

Fictionwise
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Overrush

Wren Valere looked at the body sprawled in the alleyway in front of her and wanted to throw up.

Okay, she thought, dead body. Not your problem. All you have to do is go on past him, hand the painting over to the client, and the damn job's done. It was twenty feet, tops. All she had to do was keep walking down the alley, slide past the dark green dumpster, and go home. Nothing to it. Piece of cake.

Once she stepped over the body face-down and blocking the alley.

"Bodies were not in the contract," she muttered, wiping the sweat off her forehead with the back of one latex-gloved hand. She thought about taking a deep breath, then looked around her surroundings and thought better of it. "Right. I can do this."

Not that there was any other option. The Wren never left a job unfinished. That was the reputation her partner sold to nervous, twitchy clients. He talked the talk, and now she had to walk the walk...

Stepping over the body was every bit as bad as she expected it to be—the paranoid fantasy of the corpse reaching up, grabbing her foot, pulling her down—but once she managed that, it was even worse. Every move she made was shadowed, like his ghost had decided to latch onto her like some phantasmic kitten.

Wren didn't believe in ghosts. Mostly. Placing her feet firmly against the cracked sidewalk at the end of the alley, she exhaled once, slowly, letting all the remaining tension flow from her neck, through her shoulder muscles, down her arms and legs until she could practically feel it oozing out of her feet and fingers like toxic sludge. And with it, the buzz of unused current-magic still running her in her system, drawn back into the greater pull of the earth below her.

When she opened her eyes again, the world seemed a little more drab somehow, her body heavier, less responsive. Current was worse than a drug; it was like being addicted to your own blood, impossible to avoid. All the myths and legends about magic, and that was the only thing they ever really got right: you paid the price with bits of yourself.

She reached almost instinctively, touching the small pool of current generated by her own body. It sparked at her touch, like a cat woken suddenly, then settled back down. But she felt better, until she looked up and saw the body still there. And the ghostly presence weighted on the back of her neck again.

What? She asked it silently. *What?*

Wren bit the inside of her lip. Scratched the side of her chin. Then she sighed.

It didn't matter if you believed in ghosts or not, if they believed in you.

* * * *

"You did *what*?"

"Shut up, Sergei," Wren snarled, slamming the door behind her. He was glad they had gotten a mage-tech in last year to reinforce the office with current: she was practically emitting sparks of frustration. "I couldn't just leave him there."

"Why the hell not?"

Sergei knew that he had a great voice for yelling. The same person who had told him that, a woman, had also told him that when he got really pissed, his lips flattened into a whiplash line, and his square-tipped fingers went so still you just knew he wanted to wrap them around someone's neck. Wren's, tonight.

"I said, shut *up*."

Sergei opened his mouth, shut it, stared at her. It shouldn't have been a contest—he had ten years, a hand-tailored suit, and the weight of being the senior partner behind him. She glared right back. He blinked first.

"All right. Suppose you tell me why you felt the need to risk a well-executed job in order to remove this ... gentleman from his last stand and bring him back to my office?"

Sergei leaned back into the leather chair, steepling his fingers and watching over them as she paced. His office was a luxury in dark brown leather and burnished chrome. The clients who came in here to write obscenely large checks for obscenely overpriced works of art were reassured that this was a man who knew Good Taste and Quality. Wren normally perched on the edge of his desk instead of sitting on the leather sofa. But tonight, she was clearly too wired to sit. "I don't know. I just had this *feeling* that it wouldn't be good to leave him there alone."

"He's dead, Genevieve. Being alone probably wasn't going to bother him." He waited, then, when she didn't say anything more, he finally did sigh, running one hand through his expensively styled hair, leaving it tousled, hanging down over his eyes. "I'm going to assume you didn't incriminate the scene in any way? Leave an untidy fingerprint as you were hauling him off?" The glare she shot him answered that. "No, I didn't think so. All right. What do you want to do?"

"I think ... I need to know how he died."

Which would mean actually examining the body. Her partner grimaced. "Better you than me."

"Mulder hung around when Scully did autopsies."

"Mulder didn't have anything better to do. I do."

As though on cue, the phone lit up, and he made a shooing motion in her direction as he picked up the receiver, automatically making the sea change from retrieval agent of dubious legality to legitimate art dealer. Wren stuck her tongue out at him, and left.

