

like a last breath. back into the ether i suppose. some form of self defense?

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by [PDV](#)

Summary

Royce Brakth conducts experiments on stray women at the behest of Prince Sibbis Reisch Kammerat.

A pair of carnies have accidentally caused this to backfire on them, badly.

Chapter 1: a pair of these, they often work in pairs, can wipe out a small house in an hour or two if sufficiently impelled

"Look at you! You're alive! Me, I'm not so sure..."

The room the engine had been in had collapsed, or at least the floor had, leaving both attempted rescuer and rescuee in a cave. Judging by the rock falls, possibly several more floors had collapsed as well.

Romana Traverson, or 'Red' when on stage, shook her head to clear it. She'd been in the engine that creep Royce was muttering about, and he'd been turning it on when...

When Fischke burst in. And that was the voice she had heard. Though he sounded... wrong, somehow.

The cave was dark, but not totally dark. Part of the apparatus looked basically intact, and several pieces were gently sparking. The crown-like net of electrodes, and the long sleeve that had gone over her arm and been knocked free.

"You're still in one piece. That's all that matters." And the sparks got much brighter as the voice spoke. She could see - she could see Fischke's body. The engine was attached to him, and he wasn't breathing. Bad burns, too, she thought.

"It's me. Red, it's me."

She gasped.

"Could use your help. I know this looks bad. Can't feel a thing, though. Pick me up and let's go."

She played her hands along the wires, angry words stuck in her throat. All the other words stuck, too.

"Hey, say something already."

She tried, but just gasped again.

"Say something, will you?"

She shook her head.

"Oh no..."

She gently peeled the device off her boy's body. So he was a clank-arm now. She'd live with it.

"Okay, slide this thing on. I think I can still help. This thing was made to disrupt clanks."

She did, and flexed it; it felt stronger already.

"I've got a sense for our surroundings, I think. Like a bat. Head over there, I think there's a door." She felt a tug off to the left.

It was more like a cabinet than a door, but it was blocking the way and she could get through. On the other side were some of Brakth's pets; a cluster of rats with little cogwork grown in. They looked unhappy. She hmmm'ed at the situation.

"Oh, you can still...? Better than nothing, I guess. But check this out, I think we can think faster together."

She felt a prickling on her scalp, under the 'crown', and on her fingers. Everything felt slowed down, and she could feel Fischke's presence. Frustratingly, neither of them could communicate in words - even just to him, she couldn't sing. But they could plan - little jets of sparks at the further rats, step up and crunch the closer ones. And when they shared a sense of agreement, they did it, moving very fast.

"Okay. That went pretty easy. But he had bigger half-clanks in the sewers I came in through; this will get harder."

Red nodded. And she wouldn't be able to create anything new, most likely; she'd never done anything with her Spark that wasn't sing. Maybe she'd be able to do something with an instrument. Maybe the arm-circuit would let Fischke help. Probably not soon.

The next room was empty, but the door was locked with some cogwork.

"Put your hand on that panel, I think we can do this."

Sparks from the circuit hit the door. Some diodes lit, and the cogs spun. The next room was big, more like a corridor, though from the ridges on the far wall and the deformed ceiling, it probably started as a lava tube before someone came in and fixed up the floor. It was a gentle rise, with a breeze blowing up from off to her right.

"I saw this one on my way in! There are open-air parts down to the right. And the sewer system not far beyond that. Right back to the circus, and we'll be out of here."

Red turned to the breeze... then spun and started up the tunnel.

"Hey. You turned left. Thought we were going to skip town. We're going back there? These things will track you down, wipe you out, and take whatever's left of me..."

She snorted, and caressed her right hand with her left.

"Okay. We can pay back Brakth and those Kammerat princes of trash. They took your voice, well, we took something of theirs. It's your call, we can take some more."

"But whatever you're thinking, do me a favor. Don't let me go."

"Lizards! Extra jaws and tails on these. Watch out."

They went back into the shared mind, and with the arm circuit, they stunned one lizard and made the other spasm, biting everything near.

"Hey, wait a minute. These things were made to work with this - this Circuit. I think if you grab the tails, that will make this stronger."

Fischke had to guide her, but he was right. Being stored in the device seemed to give him the original Spark's intuition for how they were meant to combine.

