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about 2000 words

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HIGH VOLTAGE

by Sara Phillips

They'd almost made it to the woods.

It wouldn't have been safe there, not completely, but its darkness would have acted as a security blanket, shielding them from the headlights and streetlamps that captured them in plain sight on the main roads, like sitting ducks awaiting their pursuers' next move.

But, of course, things never go according to plan.

The road trembles as a far-off car erupts in flames and blows to pieces. Even from this distance, Jonah sees the shrapnel blast apart, and the bang that finds his ears is almost as loud as the pounding of his heart in his chest. Strange, canine-like beasts circle the wreckage, sniffing at the metal and smoldering flames. Their humanoid handlers follow close behind, shouting to each other, and armed with more small bombs and (much larger) guns. At the sight of them, Jonah blanches and rushes to join the others.

He dives over a concrete road barrier and scrambles to press his back against it, surrounded on either side by his companions. They all clutch at each other, gasping for breath and staring desperately towards the forest, barely a hundred yards farther.

Wren, next to him, swallows hard. “When I tell you to, you guys make a run for the trees. I’ll distract them.” She shifts into a crouching position and starts to peek over the top of the barricade.

“No.” Jonah grabs her arm and pulls her back down against the concrete. “You’re too slow. You can’t escape with your ability.” His eyes harden, and with no hesitation, he adds, “But they can’t stop me.”

Wren turns a bewildered, furious expression on him. “Jonah, no. You can barely control it.”

The distant shouting grows closer. Jonah pinches the bridge of his nose, a frustrated growl building in the back of his throat. “Listen, we don’t have time for this. They’re not going to catch me. And I’m probably the only one here who can say that and actually mean it.”

“It’s my responsibility to—”

“Would you cut it out with the self-sacrificial bullshit already?” Jonah grabs her shoulders. “Nobody gives a damn that you’re the oldest, okay? Nobody cares! It doesn’t make any sense for you to be the one who stays behind.”

Wren opens her mouth to spit out a retort, but another explosion goes off, much closer than the last. A spray of rubble cascades over the barrier, and the group flinches lower to the ground, lifting their arms to shield their eyes from the dust and dirt. When the shaking stops, Jonah glares at Wren for a moment longer before gritting his teeth and turning away.

“I’m not asking for your permission,” he says. Yellow sparks of electricity flicker to life along his body, at his temples, his fingertips, his ankles. “Just go already, would you?”

Not waiting for a response, he takes off, leaving a jagged trail of static electricity in his wake.

“Jonah!” Wren reaches for him, but she’s too late, and her hand closes around nothing but empty air.

As Jonah clears the barrier and throws himself within sight of the handlers, he doesn’t have much of a plan beyond “be fast” and “get them away from the forest.” Which, to be fair, is pretty good, considering he hadn’t had a lot of time to come up with anything much more tangible than that. The safety of the group had demanded immediate, executive action.

So, as he faces the enemy, Jonah only has a few moments to piece together his options and decide which to go for. There are five handlers in total—likely one for each member of his group—and two of the beasts, the latter of which are built more for tracking than speed, but they’re big enough that it wouldn’t matter. They’d still outrun any of the group. Well, except Jonah, maybe, which is the gamble he’s banking on.

Too many sets of eyes land on him, and Jonah tenses, sizing up the weapons they carry. The guns, for one, are just a scare tactic, surely. Like, they wouldn’t actually shoot a kid, right?

A bullet whizzes past his ear.

Okay, so they would totally shoot a kid.

Jonah flinches and drops immediately, but it’s a useless move, as everything nearby that would work as cover has already been blown to bits. Down the road, one of the handlers angles their gun farther down, and Jonah scrabbles at the asphalt. He darts away in a blur of electricity right as more bullets fill the space he’d just occupied.

The distance between Jonah and his pursuers shrinks as he zig-zags towards them in short bursts of quick, electrified motion. He feels foolish, almost, to head straight towards them like this, but the more of their vision he fills, the less room they’ll have to pay attention to the tree line, where—with any luck—his four traveling companions will be entering any moment now.

As soon as he’s close enough for the beasts to make a move, Jonah leaps towards the road barrier, planting a foot against it and kicking off with another pulse of electricity. The extra surge launches him right over the two growling creatures, and he slams into one of the handlers’ chests, laying them out flat against the pavement. Before they can recover or anyone else can take action, Jonah vanishes in another cloud of static, zipping behind a second handler and cracking a foot into the bend of their knees. Their legs fold, and Jonah bolts yet again, sweeping a quick gaze over the road in front of him. *One, two, three, four... Wait, where’s—*

Thick arms suddenly wrap around his chest from behind, and he’s yanked off the ground, held aloft with his arms trapped at his sides. Jonah kicks out, but can’t seem to find any solid purchase, so he throws his head back in the hopes of connecting with a chin, or a nose, or *anything*, but he whiffs that blow as well. He strains against his captor with increasingly frantic movements, trying to free one or both of his arms, but both remain pinned against his sides.