* * * *

They had stored the body in one of the rooms in the basement, where Sergei kept the materials needed to stage the gallery's ever-changing exhibits: pedestals, backdrops, folding chairs. She opened the door, and turned on the light, half expecting the corpse to be sitting up and looking around.

But the body lay where she had left it, on its back, on the cold cement floor. "Hi," she said, still standing in the doorway. That sense of a presence was gone, as though in bringing it here she had managed to appease its ghost. But it seemed rude somehow, to poke and pry without at least some small talk beforehand.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what happened to you?" She closed the door behind her, and locked it. Sergei's gallery assistants were gone for the night, but better overcautious than having to explain a dead body.

Wren swallowed, and put the book she was carrying down on the nearest clear surface. No point trying to recall anything from her high school biology courses—that, as her mentor used to say, was what we

had books for. "Rigor mortis," she said, and flicked two of her fingers its direction. The book opened, pages riffling until the section she needed lay open. Taking a small tape recorder out of her pocket, she pressed "record" and put it next to the book.

"The body is that of an older male, maybe ... a really rough fifties. He's wearing jeans, sneakers, and a long-sleeved button down shirt. Homeless, probably—his skin looks like he hasn't washed in a while." She walked around the body, trying to look at it objectively. "Hair, graying brown. Long—seriously long. This guy hadn't been to the barber in a long time."

She stopped, stared at the corpse, trying to decide what it was that struck her as being *wrong*. "There are no signs of visible trauma. In fact, there's no sign of anything. Unless he died from an overdose of dirt." It might have been a heart attack, or something internal, she reminded herself. The only way to tell would be to cut him open ... "Ew," she said out loud. "Riger mort. Tell me about it."

There was a faint hum, like that of a generator somewhere starting up, and a voice recited: "The stiffening and then relaxing of muscles after death, as caused by the change in the body's chemical composition from alkaline to acid. Process typically begins in the face, and spreads down the body, beginning approximately two hours after death and lasting twelve to forty-eight hours. A body in full rigor will break rather than relax its contraction."

Wren flicked her fingers again, and the voice stopped. "The body was stiff, but not rigid when I picked it up," she said thoughtfully. "And it stretched out okay when we got it in here—nothing broke off or went snap." She grimaced, then bent down to touch the skin, at first gently, then jabbing harder. "The skin is plastic, not hard. So I guess it's safe to say rigor's pretty much wearing off. So he's been dead at least half a day, maybe more. Not too much more, though—he doesn't smell anywhere near that bad." At least, not for a body that had been laying in a filthy alley.

Sitting back on her heels, she looked at the book. "Next paragraph," she told it. The voice continued: "Also to be considered is liver mortis, or post-mortem lividity. When a person dies, the red blood cells will settle at the lowest portion of the body. This can be identified by significant marking of the skin. Markings higher on the body would indicate the victim was moved after death."

Wren made a face, then she sighed, gave herself a quick, silent pep talk, and reached down to take off his shirt.

"There better not be anything disgusting hiding in there," she warned him. "Or I'm so going to throw up on you..."

Her fingers touched the skin at the base of his neck, and the jolt that went through her knocked her backwards on her rear and halfway across the room.

"The hell?"

"What am I looking for?"

Wren shook her head. "If I tell you, you—just touch him."

Sergei shot her a look, but knelt to do as she asked. He was still wearing a tie, but his shirt sleeves were rolled to his elbows. Long, manicured fingers touched the corpse's hair, then the side of his cold cheek, flinching slightly away from the feel of dead flesh. You never got used to it, he thought.

"Go on. His torso."

Sergei placed the palm of his hand flat over the corpse's chest, where Wren had left the shirt half undone.

He waited. Then frowned. "What the hell...?"

"You feel it?"

Sergei nodded, astonished. He was reasonably sensitive to the natural flow of magic—that was how they'd first met—but this was different somehow. "I feel ... something. What is it?"

"Overrush."

Sergei pulled his hand away, wiping it on his slacks as though that would rid of the taint of death. "Which is...?"

"Current. Only, more than that. There's current residue in him that's impossibly high. This guy's ... God, I don't know how to explain it. I don't even know what it is! But it feels right. That's what you're feeling. It's the only thing that could explain—"

"Genevieve!"

He hated shouting at her, but it seemed to do the trick; she grabbed onto it, pulling herself together. "Right. It looks like he got caught up in current, major mondo current, pulled it in—and got ungrounded. Which is impossible. I mean, any lonejack worth their skin knows how to ground. You don't make it past puberty if you can't."