"I saw a few other beasties on my way in. Dogs, giant mole things. Soldier clanks with a construct torso. We might be able to put together another arm. Or a voicebox... won't be as good as your old one, though."

Red leaned into the shared mind, trying to project fondness. Fischke had been her biggest fan since the first time she sang in the circus. (Her second time on stage for Master Payne's show - the first was a turn as the High Priestess, of which the less said the better.) She wasn't quite sure whether he 'heard' her, but she thought so.

In the quiet, they stepped forward, carefully seeking the beasts and a path toward the surface. They were together, after a fashion... that was good enough for now.

Chapter 2: he or she does not know what he or she is talking about and i fear something else is going on here, something rather troubling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"We need a strong personality, someone who can persist through the blunting your process keeps inflicting, Royce. I am not satisfied with your excuses."

"Father, his plans are progressing well. There's no need to rush this."

"Hush, Garend. You give him too much slack."

"Well, the process, you see, it is growing itself, adapting itself, not being planned, no. Forcing it forward, yes, perhaps we could, but this would disrupt it, of course. And the change, well, I cannot predict it. I've learned from the past subjects, surely, but a very strong personality... well, I'm not sure you've weighed the drawbacks, Prince Sibbis. Prince Garend, I think, has the right of it."

"How could he, when you just admitted you are not planning? No, there are no plans that could be progressing. A traveling Heterodyne show is arriving, and we will collect the centrepiece of it for the work. Prepare the apparatus; the Circuit will take another in, tonight."

The younger son, Prince Asher, stroked his construct cat. "I suppose you'll want me to greet them into the theater?"

"Of course. Go see to it."

Note to self; never accept a royal performance again. Not that it seemed likely she would get another chance. The reigning Prince insisted on inviting Red to dinner, and refusing that kind of invitation would be dangerous for the circus. And as long as it wasn't a *private* dinner, the worst would be that Romana had an older man make incompetent sexual advances at her, and she could deal with that.

...Yeah, she was overly rosy about what lows princes would stoop to. Drugged wine, and she woke up restrained to a large apparatus, electrodes fastened to her head and arm. A strange whispering man, clearly a Spark at work, was fiddling with various pieces of the superstructure. None of the princes in sight. She could probably do something with her deeper harmonics to disrupt the device, but this guy was a *strong* Spark, probably he could fix it far faster than she could break it. Crap.

"...unusual readings, hmm, the girl is not just a pretty voice I think, no, something very interesting about the brainwaves. And, perhaps, the sound waves, the readings in the royal box were interestingly complex, very interestingly..."

And he was aware she was a Spark, or likely to realize it quickly at least. Worse and worse.

"...certainly could be an interesting experiment, injecting a Spark into the Circuit. Either wildly successful in enhancing it, or completely destabilizing, definitely, definitely one of those. But do I, do I prefer it to the slow evolution of the process, that experiment? That is a good question, a hard question, logic demands both, science demands both, and yet a result in either could invalidate the other, could it not? But then, science must bow to funding on occasion, alas, and I do believe the choice has been made for me..."

This was certainly an unusual form of Spark fugue. And with Master Payne, she'd seen some very unusual Sparks. But he seemed as absorbed in it as any; literal sparks flew across his head and stood his heavy curls out on end for seconds, and he ignored it completely. She'd seen this play a few dozen times, and it didn't look good without any Heterodyne Boys in the area to rescue her.

The circus was packed up and ready to move by the time Romana sat down to dinner. But they didn't move until midnight passed without a sign of her.

Master Payne had taken a rest from his pacing, but he was back up with Lars and Fischke to make the call.

"She'd be back now if she wasn't being held. We're witnesses. The dangerous kind to be." - That was Lars.

"Not as dangerous as it is to be *her*!" - Fischke, much less of a level head than usual.

"Gentlemen. No sign from the castle?"

"No sir. We've trained a spyglass on the gates, as well; no one out. I think we should leave immediately, if they're not keeping us. Before that changes."

"Fischke, I assume you disagree?"

"Actually, no. I think you should leave."

"But not you?"

"No. I'm... You probably want to be able to honestly deny any knowledge of my plans."

