

After Urs taught the peon a lesson, and wove their consciousness into the wider mesh that constructed the outer edges of Animal Control's hive, he returned to his base to select another peon to take the previous one's place.

He wasn't in the mood to argue, and would be far more selective so this one would last a bit longer before also being assimilated into the mesh. As he leafed through his options, opening a mental filing cabinet to find the totality of every bit of information that had been extracted from them upon their joining. Many of the newest additions to Animal Control were only their because there needed to be cannon fodder for the clashes with the Coalitions and La Masse.

Most of them had accepted their fate, at least enough to get in, but it hardly mattered. The unruly peons would be assimilated to strengthen the hive's defenses against that nosy ass bitch from Key, who was routinely poking her crowns where they didn't belong. What a psychotic cccat, having the ability to pry under the panels of a hive's network to see inside without permission.

If he had been a crueller cat, he would have had her kidnapped, but she was protected by a crook, who was a lot sturdier than most gave him credit for. Some little donkey looking thing, with a small head and tall notched ears. If it called on the help of friends, who would also undoubtedly be crooks, Urs would have to deal with stinking humans, cowardly cats, and brutish crooks from above as well as below.

He'd be dealing with one of those problems soon enough, he just had to study more.

The good thing about having a thousand minds all linked together was the fact that all minds could work together to analyze data. Urs had his first true immolation attempt seen from dozens of angles, and had his captains already processing the exact effects of the magic, picking it apart for him so he didn't have to try to figure it all out on his own.

It was one thing to be able to do the magic, but another thing entirely to truly understand it. That was something he'd gleaned from Giyas, when that fool finally showed their face to him. Their mind was

weak, though, and Urs would be capitalizing on that soon enough, but not until he could defeat Giyas as his own game.

Urs rewatched the threads of mental playback, noting how the flames formed in his hands, how it spread across the materials, how it burned and seared and singed. He had hundreds of comments flow through his mind, coming from magic casters in other elements, but still knowledgeable about magic more broadly speaking.

They told him about his form, and how to improve it, how to better isolate the ignition from the ambient atmosphere, allowing him to burn the fire hotter so vaporizing could happen instantaneously next time. The hive mind ran dozens of simulations, augmenting the shared memories with magical markers, labels, and streams of data from books, videos, and research papers once accessed in a university, back when those were still around and people gave a damn about a “proper” education.

Each bit of information gathered under Urs’s skin, and his body moved and changed to follow the examinations. He changed his stance, his hands, his fingers. He even paid closer attention to the way his claws slid across the others. He understood more of the heat and where it needed to come from.

He understood how the flow of air could change the effectiveness of his fire, starving it or fueling it. He understood that flames could be unpredictable, but the advantage of total immolation was that it could rage as long as the subject didn’t try to put it out. That’s what burning the inside of the lungs first was for.

That’s why burning the nerves was so effective. If they went numb and lost all feelings, they could continue to burn until there was nothing left. Some of the less social hive members showed statistics for burning different types of materials, including hair, fur, nails, skin, blood, and raw magic. Many other hive members averted their mental eyes as simulations of humans, cccats, crooks, gravents, and nautipods were immolated and the simulation data filtered in.

Urs studied it all, alone, in his base, where dozens of burly cccats trained to fight and kill in close combat, kept guard, their minds left to the devices of security. Only the most trusted of the hive

members could make it to a position like this, especially because La Masse would want to retaliate against the senseless slaughter of their kind.

Humans were so sensitive to that kind of thing. What did it matter when they could actively make more if they spent their time doing that instead of having thoughts about Fever or opinions about anything else. They lived like the animals did, so they should have stayed doing that.

A vague sense of historically relevant flowed in, depicting feral humans living in tribes out in the wilderness. Whatever happened to them staying where the animals were? What did gravents ever see in them to begin with? He was losing track of his intentions.

For the next few days, Urs sat in his base and trained, not bothering to answer anything that didn't require his immediate attention. When La Masse mounted their assault, Animal Control destroyed them, utilizing the knowledge their superior processing power disseminated to run a series of tests on the incoming thugs. Urs had to take over the drones in order to run these tests, but he didn't need to physically be there in order to cast his magic.

He had the awareness and the experience. He had the knowledge of the elements in his mind, and understood how to hold his body in the optimal posture to facilitate exactly what he needed to do to learn. Unlike Givas, Urs had no qualms about burning living things alive to see how the magic worked. He had no issue with the destruction of whatever remained standing either if it didn't already belong to him.