"So this fellow should have been able to ground, and dispel any current he couldn't use."

"Unless," Wren said, even slower than before, "unless somehow, he was stopped..."

Sergei stared at the body. "How? By whom?"

Wren shrugged, hugging herself. "Damned if I know. I didn't think it was possible. Grounding's as much mental as physical—like breathing. Which he's not doing either, any more."

Sergei sat down heavily on a dark green velvet-covered stool and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You couldn't have just left him in the alley?"

She didn't even bother glaring at him, looking at her watch instead. "Almost seven," she told him. "You'd better get upstairs and meet our new client. I'll see about finding the old boy a more final resting place."

Sergei caught her arm, not harsh, but firm. New client be damned. "Be careful," he told her. "I don't like this."

She put her hand over his. "That makes two of us, partner."

* * * *

Sergei never asked what she'd done with the body. She never offered to tell him. He told her, instead, about the new client. "It's something a little different," he said. Different was good. Different required planning, plotting. That was what they did best, the different ones. The difficult ones. That was why they were the best Retrievers in the business, on either side of the law.

And different distracted her from the memory of a man torn apart from the inside by too much of the stuff she depending on to exist.

Lonejacks were all current junkies. The mages' council might try to rein their people in, keep them under strict control, but the jones was the same. It got in your blood, your bones. If you could jack, you did. End of story. And if you jacked too much...

Her mentor had gone crazy from current. She had always thought that was the worst thing that could happen. Maybe it wasn't.

Sergei's hand touched her waist, his breath warm in her ear. "Stop thinking. That's my job."

Wren nodded once, making her mind go blank. It wasn't the usual run for Sergei to be with her on a job, but you had to mix it up every now and again. If they start expecting one, give them two. If they expect two, don't hit them at all that night, that week, that place. And when they expect stealth, walk in the front door.

"Mr. Didier, a pleasure, a pleasure indeed..." Wren tuned out the host's nervous bubbling. If 'jackers were bad about hanging around each other, gallery owners were worse. At least a 'jacker would let you see the knife before it went into your back. She detached herself from Sergei's side and began to wander around the gallery. It was larger than Sergei's, and more eclectic. There were a series of oddly-twisted wire shapes that she thought she might like. Then she saw them from a different angle, and shuddered. Maybe not. Snagging a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter, she took a ladylike swig, licked her lips, slanted her gaze around the space as though looking for someone to share her shallowest thoughts with.

A heartbeat, and she had effectively disappeared from the awareness of everyone else in the room. There wasn't any real magic to it—herd mentality clothing, a perfectly ordinary body and face, and a strong desire to not be noticed, sewn together by the faintest of mental suggestions wafted along the man-made current which hummed in the lights strung along the room, illuminated the exhibits.

Walking slowly, seemingly at random, she made a half-circuit of the main floor, then moved up the short, straight staircase against the back of the wall. Nobody saw her lift the velvet rope barricading the steps, nobody saw her move up into the private areas of the gallery. If she hadn't been so intensely focused, she might have felt pride in her skill.

She barely paused at the primary security system at the top of the stairs. Her no-see-me cantrip was passive, neither defensive nor aggressive, and she passed through the barrier of current without a hitch.

Reaching into her fashionably useless purse Wren pulled out a silver compact, from which she took a folded index card. The sketchy lines were a poor substitute for the schematics Sergei had downloaded to his PDA, but that was off-limits on gigs like this one. Anything protected by current the way this gallery was could be set off by electricity as well—even cell-powered. You stayed out of trouble by assuming the worst.

Once satisfied she knew where she was going, she cast one look back down the stairs, picking Sergei out of the crowd with ease. He was leaning in to hear what an older woman was saying, his shoulders relaxed, his right hand holding a glass, his left gesturing as he replied, making the older woman laugh. Charming the marks. If you didn't know what to look for, you'd never recognize the break in the line of his coat as a holster. The one time Wren had picked the compact, heavy handgun up, she'd spent the next hour dry-heaving over the toilet. Psychometry wasn't one of her stronger skills, but she could *feel* the lives that gun had taken.

But hating something didn't mean it wasn't a good idea to bring it along.