"Ah. Well, we'll need a new scout. Meet us in Beetleburg in spring if you can. With or without a songbird on your arm."

"I think Augie would be good at it. It's been a pleasure, Master Payne. And with you, Lars."

"You're just letting him go? It's suicide!"

"Lars, when you've been in this business as long as me, you can recognize a mark who's completely convinced. And Fischke *is*. I don't believe I could stop him."

"Can I take the weasel borer, sir?"

"We haven't taken it out in a year, and we probably won't notice if you steal it."

He raised an eyebrow, but that was all.

The weasel borer got him into the sewers easily enough, and the place wasn't all that complicated, or fortified. Not to an old gutter rat like him. Ran out of weasels on the second tunnel he tried, but it was the right one, so that was fine. Time to go save the girl - or feel very stupid if she'd decided she liked one of the sons. But that would be unlike her; she didn't like personal attention from almost anyone.

The sewers had had some rats that looked like a Spark had tried to make hybrid clanks. The tunnels had more, though they weren't very observant; he got past them without a fight several times. They seemed to be denser as he went up, but no more observant.

As he got closer, he started overhearing servants. One said "Stay away from the lab, Their Sparkinesses have their latest catch in the machine.", which got his attention. He tried to find ranting, which seemed like it should be easy, but there wasn't any, anywhere. Louder voices he thought he recognized from the royal performance got his attention eventually, and when he went toward them, he heard something else. Off-kilter muttering, which was much quieter than any Spark fugue he'd ever heard, but had that strange mad energy to it despite being practically a stage whisper. He searched for a way in, and found a grate, but it was almost too late: the old prince commanded "Throw the switch!", and Fischke had only seconds to act.

Chapter End Notes

Futzed around with the identities of the Camerata, as you can tell by now.

Royce Brakth: Royce Bracket, a very strong Spark with inclinations toward the mixture of biology and machinery. Inventor of the Circuit, which is the name both of the full apparatus and the part that did the scanning - the latter being the part Red now wears, and Fischke (Blue/Unknown/Boxer) now inhabits. Has a very unusual manifestation of Spark fugue, apparently calm, but not a bit saner.

Sibbis Reisch Kammerat: Sybil Reisz, reigning prince and a weak Spark. Yes, I gender-swapped her; Europa doesn't have many reigning princesses. Sets the goals for the Kammerat cabal, but usually defers to his elder son on tactics.

Garend Kendrell Kammerat: Grant, Eldest son, not a Spark but an excellent strategist and planner. Their mother, now deceased, was a Kendrell.

Asher Kendrell Kammerat: Asher, obviously. A slightly stronger Spark than his father, and not too fond of him. Close with his elder brother.

Fischke's name comes from my preferred nickname for "Subject: Unknown", which is 'the Fisherman'; his dialogue in the game suggests he prefers to spend his time by the water.

Chapter 3: like how one might subconsciously assume the mannerisms of a friend? at any rate this one is very unusual, very much so, and rather temperamental too

They'd fallen further than Fische initially suspected; the corridor was long, curving slowly, and they were several circuits below. It was blocked in places, too; not enough to block the air, but enough to block passage. They fought their way up, taking apart rats and lizards and a small half-mechanical hive of bees. (They set it on fire with an oil-spit gizmo taken from a particularly large lizard.) After what might have been ten minutes or an hour, they started seeing larger animals. Some looked like dogs, but half their tails sprouted fire when they got agitated and the other half blasted shockwave barks that knocked their packmates back and stunned any rats nearby. After pausing to watch them, they dealt with it by causing a small cave-in which drew their attention but didn't let more than one approach at a time. It was still tricky, but a pile of part-metal dogs built up, and then they picked through to build a pauldron for Red's left arm.

"Ooh, go for that one. It's got a good voicebox, we can improve from there."

Red turned away from it.

"No?"

She started to hum a tune, tapping a drum line. He recognized it - In Circles, which she mostly sang for the circus rather than the audience.

"'I won't save you.' Yeah, okay. If that's what you want."

She nodded.

The next big break in the upward corridor was not stones, but a bear. Half-clank, but looking sickly and tired.

"That won't go down in one burst, I bet. Should we go for it, Red?"