And, to the credit of La Masse, they were like a bunch of skittering pests, always trying to learn from the mistakes of others. O, how he wished he could rain fire down upon them. But that was such a shortsighted goal for him to strive for. He didn't need to kill all of them, just enough of them.

His real goal was far more sophisticated than that. All this research and training was in service to a grander goal of incredible design. While the Key Holders scrambled around, waiting for something that would never come, Urs had every intention of taking all of Fever for himself and declaring it his own personal kingdom. The cccats from the junk cities were more and more afraid of the world as the Coalitions moved in to seize resources.

Being purely magical creatures meant they made for much more nutritious meals if the crooks got ahold of them. But some, Urs noticed, were also clinging to crooks for dear life, thinking in vain that their silly little pair-bonds would save them from a gaping stomach.

Just like when the crooks came back from whatever dump they'd been staying in, nothing would stop them when it was a choice between living or dying. And as those cccats were inevitably betrayed, Urs would be the only one who would welcome them, put them in a place where they would excel, and ensure their safety.

A Coalition of crooks was indeed a scary thing, but crooks were ultimately selfish things and wouldn't start a fight they weren't certain they could win. Not while there was plenty of food elsewhere.

Urs also wanted the company of several specific humans. Ones who knew how to build. He needed to convince them to serve him, and he promised to pay handsomely in the resources humans actually needed. Food, water, shelter, and medication. He could make sure they lived long enough to see the rise of a new world.

However, some of them were being a lot more stubborn than he originally thought they would be. In fact, here came his captain, bloodied and beaten, but still alive.

Spotlight, but everyone called him Spot. He looked like a cityscape against a wall of black, with markings on the face that made him appear like he was a searchlight looking for detractors. He had only a couple other cccats with him, the other perishing in a clash with a stupid skyborn.

Urs regarded Spot with a critical eye as the whole of the hivemind turned to pick apart every single thought Spotlight had from the moment he left to the moment he returned. They all watched as the negotiations broke down in the face of this stubborn ass human who was pretending to be something he wasn't. Urs's annoyance inflamed the hive, and a tremendous hatred spread through the whole network, even leeching out to other cccats who were not part of the hive, but still received some of their stronger messaging.

Spot did not resist the probing, offering everything up, including just how stupid the skyborn was. The human called Skreet, like it was some kind of pet, and Skreet did not listen to the human nearly as well as a

proper pair-bond should have. This would be an easy correction to make. If the Skreet was removed, then the human would not be able to resist another negotiation attempt.

Brief flashes of creative torture methods came from some of the other captains, who simulated the human's behavior. Only a few noted that humans, especially stubborn ones, would lie if they were hurt too badly. Too much force would cause them to say whatever it took to get relief from the agony.

Ineffective, came the resounding agreement. Urs waited as his captains discussed more options. Some suggested kidnapping, some suggested taking the pair-bond but leaving it alive. Some suggested killing the allies until all the walls closed in, though some of those other humans had their uses.

And many of the humans in his immediate vicinity were wisening up to his intelligence. If they waited too long to make a decision, then their opportunity would be lost, and they would have to resort to kidnapping a Key Holder in order to start their hostile takeover of the still working resources, which had been diverted back up to Key even though the base infrastructure should have defaulted to Fever.

Once Spot's memories were thoroughly dissected, Urs withdrew from his focused studying to address Spot directly, his mind a thousand layers of focus snapping from one task to another.

"Is it worth it?" Urs asked, his crowns twitching in unison with Spot's. Their mental connection was powerful, and Urs was overwhelming when all of him was focused on an individual.

Spot nodded, his own crowns syncing with Urs in the microscopic lead. The human was constantly starving. If they watched him long enough, they would be able to find where he kept his resources, as that was how they were failing to convince him.

"He has something somewhere," Spot explained, showing the empty tent and the tiny pricks of light on the human's person, the unmistakable look of prescription medications. "And he trades in medicine. Weak stuff, but he has something stronger. We don't know where it is, and a new protection moved into the perimeter."

Urs's command rang out from his mind, touching every single cccat stationed near Block Six. They were to follow this human, Elijah Court, who owes a sizeable debt to Animal Control, and is as trained an engineer as Fever can realistically afford. He has a stash of resources that allows him to work independent from any organization. The goal was so simple, even the lowliest of peons would be able to understand the intention.

“Find it.”