Moving down the hallway, Wren counted doorways silently, stopping when she came to the seventh. A touch of the doorknob confirmed that there were elementals locking it. Trying to use magic to force them out would bring smarter guards down to investigate, exactly what she didn't want to risk.

Going back to the stairs, she leaned against the wall, just below the protective barrier, and took a deep

breath. As she exhaled, slowly, she touched the current, sending a wave of disturbance racing down the stairs.

The twinkling lights in the gallery window went out with a satisfying **pop**, followed in quick succession by the lights over the exhibits. As the crowd milled about in confusion, Wren raced back down the hallway and slipped inside the seventh room, trusting the chaos downstairs would hide her own intrusion.

Inside, the room was dimly lit, three paintings stacked against the wall like so much trash. Each one cost more than her mother's house. Sergei would have had conniptions, if he'd seem then treated like that. But Wren wasn't interested in their artistic value. A razor, taped to the sole of her shoe, let her slice the bottom painting out of its frame and remove the piece of pink-hued bone that had been pressed between two layers of canvas. The relic went into a small, rubber-lined case that fit in her pocket, and the painting was placed back into the frame. A finger run along the serrated edges, and a tiny draw-down of power, and the two layers sealed themselves together again. Done, and prettily, too, if she did say so herself.

"Ssst!"

She managed not to freak by the skin of her teeth, turning to glare at Sergei standing behind her.

"They're frisking everyone downstairs," he told her, heading off any questions. "We need another exit."

"Chyort," she swore, using one of his personal favorites. "Right. This way."

"This way" ended up being a long hallway without a single door off it until they came to a T intersection. Sergei looked decidedly unhappy, his gun now out and ready in his hand. Wren barely spared it a glance, too busy listening to the hum of current throughout the building. It was alert now, singing in activity, but very little of it was directed at them. The building was locking down, tucking itself up tight. "No, down here," she said suddenly, grabbing his free hand and tugging him to the left, concentrating on the patterns.

Four steps down, Sergei stopped so suddenly she was pulled backwards by his weight. She recovered, looked up into something big, ugly, and smelling of wet fur. The wide metal collar around its dog-like neck shimmered with controlling current-marks. It pulled back, its mouth opening to show huge, silvery-white teeth in double rows like a shark's. Behind it, Wren could hear the faint noises of the rest of its pack. They were screwed, now.

"Shoot it! Shoot it!" she yelled, but Sergei was already moving, pushing her behind himself. Wren flattened herself against the wall as he sighted, steadied, and slowly squeezed the trigger. The sharp crack of the .38 echoed down the hallway past them like a miniaturized sonic boom. The creature checked its pace as the bullet hit it square in the chest. It shook its head, as though annoyed by horseflies, and snorted, a wet, sticky sound.

Sergei cursed. "Now what?"

Wren didn't bother replying, sliding forward against the plaster wall, feeling for the wiring hidden underneath, pulling whatever energy she could find into herself. It was going to hurt, but not as much as getting eaten. Then she sprang at the creature, grabbing at the collar. Sparks flew as current met current, and Wren yelped but didn't let go. The beast staggered, fell back, died. Wren unclenched her fingers, staggering a little in pain and dizziness.

"Let's go!" Sergei said, holstering his gun and grabbing her by the scruff of the neck. Wren yelped again, but ran with him. Down the hall, through a heavy fire door, a pause on the landing to determine—up or down?—then up to another fire door and into a hallway that was the exact replica of the one they'd left behind.

"What did you do to that thing, anyway?" he asked, breathing hard.

"Short circuit," she said. He grimaced, as though he should have known better than to ask. They took a corner at a full out run, and stopped.

"Oh hell."

Wren stared at the blank wall. She could hear the hounds still on their trail, despite the fire doors, could smell the sweat on her skin, Sergei's. She could feel the thrum of blood racing in her veins. Panic bubbled just below the surface. But Sergei's voice, next to her, was calm.

"Get us out of here."

She knew what he was asking.

I can't!

We're dead either way. Or worse...

She reached, grabbing every available strand of current, draining every power source in the building, siphoning off Sergei until he staggered. Filled and overflowing, practically sparking and glowing from within, she grabbed her partner in a bear hug and **threw**—

There was no transition. Her chin to the ground, palms abraded by macadam, vomit pouring from her mouth as everything she'd ever eaten came back in doubletime. Her body ached and quivered and she was drenched in cold, sticky sweat.