She peered at it, and tugged his mind into the wordless bubble of shared thought, poking their attention at particular parts of the bear. A hairless haunch, thin white fur near a gear's embedding. Nothing seemed disabling. Finally, she drew back and shook her head.

"Okay. There was an archway back on the left that had a lot of space beyond. Lead the way, bird."

She winced. That nickname was short for songbird.

"Ow. Sorry."

The side room had something new - paired snakes, bound together tail-to-tail with a net of brass that looked like a finger-trap. These weren't going to budge to finesse and shocks - they just smashed one of the two, leaving the other dragging dead weight and easy to pick off. Fische guided them to putting together a few of the trap braids into an electric whip. Two more rooms of rats were quick work, and let them affix the whip to the left arm with a delicate chain-link line running down her arm conveying the charge and adding motive force. But from there, they came to a dead end. A storage room, with no breeze or grates.

"Back to the last turn-off before this, then."

Red shook her head.

"The bear? You think we can take it?"

She tossed the whip up, then cracked it.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Never thought you'd be so good in a fight, love. And you still look damn good doing it."

She smiled, and caressed her arm again. She hummed something as they went back - he'd heard her practicing the tune, but couldn't remember the words, or the name.

They looked again at the bear. The distance of the whip made agonizing it more practical, and with its sickliness, it felt likely to get Red past unscathed. They still made sure to clear any smaller beasts away beforehand - the last thing they needed was an interruption.

Red didn't quite stick to the plan, though. They had it immobilized with pain, and could stay back for safety... but she couldn't stand it. She rushed up and formed a blade with the main sleeve.

"Red, no!"

It twitched its claws toward her, but she stayed far enough away, and sliced through its neck.

"Put it out of its misery. Good of you. But way too risky. I don't want to lose you any more than I have..."

She petted the arm again. *Fische was such a sweetie.*

"Well, if you're going to take the risks... Let's take some of those leg replacements, get you moving faster."

Soon they were on their way, moving faster as promised.

"Okay, I think we're back to where I came in. Storage rooms off the left, should be a path through."

As it turned out, the damage that sent them falling had blocked off the access. But they did find chalk and slates, so they could actually have a conversation.

Are the circus okay?

"Yeah, they left when they realized you weren't coming back. Didn't want to be treated as witnesses to the prince's guilt. I came back."

A little cold. But smart.

"Yeah. Lars was twiggling, and he wasn't wrong. Master Payne backed him, and I agreed that they should go. I 'stole' the weasel borer to help me get in."

Thank you for coming back for me. It was a big risk.

"You say that like there was ever any chance of anything else."

I will always find you...' Should have reversed that.

Oh, that was the tune from earlier.

"Maybe. But you'd do the same for me."

I definitely want them to pay for what they did to you. All of them.

"I only heard the end of it. That Spark, Royce?"

It was the old prince's idea to kidnap me. But the two younger ones have helped him kidnap others before. Many others, I think.

"Well then. We'll see how they like getting this gizmo turned on them."

He called it The Circuit. It's supposed to let him control all those half-clank things, make an army.

"Should we call down the Baron on them? He's not gentle."

I want to see them suffer. They wanted a central guiding intelligence and have been extracting minds from stray women to find someone who could hold themselves together through it. Guess they finally did.

"Well, I always was stubborn. And I think I had some help."

Awww, ♥!

What's next from here?

"I think the other side of the corridor here goes to dungeons. I stayed clear before, but there's nothing for it."

Maybe we can free some new friends.

"Yeah, that would be good. Let's go?"

She nodded, and pocketed the chalk.

Dungeons wasn't quite right. More like 'slave pens'. Only the slaves weren't entirely human. Clank-embroidered like the animals further down. And with these, it was more obvious that the changes weren't just physical. They moved like they could barely see, but like they knew exactly where the others were standing and moving.

"These guys give me the creeps."

Yeah, you said it, thought Red. Fortunately, they were contained, and not reacting to the intrusion. Or not intelligently enough to break loose, at least. Slowly, the Circuit-bearers picked their way through the dungeons, climbing toward the surface.

Chapter 4: this is no conversion but a total metamorphosis, it cannot be reversed as far as i can tell.