Crap. The handler starts to drag him back towards the others. *Crap, crap, crap—*

A desperate yell builds in Jonah’s chest, and as he releases it, he swears his heart stops beating. Every muscle in his body seizes with a sudden surge of numbingly potent energy that laces his veins. It’s as though someone strings a live wire down his spine; every nerve ending fires off at once, and the overwhelming flood of information blurs together. He feels nothing, and he feels everything, captured in a moment of full-body electrocution that stretches on infinitely for three, four, five seconds, swelling and swelling until it bursts well beyond his limitations.

Jonah has no comprehension of the size of the electric discharge he unleashes, but the man behind him drops like a stone, and he doesn't care to figure out any more details than that. He staggers away, grasping at his chest, but doesn't make it far before he stumbles, barely managing to catch himself on his forearm.

The air around him still crackles with voltage, and with each movement Jonah makes, little pinpricks of static electricity sting his skin. He tries to steady his breathing, but it's all he can do to suck in a breath and then cough half of it back out. Tremors rack his frame, and his vision swims in front of him as he fights to get back to his feet with what was now a dangerously high heart rate.

Getting up is a mistake. His already blurry vision doubles, or maybe triples, and each one of his organs feels like it's been shoved in a place it doesn't belong. Jonah can't help but think that the asphalt below looks so welcoming, and that he would love nothing more than to collapse on it once more and wait for his body to stop screaming obscenities at him, but he knows better. To give in to such an impulse would be to consign himself to failure, to imprisonment, to death.

No... Stopping isn't an option. Not yet.

As he balances himself back on his feet, his nostrils are assaulted by the rancid scent of burnt flesh. Its abrupt intensity makes him double over, and as a wave of nausea joins the list of problems he's juggling, Jonah clamps a hand over his mouth, as though that would be enough to fix it. It's not, but nor has the overall situation changed; there's just no time to deal with any of it now, so he pushes onwards as best he can, refusing to look back and catch so much as a glimpse of the damage he's evidently caused.

The idea of channeling his electricity again makes him feel like his hammering heart may actually, truly burst open, so it's at a sluggish pace that Jonah approaches the road barrier. He all

but falls over it, hardly able to keep himself upright as he finally makes his way towards the woods. Nobody stops him—there’s not even much noise left behind him, save for a bizarre, constant hum. He still refuses to look back.

Jonah knows he has no chance of catching up with the others like this. He’ll have to find a place to rest, he thinks—maybe up a tree, if he can just manage to scale one.

...Yeah, that’s not happening. Any faith he has in himself vanishes as soon as he steps into the forest, for he stumbles almost immediately, tripped up by the gnarled undergrowth that he can’t focus on long enough to see at all. His knees hit the ground first, and he stays that way for a few seconds, swaying and debating how much more effort to exert. Before he can make up his mind, though, Jonah falls forward, chest and face hitting the dirt. He doesn’t get back up.

Oh, no. Jonah’s eyelids flutter, and he thinks he tries to move his arms, but his body doesn’t respond. *That’s probably not good.*

Well... At least he made it out of the open.

...

He’s not sure how much time passes, but suddenly, hands find him, and for a moment, newfound panic grips Jonah. Residual static electricity jumps at the hands, and they recoil from the shock, giving Jonah a chance to thrash and try to drag himself away. It’s a fruitless effort, and he knows it, but the unexpected boost of adrenaline and despair urges him onwards regardless. Inevitably, the hands return, but this time, Jonah registers that they’re smaller hands, gentle hands—familiar hands, with an equally familiar voice softly repeating his name. At once, he relaxes and goes still, and the hands’ owner slings one of his arms over their shoulders and hauls him back to his feet.

“If I didn’t get to go out in a blaze of glory today, you don’t, either.” It’s Wren.

A slight, upwards twitch of Jonah’s lips makes the relieved breath that escapes him sound almost like a “heh.” He abandons any remaining sense of heroics clinging to his bones and shamelessly leans his full weight on Wren. Pretending he’s capable of any more than that at the moment would just slow them down.

Jonah glances at Wren through drooping eyelids. “I didn’t... I didn’t get caught.”

“No.” Wren looks behind them, as if double-checking. Nothing jumps out at them. “You didn’t.” She squeezes his hand. “You did good. The others are way ahead. All safe.”

Jonah lets out a hum that falls somewhere between pleased and “I told you so.” Then his head lolls forward, and he does his best to just keep picking his feet up, trusting Wren to guide them the rest of the way.