When the torrent finally released her, she fell to her side, panic filling her brain.

"Serg?"

"Da."

Utter relief filled her at the sound of his voice, faint and worn-out, somewhere behind her. "I told you I was no good at this," she offered, wiping her face with her filthy sleeve. There was a scrape of flesh against pavement, then a slow stream of curses in Russian.

"You 'k?"

She managed to find the energy to roll over and watched as Sergei fussed with his cell phone. Throwing it down in disgust, he reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out his PDA. He glared at it, then her, then threw the equally useless device next to the cell phone.

"Oops?" she offered.

He closed his eyes, picked up the gun from where it had fallen when they translocated. It seemed to click and spin in all the right places, and some of the lines on his face eased as well. He replaced it in the holster, then leaned forward and took her hand, pulling her up with him as he stood.

They leaned against each other for a few moments, listening to the sound of their still-beating hearts. In the near distance, a car hit the breaks too hard, squealed away. Further away, the hum of engines, horns, sirens wailing—all the normal sounds of the city at night.

""You got it?"

She nodded, touching her pocket. "Got it."

"Then let's get the hell home." He paused. "You have any idea where we are?"

Wren tried to laugh, couldn't find the energy. "Not a clue"

"Great," Sergei muttered, moving forward at a slow shuffle. "And what are the odds any self-respecting cabbie will stop for us?"

They came to the end of the alley, and paused to get their bearings. "Wow. I managed to toss us further than I thought."

"In the wrong direction."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch." She paused, her head coming up like a dog catching a scent. "Sergei?"

A strangled scream answered her, and they whirled: bodies, exhausted or not, tensing for a fight. A figure staggered towards them, its skin crackling with fire like St. Vitus' dance, blue and green sparks popping and dancing along his skin. He jittered like a marionette, hinking first to the left, then right, forward and back, moaning and tearing at himself all the while.

"Oh god..." Wren went to her knees, her already depleted body unable to withstand the barrage of current coming off the man in front of her. "Oh god, Sergei..."

The burning figure lurched forward again, and Sergei reacted instinctively. A sudden loud crack cut across the buzzing of the current in Wren's ears. The figure jerked backwards, his eyes meeting Sergei's in an instant before he pitched forward and fell to the ground.

The lights disappeared, and Wren heard a faint **whoosh**, as though all the current were suddenly sucked back inside his skin

Sergei went to the body before she could warn him not to, flipping it onto its back. Long fingers tipped the man's head back, and then Sergei nodded once, grimly, and released him, getting back to his feet and putting the pistol away.

"What?" Wren looked at what her partner had been looking at; a pale blue tattoo under the dead man's chin.

"A mage."

"That the same thing that killed the other stiff?"

Wren touched the rapidly-cooling skin just to make sure, but it was a meaningless gesture. "Yeah," she said with certainty.

"You think this is a Council thing? Was the other guy a mage, too? Maybe some kind of punishment?"

Wren shook her head, stepping away from the body as though afraid that it was contagious. "No. Never. If they had a problem with a mage, they'd kill him or her, but never like that. That's bad for morale."

"Right. We're out of here." He put one large palm between her shoulder blades and steered her towards the sounds of traffic, and cabs. Neither of them looked back.

* * * *

Wren was still nursing her first cup of coffee when Sergei arrived at their usual meeting place the next

morning, sliding into the booth across the table from her. The waitress brought over a carafe of hot water, tea bags and a mug without being asked, and Sergei smiled his thanks at her. Wren watched him as he went through the ritual of testing the water, then stirring in the right amount of milk. She couldn't stand the stuff, herself, but she liked watching him make it.

Finally, he took a sip, then looked up at her.

"His name was Raymond Pietro," she told him. "Twelve years with the Council. Specialized in research, which is the Council's way of saying he was an interrogator. Truth-scrying, that sort of thing. Only the past tense isn't just because he's dead. Rumor has it he went over the edge last month."

Over the edge was a gentler way of saying he had wizzed. That the chaotic surges of current had warped his brain so much that he couldn't hold on to reality any longer. But that didn't explain his death. Wizzing made you crazy, dangerous, but your ability to handle current actually got better, the more you gave yourself over to it. That was *why* wizzarts were dangerous. That, and the raving psycho loony part.

"They dumped him?" It might have seemed like a logical explanation to Sergei, but Wren shook her head.