The machine glowed with power. Red felt a tingling, first physically from the attached thing the muttering Spark had referred to as the 'Circuit', and then something slightly behind her eyes, a mental contact. She felt... abstracted. Not quite attached to the situation. It took her a moment to remember that she had planned she should try to sing when they started whatever it was. It probably wouldn't work, but...

Romana's Spark was weak. She could do some tricks with harmonics, but it was hard to pull off, and she'd never made a device do it. She needed to sing herself, and be in the right frame of mind. Fortunately, that frame of mind was also excellent for performing, so she had *plenty* of practice.

Romana Traverson blinked, and Red opened her eyes. She sang a pure note, but it came out layered, a harmony with herself. The apparatus shook.

The main Spark - the son called him Royce, and the father Brakth - looked alarmed, and the princes were distracted. He moved quickly to adjust some controls, and the shaking eased off. She still felt at a remove, so the disappointment was distant.

Then the floor broke open.

In the following moments, she processed that it was just a grate that had been thrown open, right between her and Brakth. But she was as shocked as the Kammerats and their pet Spark.

Fische surged up, throwing the grate toward the voices. He went straight toward Red, her song like a beacon. He smashed pieces nearby with one hand, and pulled the connecting device off his girlfriend with the other. It sparked and burned his fingers, but Red's song changed, and he felt his pain recede from his mind.

But the device was unstable from the vibratory note, battered from Fische's assault, and like many such devices, powered by highly unstable repositories of energy. While the princes were still cowering from the thrown grate, he saw it beginning to rupture. He grabbed Red and threw them to the ground, bracing for impact. Dimly, he noticed that the device, specifically the portions of it he'd peeled off her, autonomously reconfiguring itself to stick to *him*.

But then there was thunder and light, and then darkness.

The slave pens were creepy, full of the leftovers from failed attempts to do to others what they'd succeeded in doing to Fische - or maybe just failed *differently*? But the results of partial successes were even worse. They stood guard near the entrance to the dungeons, one with a machine eye and jaws and the other with huge spidery brass hands, and they moved in disturbing unison.

They reacted as quickly as Red and Fische could, in their shared thought mode, so despite their lack of natural weapons and limited ordinary tools, they were a tougher challenge. But between the whip and the enhanced legs, Red only got scratches. More interesting was what followed the fight: one of the penned test subjects looked up, and addressed them directly.

"You. You're not one of the collection. That's the Circuit itself, isn't it?"

Red nodded, and Fische spoke. "It is. I got sucked into this entirely, but I'm still me. Red here lost her voice."

"Ah. I'm Jallaford. I freelanced for the Baron. I wasn't careful enough."

The speaker was clockwork from the waist down, and it didn't seem he was in control of any of it.

"So we weren't the first ones to keep our minds."

"I wouldn't go that far. I was in a - hmm - fugue state. Unaware of my surroundings, not entirely conscious. That stopped earlier today."

"Probably when I made the main apparatus explode."

"Logical. Yes, I concur. The rest of us are uncontrolled, and I apparently have enough of me left to regain my faculties."

"Should we bring you along?"

"I will be a hindrance; these legs are not mine. But please do unlock the cage."

"Red, we trust this guy?"

She raised a hand, wobbled it. Tilted her head... then nodded.

"Alright. What should we expect?"

"I believe a large portion of the affected beasts are loose in the town. The princes will likely be retreated to the central tower, as the bats are only minor pests and its defenses are adequate."

"How about the Spark? Royce something?"

"The father and younger son are also Sparks - but you are correct in that Royce Brakth is a far stronger one. He is harder to parse; he may be with his patrons, or in his laboratory trying to regain control. However, you appear to have the principal elements of the focus device, so he is unlikely to reestablish control unless you aid him."

"Why would we?"

"The townsfolk will pay a heavy price for the loss of control. The princes, less clearly."

Red shook her head. Scrawled on the wall with chalk. *Revenge first.*

"A priority I can certainly understand. And, in fairness, the beasts have been running amok for, hmm, I estimate six hours. Most of the damage has in all probability already been done."

They'd been out for longer than she'd realized. This seemed like everything they needed to say, so she unlocked the cell Jallaford was in, and grabbed a plank from a broken crate to give him as a crutch. He couldn't control the mechanical legs, but they could bear his weight, and maybe this would let him navigate.

