



Black Gate Online Fiction:

“Truck Stop Luck”

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Keith pulled into the truck stop and climbed out of the family’s Quest van into the pouring rain. He was soaked and shivering in seconds. Though it was midday, the storm clouds made it almost as dark as evening, and the air was cold, even for a late spring day. He pushed wet hair out of his eyes and glanced back at the trailer, where all his immediate family were roped in states of rock-hard immobility, most of them covered with a silver tarp. From under a flipped-up corner of the tarp, his sister Sadie glared at him. She always glared at him, even when she could actually change her face at will.

He’d come back from a dental appointment to find everyone else in his family petrified. He’d secured them in the trailer with bike-lock curly cables around their rock-hard feet, and he’d put pieces of Styrofoam between them so they wouldn’t knock against each other and maybe chip. He wasn’t sure about the physical properties of their current state.

Could he have fitted them into the back of the van if he had taken out the seats? Stacked his family like cord wood? Somehow he didn’t think so. The trailer they used to haul trash to the dump would be more comfortable; they could all stand up without bumping knees or elbows.

Though their outer edges were hard as stone, they weren’t any heavier than they had been while flesh. Keith was glad he spent time at the gym every day. He hadn’t had to call anybody to help him transport the family to the trailer, which was good. Everybody in the farm valley where they lived thought the Sharps were strange enough already.

Keith half-hoped someone would steal Sadie while he was in the truck stop getting lunch. That was why he left her corner of the tarp flipped back. It had started as an accident — he’d roped the tarp over all six of the family, thinking that would make them less conspicuous on the highway— but that one corner had blown back. Keith didn’t think any of his family was in a state to feel the rain or cold. Sadie was pretty enough, even while glaring, to catch someone’s eye. If she were gone when he got back —

But he shouldn’t think that way.

“What’s your pleasure?” asked the red-headed waitress at the cash register. Her eyes were a brown that made him think of root beer hard candy, and her pink-lipped smile brought out a dimple in her left cheek. She wore a short white dress and a pink apron. A nametag on her left breast said NANCY.

“Uh — ” Keith had lost track of the question.

“Smoking or non?” asked the waitress, her smile gone.

Keith blinked and realized he had hazed the woman in fantasy. She looked tired; the frilled edges of her apron were wilted, and there were ketchup stains on her lap.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m tired too.” He should have driven farther from home before stopping, but he’d woken late and rushed off to the dentist without breakfast. He figured he better eat before the long drive to Crescent Valley. “Any table where I can get fast service will be fine.”

“I’m all the service we got right now, and I’ll get you your food as soon as I can. Take your pick.” She stepped back, giving him a view of the dining room, booths with worn Formica-topped tables, a few wooden tables with resin chairs around them, dots of plastic greenery here and there, and a clientele of mostly damp, older guys with gimme caps covering their bald spots. Most sat alone. Some studied newspapers or books, and others studied their food or the waitress. Nobody was looking at Keith.

A brief heat brushed his face as he glanced toward the counter, which was crowded with the gently steaming backs of big men in windbreakers and jackets. One place was empty.

He went to the counter, slid into a stool between a balding, overweight man in a green coverall, whose attention was all on his newspaper crossword, and a guy who looked about sixty in a dragged-down-a-bumpy-road, underfed way. The skinny man’s weathered face looked mummified. His gray-green eyes were sunk into deep sockets, with dark eyebrows above them that had sprouted a few rogue hairs long enough to be head hairs. He took a pull on his hand-rolled cigarette and charred the white paper halfway to his mouth. “Howdy,” he said, on a gush of smoke.

“Hi,” Keith said.

“Name’s Mike Clovis. Which direction you come from?”

“North.”

“That’s where I’m heading. What’s the weather like over your shoulder?”

“Wet.”

“Shoot.” Mike took another long drag, burnt up the rest of the cigarette, stubbed it out. “Was hoping for daylight. Whatcha hauling?”

“Statues.”

“No fooling? You don’t get a cargo like that every day.”

“That’s for sure,” Keith said. “What are you hauling?”

“Running empty at the moment. What’s your name?”

“What’s your order?” asked the waitress from behind the counter. “Want some coffee?”

“Coffee would be great.” Keith hadn’t had a chance to pull the food-spotted, plastic-sheathed menu from its metal clip behind the condiments caddy. “How about a cheeseburger and fries?” In his mind he heard Sadie griping about junk food again. You’re our hope for the future, she said, with that sneer that dared him to contradict her, and you’re treating our future really bad.

Why am I the hope? he wondered. At twenty, Sadie was the oldest daughter, then Mary, nineteen, then Keith, eighteen, then Olivia, fifteen, and finally James, who was twelve.

