything besides potential. He saw images of sick humans hunkering together around large crystals radiating warmth and light, their backs bent and their heads swivelling in search of onlookers. Beside their little camp lay a huge crate, and it didn't take a genius to know what that was.

Urs delivered his commands across the strong mental link with the rest of Animal Control. A handful of scouting parties would gather to the south of them and draw their attention away, while another scouting party moved in from the east. Any humans not on the list were to be eradicated and their aetherbands retrieved. He would be joining as a point, much to the alarm of the hive.

"Isn't it dangerous to go out there, Sir?" It was the peon again. "The Coalition is on the move, and we suspect they will cross the boundaries of the molehill."

Urs blinked, his eye sinking down into his pouch as his eyelid became thick lips that curved into a tight frown. Teeth appeared in the darkness of his mouth, jagged and yellow. His crowns twitched erratically, scurrying all of the mental observers into an orderly mesh of crossing thoughts, mostly about nonsense. It was just Urs and the peon now.

"It is rare that I am annoyed enough to speak," Urs said, his voice a whisper.

His peon edged closer, ears flattened in subordination. Whether it was because of the fear of Urs's spoken voice, or the terror of being assimilated into connective thread, no one could know.

“You will be coming with me instead,” he continued. “I changed my mind. You should see what I have learned from our friend, Giyas.”

The peon tensed. Urs returned his glassy marble eye back into his mouth, and the growl in his throat disappeared along with his teeth. His soldiers moved into formation, steely claws stretching across Fever in straight lines. A grid appeared over the city, seen only by the ones who mattered, blinking lights showing markers that shone brilliantly in the darkness. Dim trails connected the markers, and a wave of understanding passed through the hive.

Urs traveled quickly, seeing the fruits of his commands almost immediately. The molehill, La Masse, was too blinded by their own hatred to understand the danger they brought upon themselves. The Coalition would only stand idly by for so long before their bottomless stomachs ached for the flesh of their natural prey. Urs would have preferred the Coalition attack La Masse without his encouragement, but with how often humans holed up in his territory, he knew he’d have to start engineering something.

One thing at a time.

He had to teach his peon a lesson about the ranks of the world and its place within them. To teach this lesson, he would have to take a different form.

He hated squeezing into the fleshy tubes of a human facade; it made him appear like a helpless target. Gone were his tall ears and crowns, his jagged fur and vestigial red arms. His eye closed and separated into two orbs, one real and the other a borrowed illusion from one of his more competent captains. His tail dropped from the base of his spine, the wriggling appendage startling the peon before dusting.

Urs left without another word, followed by his appointed companions. As he approached the camp, fading completely into the dark, the sounds of screaming and gunfire echoed around him. These weapons were new, and had a much more metallic twang to their recoil. His scouting eyes funneled information to him, and blinked out as his drones undoubtedly died in a flash of light.

“Did you know Crooks and humans used to be the same?” Urs asked. His peon shook its head. “It’s true. The Crooks used to be what happened to us when we broke the truce. We used to become monsters. Some say we still do.”

The peon slowed down, that feeling of being trapped in a room with Urs mounted. Dread crept up from the cracks in the asphalt and jabbed needles into the peon’s soles. Urs grit his teeth, grunting as the points sanded themselves down into perfectly mirrored human teeth.

It took extraordinary skill to perfectly mimic a human being. It took a lot of practice, and plenty of subjects to study. Their skin was a lot more elastic than it appeared. Their teeth were irregular cones of bone, and they fit together in odd ways. Other cccats could tell in an instant if he was the real thing, and every fiber of their being wished to twist away from it.

“There’s a few of us who still remember whose side we’re on,” Urs continued.

He rounded the corner of the human camp. Most of them had already been pulled apart by the scouting parties. Their gunfire petered out as the survivors retreated, and Urs made sure to intercept a pair of humans. The sound of pattering feet followed the pair of humans through a labyrinth of layer rubble. Old steel beams and slabs of concrete constructing the foundation.

These humans were no strangers to ambush. They, too, readied weapons, though it didn’t end up doing them any good. Urs suffered no injury as he stalked after his examples, for his hive threw themselves in front of him, absorbing the burning hatred of bullets laced with magic negating alloys. Soldiers were easily replaceable, especially as Fever sunk deeper into chaos. Many of the soon to be members of his hive were realizing at this moment that no help was coming for them.

No CIB mechs were going to come down into Fever like they had when the crooks returned. They would not be digging out the world and rebuilding it, they would not be sending supplies or aid in the meantime, no food or clean water, no clothing or tents, no medicine, no nothing! Only Urs had these things in spades, and, eventually, the smarter of the survivors would start answering his calls for negotiation.

And the rest?

The humans fired their weapons until they were out of ammunition. Bodies in various states of life smoldered on the ground, their crowns twitching to distill all the information about the experience into an exhaustive list of potential exploits for the technology. A few of the captains explained what they knew of weapons design and augmentation.

The peon stayed close, feeling safer next to Urs even though it was still just trapped with him. Tail tucked, ears flat, crowns down, it stayed in step with Urs until the humans had nowhere else to go.

“Pay attention,” Urs whispered. “I will only show you once.”

He snapped his fingers hard enough to break one. In an instant, his entire body tensed, his threads of life snapping in the wake of his pain and rage. The broken bonds collided with each other as they expelled heat, and Urs captured that heat with a level of concentration that only came from years of experimentation.

His broken finger mended itself once the flames ignited in his mind, and the fire roared to life. Unlike natural fire, this tamed beast stayed in a slender shape, much like a string, with a frayed white outline. Urs shot the string out to the humans, who tried in vain to scramble away. Flames engulfed them, traveling up their clothes like a skittering spider until the deeper burning began.

Urs stared at them, his illusion eye disappearing along with all his other human features as he reformed into a cccat. A dim flame spread between the two useless limbs sticking out of his back, maintaining the connection to the flames that seared through human flesh and gnashed through hair. Acrid smoke filled the area, and the screaming was unlike anything the peon had ever heard in its life.

It wished to flee and Urs would let it.

The peon turned away and fled, sniveling and crying as haunting echoes trailed after it. Urs would let the hive have some fun with this poor unfortunate soul, too weakwilled to even be a proper informant. There was no place for them outside of total assimilation, but the good thing about cowards was that they made great binding agents for the mesh.

The peon was not a fighter and fell easily under a whirlwind of fists, feet, and teeth. Now that it was properly punished, and the humans were

little more than charred bones and burnt meat, Urs could respool the peon into something useful.

Together, in that trapped room, Urs prepared the peon for its final resting place. He capped the limbs, using fire to permanently cauterize the wounds, leaving grotesque scars behind. He then instructed his remaining hive members to place the peon in a warehouse, with all the rest, and weave the thoughts into the walls around the Animal Control hive.

With Urs's careful eye and omnipresent awareness, the mental shield around him strengthened with new layers of discordant thought. Holes patched, Urs went back to his throne.