"Thank you, Mister Jallaford. And good luck. We'll try to help you out if you're still down here when we're done."

Red nodded in confirmation, and he returned it curtly and focused on his motion.

She turned to the steps up and they readied themselves for navigating a castle built by and for Sparks.

Chapter 5: once in a while why one of them decides it's time to poke his head up for a look around. is this a primordial form of some sort, from which all the others came to pass?

The servants were absent. As they went, she realized why: they were terrified, holed up where they could. The kitchens were full, pans and knives all brandished outward in case of further beasts. They glided by, trying not to draw their attention. Probably the guard barracks were the same way, but they stayed well clear of those; unlike the kitchens, they might react to human intruders.

Closer to the inner tower, there were some footmen. Armed, with the basic slug guns of guards who didn't have a Spark equipping them. The whip hit two and hit them enough to knock them out, and Red slipped up the stairs before anyone else could find them.

Fische was still worried. Two of the three - or three of the four, if he was there - were Sparks. Cornered Sparks, which were worse than rats. The young one had his strange cat, and probably other constructs; the older one had watchdog clanks in the town, so he probably did biomimetic clanks. Hmm, wonder if the Brakth guy was a bastard, he certainly seemed to be a mixture of the two - irrelevant now. Unless it would help him see the Kammerat's creations coming, which he didn't, and that probably meant he couldn't.

Then they turned the corner and a *huge* dog was waiting, growling.

"I don't see weak points like below-" Red pulled him into the shared mind. They had fire, and the whip; this wasn't as big as the bear, though healthier... and they could *jump*, with the better legs. As they'd gotten their Circuit bigger, they could be more detailed in their communal thoughts, even get some emotions slipping in. And he couldn't analyze weak points, but he could plot a ballistic trajectory just fine, even adjusted for the whip's anchoring... Yeah, that worked.

The whip sailed out, twisting to project teeth along its edge. It caught the dog's head and wrapped around its neck, and Red *leaped*! She sailed over its head, and they timed her right hand to blast a *big* gout of fire just at the top of the arc - and electrify the whip at the same time. The yelp probably woke the dead, but it couldn't handle the stress and damage, and after landing behind it, a solid kick ripped the whip back to them with most of the neck still attached. The dog lay still, and Red cleaned the whip with another flame. The next room had a mirror, and Fische saw that under the brass superstructure they'd pulled together, the nice yellow gown was red and black with stains. Hell's own angel.

He wasn't sure whether they should try to split up the princes first or just face them. As it turned out, the noise had made the decision for them. Prince Sibbis charged down the stairs with a death ray, a leather-and-brass bat above him and a small watchdog clank by his side.

"Sibbis. Should have finished the job the first time, chump."

He fired. Red had already moved. They thought together. The watchdog was tougher, and probably had its own gun. She was faster, though; much. The bat looked like it had some kind of poison reserves, but the leather would go down to fire. Fische didn't push for what they'd respond to the prince himself with; that was Red's call to lead, he'd follow. She suggested starting with whipping the gun and getting in motion, and leave the rest for a second thought. He took moments to convey that he thought the dog would shrug off their three main weapons - fire, shock whip, impact - and they should be looking for options. She accepted the impression and replied something that you could almost translate as 'some tools' - 'not good', then they tried her step one.

This worked, basically. The bat roasted, the gun was jolted loose from his grip and yanked away to clatter across the tiles. They'd jumped again, this time almost bouncing off the wall. The watchdog was quick enough to be almost facing them when they landed, though. Dangerous. Well-trained instincts, or whatever you call those in a clank. It was defending its creator well... exploitable? Probably not, but worth trying if it could be cheap.

It aimed a bark, and they saw a capacitor sparking behind it. Keep moving. Prince was diving for the gun. Too slow. Go for it before him? Wordless agreement. They skidded sideways toward it, and the jagged edge of the right hand's gauntlet found his spine. !!! They had a contact! The Circuit could pull at him from there! Fische was distracted by the awareness, but Red kept them moving - the dog had missed, and she had the gun, but it was damaged, might not be good for much. If you could judge a Spark by his death ray, Prince Sibbis was a much poorer Spark than they'd realized.