"I told you, Council takes care of its own. They have a house; really well-warded, totally low-tech, so he wouldn't be distracted by electricity. Not exactly the Savoy, but better conditions than lonejackers get. He disappeared from the house two days ago. Council was freaking—the guy I talked to actually thanked me for bringing news, even though it was bad.

"They also said Pietro wasn't the first of their wizzarts to go missing. They never found the others."

Her partner's face, not exactly readable at the best of times, shut down even more. She finished her coffee, putting the mug down firmly on the table in front of her. "People that good, good enough to be mages, don't just 'forget' how to ground. And one might have been an accident, or a particularly crude suicide, but not half a dozen. Someone's killing wizzarts, Serg. Whatever it was that killed them, someone did that to them—Pietro, our stiff, the others. Who knows how many others? It's easy—nobody cares about them. You can't, not really. They're as good as not there anymore. So they're easy victims."

She was really rather proud of how steady her voice was, until she made the mistake of meeting her partner's eyes. The quiet sympathy she saw there destroyed any idea she might have had of remaining calm.

Oh, Neezer...

John Ebenezer. Two short years her mentor. Five years now, since he started to wiz. Since he walked out of her life rather than risk endangering her with his madness.

Are you out there, Neezer? Are you still alive?

"And if he—she, that—are?" His voice matched his face; stone. "From everything you've told me, what I've seen, wizzarts are wild cards, dangerous, to themselves and others. And quality of life isn't exactly an issue."

Wren bit back on her immediate reply. He wasn't trying to goad her; it was, to his mind, a valid question. And she had to give him the respect of an equally valid answer. "Because that could be me, some day. Wizzarts are powerful. Sergei. Undisciplined, but strong. If someone's found a way to get at them ... Council might poke around, but they don't care about lonejackers. If they discover anything, they might not even do anything, so long as they can cut a deal to protect their own." She hated asking him for anything, but they had to take this job. She would do it alone—but their partnership had been founded on

the knowledge that their skills complimented each other; she didn't want to handicap herself by working solo if she didn't have to.

A long moment passed, and her skin began to sweat. Finally, Sergei sighed. "It's not as though the Council will ever admit they owe us anything, least of all payment," he groused, signaling to the waitress for a refill of Wren's coffee. She would have grinned in relief, if her mind weren't already working on the next problem.

"First things first—is there any way to keep track of wizzarts in the area?"

"Already ahead of you," she said, her memory search turning up what they needed. "It's not pretty, but once I have them in sight, I can tag them; monitor their internal current pool. If anything—anyone—tries to mess with them, I'll know.

Sergei looked like he had a bad taste in his mouth. "How much risk is there to you, in this?"

"Negligible," she said, lying through her teeth.

* * * *

Sergei tapped a finger on the space bar, studying the screen in front of him, skimming the descriptions of John Does brought into the local hospitals for unexplained expirations. Of the seven names listed, two of them had cause of death listed as lightning strikes. One more had internal damage consistent with lightning, but the cause of death was liver failure—apparently he had been a long-term alcoholic.

None of the men matched the description of John Ebenezer. His lips thinned as he entered another search, widening the area to include Connecticut and New Jersey. Genevieve had grown up across the river, and it seemed likely that, if Neezer were still in the area, he would have remained close to his home. Assuming he stuck around. Sergei wouldn't put any of his money on that.

Behind him, Wren made a sound of disgust, changing the channel with a flick of the remote. They had spent two days driving through the city, walking into homeless shelters and into run-down apartment buildings until she could "see" the wizzarts scattered there, siphoning the faintest trace off their auras until she could weave a leash from them to her. She had found seven, but had only managed to create three leashes before collapsing from exhaustion. Just the memory of her shaking, sweating body made him angry all over again.

"Drink more of the juice," he told her, not looking over his shoulder to make sure she obeyed him.

The screen displayed a new list of names. Nothing.

"Serg?"

He was at her side before he consciously realized he'd heard her voice. The juice lay splattered on the carpet, the glass rolling off to one side, thankfully unbroken. He determined that there was no physical danger, and cupped her face in his hands all in the space of heartbeats.

"I'm here (endearment)," he told her. The pulse at her neck was thready, and her eyes were glazed, pain lines forming around them. He waited, cursing whatever idiotic impulse had ever led him to agree to this, as she struggled to maintain the connection.

"Got him!"