The watchdog was well made, though, and smarter than it looked. It was jumping toward them, clearly trying to stand watch over its creator. They let the contact break and backed up to think. Fische pointed to the power source in its gut. Red expressed distrust of the gun, but drew a line to a knife that had gone spinning to the opposite corner. Precision? The dog was holding position, so maybe. But they'd have to get it growling at them, and that was a risk to Red... she brushed it off. A graze was acceptable, even if her boy disagreed.

In the next couple seconds, they discovered this dog was more flexible than it looked. It spit razor teeth at them as they dropped the gun in a corner and grabbed the knife, and a couple grazed Red's legs. Hopefully not poisoned, but checking would take too long now. A pause in their accelerated mind, and ready-aim-throw-hit! Containment on the internal battery/capacitor/whatever breached, it was sparking and the dog was twitching. Jump and *flame* and skid to the wall... and it clearly was melting internally, two legs fell off. It had had the presence of mind - was it mind? - to move off of Sibbis, so it wasn't scalding him and wouldn't blow him up. Probably.

"Well, Sibbis. You have one chance to convince us not to kill you. Want to bother?"

"Idiot child interfering, if *you* hadn't involved yourself *she'd* be in command of an *army* right **now**! My *new queen* for my *conquest* of Europa! Fool!"

"Hey Red, you actually think that would be better?"

She shook her head.

"Yeah, didn't think so. Back of the neck would let you do unto others as they have done unto me. Your call."

She shrugged, and stuck a foot on his back, forcing him to the floor.

"*You* underestimate my power! You are *doomed*! **Doomed**, I *say*!"

She sunk the contacts into his spine just below the head. He went silent, then slack.

"Got some data here... should stop there. Else we might have company."

She withdrew, and smacked him hard enough to send him unconscious. If he woke up, it'd either be to a fate worse than death, or to the Baron's medical team... Six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Chapter 6: the others in the family they all come on in to make way for something new, something different, often something better than before

"Have a map of the tower, now. The sons are at the top. Asher has his cat and they have two of Brakth's more successful human subjects guarding them. They're expecting us."

She tapped the gun.

"Oh, it's meant to do that. But it's a pretty quick piece of work, three or four shots max before it needs refueling."

She made a 'tch'ing sound. Even the circus's Sparks would call that shoddy work. Andre's sonic gun had flaws but it was *reusable*. The Countess's attack potions weren't, but they had other things to recommend them, like thoroughness, potency, and large batch sizes. Well. It would be good for one of the clank-zombies, at least.

The construct cat was with the two of them. Asher was up another flight of stairs, with knives - probably poisoned.

"Anything to say for yourself, prince of trash?"

"This was all Father's idea. Leave now and we won't bother chasing you. We have our hands full anyway."

"Yeah, right. How many of those husks did you grab just like Red?"

"Some. How many more servants did you kill on your way up?"

"Less. Red?"

Asher had done some work on himself, but it wasn't nearly enough to match the Circuit's reflexes. Red had the gun aimed and fired from the hip before he could twitch.

The zombies charged, one with glowing claws and the other with a mechanical torch and a sword. The cat wasn't approaching directly, but Fische pulled their attention to it anyway. Whip to get it out of position and flames to disable it. He attached a hesitant feeling of sickness Red interpreted as potential poison. They didn't know his style...

The whip cracked, first to a zombie and then to the cat, and the husk raised its torch as the duo burned the cat against the wall. The gun got thrown in its face, and the torch destabilized it, the explosion costing it an arm and a leg. No time for a mercy kill. Charge, kick the body and grab the sword, jump over the other one. Grab the head to anchor and spin down to its back, and *pierce*!

Victory. Claws dead, Torch twitching. Cat still potentially dangerous... end the zombie, take the torch, fry it from arm's length. Safe for now.

"Parts or prince?"

He wasn't a Spark, so not a serious threat. Seemed clever, though... Better not give him time. She strode toward the stairs.

There wasn't much to find.

He had a pneumatic gun, it looked like. Silent fire. Put to the temple, one and done.

Red couldn't decide if he was wise or just a coward.

He had a notepad in his hand. There was a short message.

I told Father this was a bad plan. We should have waited until we had it understood enough to use one of us. Not that you'd spare me for that, I'm sure. One or the other of you.