They had lost the first one that morning, the leash snapping before Wren could do more than be aware of the attack. She had cried then, silent tears that left her eyes red-rimmed and her nose runny. She had

never been able to cry gracefully. His fingers tightened on her chin. "Easy, Wren. Hold him. Hold him..."

It was dangerous, touching her. The overrush of current she was going to try and channel could easily jump to him, and he'd have no protection from it, no way to ground himself. But he couldn't abandon her to do it alone. They were partners, damn it.

Sweat was rising from her skin now, dampening her hair against her face and neck. But she felt cool, almost clammy, tiny jumps of electricity coursing off the dampness, sparking in the air. He spared a thought for his computer, and then forgot about it.

"Ah—yes, that's it, come on, lean on me.... lean on me, damnit!" She was chanting instructions to the wizzart at the other end of her line, trying to reach through their connection into his current-crazed mind. Trust wasn't high on a wizzart's list, though, especially for voices they heard inside their own heads.

A bolt rumbled through her, almost knocking them to the side. Sergei planted himself more firmly, his grip keeping her upright. She'd have bruises on her face when they were done. He'd have them too, on the inside; lighting burns, internal scarring. Pain ached through his nerve endings. This was insane. For some literal burnouts they'd never have anything to do with...

For Ebenezer, he reminded himself. For Genevieve.

The air got heavy, and he could almost smell the singing of hair and flesh, of carpet fibers cracking underneath his knees, the fusing of the wiring in the walls, the phone, his computer. A lightbulb popped, but all he could focus on was her labored breathing, the voice crooning encouragement to someone miles away.

Her eyes, which had been squinted half-shut, opened wide, and she stared into his eyes endlessly. He felt as though he were falling, tumbling straight into an electric maw with nothing to stop his fall. He *was* her, was him, was the current flowing between them. He Saw through her eyes the wizzart let go, felt the current being pounded into him, flowing into her, and being grounded. He understood, finally, for that endless second the elegant simplicity of grounding, and reveled in the surge of power filling the matter of his existence.

The wizzart slumped, fell unconscious in a puddle of his own urine. *Get him*, Sergei urged into her open mind. *Find whoever did this...*

He felt her stretch back into the wizzart's self, backtracking the current that had been pumped into him, striking out like the lightning it rode in. A shudder of anger, hatred, disgust slamming into hard walls, confusion, and time stretched and snapped back, knocking him clear across the room and headfirst into the wall.

When he came to, the room was dark. He didn't bother to turn on the lights—they'd blown, each and every one of them. Crawling forward, he reached out, finding the top of Wren's head. She was curled into a ball, silently shaking.

"(endearment)?"

"I screwed up," she said. "I couldn't get them. It was too far away, I couldn't reach the bastards..."

He sat there, in the dark, and rocked his partner back and forth while she cried.

* * * *

"It was a good control group," Sergei said around a mouthful of toast. "Small enough population to monitor, and nobody to care if a few bodies went missing. Who knows how long they'd been perfecting

this?" He shook his head, less astonished at the ways of mankind than impressed at the planning it had taken. Planning, and resources, and a certain bloody-mindedness.

"You're a bastard, Sergei." He had dragged her out to have breakfast, but she wasn't eating. Scrambled eggs congealed on the plate in front of her. Sunglasses perched on the edge of her nose even though the diner itself was shaded and cool.

He put his fork down. "What do you want me to say? It's over, Wren. We got too close ... we scared them, at least. They knew someone was trying to reach them, whoever they are. That will make them pull back, be cautious."

"So they'll just move shop to another town? Sergei, I can't..." She stopped. "I couldn't do anything last night. I didn't have enough juice, wasn't good enough. We can't stop them. We don't even know who "they" are."

He ran a hand through his hair, wincing a little as he touched the bandage on his forehead. Practical acceptance was an essential in their business. But it wasn't all downside. "We know the how, what they're doing, the kind of people they're looking for. A few well-placed words, a few well-placed comments in the right newsgroup, and people will be looking, and paying attention. They'll be able to protect each other"

"It's not enough." He could see the tears building again, and watched her force them away. *Damn you, John Ebenezer...*

"It's all we can do." He didn't have anything more to offer her. Sometimes, all you could do was make sure your own neighborhood was clean. Sometimes, that just had to be enough.

Wren didn't look convinced. But she picked up her fork, shoveled a mouthful, and chewed, swallowed.

That was enough.

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