Royce will be waiting. Without us - me - keeping him in check, it's probably best that you take him down. He's a much madder madboy than he looks.

The last line of the message was struck out. ~~I won't insult you with an apology. Good luck.~~ In its place, scrawled more hurriedly, he had written *Asher was a better man than me. Go to hell.*

"Think we already did," Fische commented, "but at least we're together."

Red grabbed Garent's body and threw him off the balcony, and didn't wait to hear the impact.

They picked over the zombies for parts. The sword was handy, the torch enhanced what she had, and Fische found some pieces which meshed properly with the skull lace. They could think a little faster, and almost use words to communicate.

"Only one left. And we're using his toys. Won't be pretty."

Red gestured, tracing out a cautious stance, then making a bursting motion with her hand.

"Stand back and blow the room? Safer, sure. But... if there's any way to get your voice back... it's probably in his lab. If we grab him like we did Sibbis..."

She nodded. Sat on a bench, pensive.

"Your call. I don't think he'll get out alive, either way. We could stay like this, or risk a blaze of glory for the chance to get your voice back. I'm with you for either. To the end of the line."

The thought sharing was good, now. Really good. She could pull him in, and share... **love**. Pure and complex as reality could be. And he could share his, right back.

As she stood to go deeper into the castle, he said, "You know... that part there? Almost makes it worth it."

She smiled and nodded.

They approached the lab. Fische could sense the whole layout, including the structure Brakth had already built over the hole, a web-like platform that was hooked into the remains of the large Circuit apparatus. He seemed to have a replacement focus device already, too, cruder than Red's but recognizable. All this he conveyed to her in a whisper.

They tried to approach silently, but the moment they crossed the threshold Brakth looked right toward them. He clearly had the same proprioceptive sense as them.

"Well, well, here you are, back again, I suspected you might be. For revenge, for theft, for pure destruction, for madness, I wonder? But here you are, and here we are."

"For the moment."

"And not much longer than that, hmm, I believe. One way or the other, the Circuit shall be reunited this evening, indeed."

They slid into the mental communion. The room was filled with devices, all clearly - to Fische's sight - connected to the Circuit on Royce's arm. It was already turning to aim at Red, and he couldn't see its weak points - blocked.

But they were faster, and could keep their speed of mind while acting, now. Only a little, but that was enough. Red ran, sword trailing after her.

Shocks and flames spurted, partly aimed and partly as random chaff that might get lucky. Red slid under it and jumped over, sword slicing anything close and whip anchoring to large pieces to disrupt them and control her trajectory.

But as they moved, new weapons deployed. Oil slick, choking smoke that blocked their senses. Disrupting her mobility - clearly Royce had anticipated the strengths enhancing his tool would give her. And he proved faster than human as well.

He muttered something about dancing and her 'going first'. She barely noticed. He was moving, and slowing her down, but she was closing. Her rage drove her more than his intellect could match.

It was chaos, but biased chaos. Everything was, steadily, tilting toward the pair, two minds better than one even when the one had preparations - because those preparations hadn't been nearly extensive enough.

After perhaps thirty seconds of havoc - blood. An arm sliced off, and the Circuit with it. The lab erupted, everything firing at once - but only for a moment. The sword dropped, the claw-contacts pierced his spine, and the original Circuit took control.

She was burned, battered, bruised, boiled... but bright.

"There's a lot in here... drop him, we can get the rest from the tools."

She sent a thought, a memory of his voice, months ago.

"I think... yeah. He made a songbird with this stuff, and everything about your voice was recorded, trapped in his cogitation engine. I think we can give you a new one, as good as the old. You won't be quite as beautiful"

She smiled, and sent him a burst of affection. And another memory, of his face.

"...Probably not."

With so much of the system around them, their shared thoughts were crisper than ever. She stuck her hand into one of the bigger banks, and could even use words.

Still not letting you go, love.

There's no way we could hide like this. You'll have to.

*The hell I will. I'll miss the circus. **We** will. But you're worth it.*

What, we let the Baron have us?

With you here? I'm not even scared.

She called up a memory, from nearly a year ago. Plucking his version from his mind, too. Their first kiss.

...When you put it like that... hell, I'm not either.

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