As far as Keith was concerned, everybody in the family was the hope for the future, let alone the present was pretty fine. Ma and Pa were powerful wizards. Sadie was no slouch in the wizard department — she could

outspell everyone else in the family, and usually did. Mary didn't seem very motivated to spellcast, and who could blame her, with Sadie always ragging on her, but Keith had seen her gentle wild animals when she thought she was alone, and he'd heard her whistle up breezes and pull music out of stones and trees. Olivia showed lots of promise. During a school softball game, she had afflicted everyone on the other team with itchy rashes so her team could win. James had brewed up two champion storms so far, and could conjure mini-rainstorms inside the house.

Keith lagged behind all his siblings in the spellcasting department. Our hope for the future. Sadie probably just called him that to torture him. His own future hope was that he could go to college somewhere else and get away from the family. He had applied to three colleges on the sly. No news ever came back from them, though. Maybe his grades weren't good enough, or maybe Sadie was getting to the mail before he could.

Keith's magical talents were less obvious than other people's in the family. He hadn't told anybody the first four years after he got them, but Sadie, bloody Sadie, figured it out one day when he was eating her dessert after supper. He should have stopped after Mary's dessert, but it was Kona coffee ice cream, his favorite.

A push here, a nudge there. When he first came into his powers, he had made big, obvious mistakes; luckily, they were on his friend Calvin, in fifth grade. Calvin was a nerd. He was more interested in helping Keith figure out how his magic worked and how best to use it than in tattling to anyone either inside or outside of Keith's family.

With Calvin's help, Keith developed skill and finesse. He got away with lots of things until Sadie unmasked him. After that, he had to watch his step, because one of Sadie's skills was tracking — both people and magic use. She didn't let him get away with anything at home, but she made him practice like crazy outside of it. She dragged him to the mall when she first discovered his gift, and forced him to nudge strangers into giving him things they had just bought. Sadie had even made him nudge a woman into buying a dress Sadie particularly wanted, in Sadie's size.

Sadie's demands forced Keith to upgrade his nudges; he invented whole mental scenarios to persuade people they wanted to give things away. He learned to heighten mental moods of kindness, charity, and altruism, but he was ashamed of these techniques. The only person he really wanted to use them on was Sadie. They didn't work on her; she had few natural altruistic tendencies.

Later, when Sadie told their parents about Keith's talent, even though she had promised she wouldn't, she didn't mention any of the things she had made him steal for her.

Sadie was always on his case. After awhile, Keith's most intense magic practice was figuring ways to evade Sadie. He was trying, with Calvin's help, to develop a distract power. He didn't want to test the distract at home until he knew he had it down.

Meanwhile, he preferred the company of normal people to that of his relatives — well, his relatives except James and Olivia. Normal people might threaten him physically, or with words, but they didn't do the kinds of twisted, uncomfortable things to him Sadie did. In general, people liked him, even without nudges.

Pa always sided with Sadie when she bossed Keith around. Keith was lucky Pa had a job that took him into town every day.

Too bad for Sadie and Pa they were frozen and outside. There was nothing they could say about what Keith chose to eat. Except, of course, in his head, where Sadie's irritating voice still nattered at him about polluting his body with beef and cheese when he should be eating rice and fresh fruits and vegetables. Fries! A vehicle for degraded fat. Coffee! Caffeine upset the delicate chemical balance of Keith's forces. Besides, he didn't even like coffee. He only ordered it to contradict to Sadie's voice in his head, which was a waste of time. But maybe the caffeine would keep him awake until he got the family to Janowary Jeanne's, in Crescent Valley. Janowary Jeanne had never liked any of the Sharps except Keith. He wasn't sure she would help him disenchant the others. She was the only wizard he knew within a day's drive who might consider it, though. If she wouldn't help, Keith wasn't sure what to do. Wait for two months until the next Council?

Pa and Ma were planning to present a new technique there. They had discovered a method of slipping out of normal time. There were a few wrinkles in the spell Pa and Ma needed to smooth out, but they were sure they could get it perfected before Council.

If they could work at all.

Keith had to get them unfrozen.

The red-headed waitress came back and slapped a plate down in front of Keith: a cheeseburger so tall he wouldn't be able to bite it without taking off the top bun, and a logjam of French fries. Keith leaned forward and just breathed in all that good, savory grease. He tasted a fry, then grabbed the salt and pepper shakers from the condiments caddy and went to work. He mashed the burger flat until it was biteable. It, too, tasted like grease heaven. He moved fries aside and poured a pool of ketchup on his plate.

"Statues," Mike muttered in a cigarette-flavored voice. "Statues of what?"

Keith dipped a French fry in ketchup and ate it. "My family."

"You have statues of your family? Are you rich?" Mike's gaze traveled from Keith's mud-spattered Adidas, to his wet, worn jeans, on up to the beat-up brown leather bomber jacket he'd found at a thrift store, zipper gaping to reveal a blue work shirt, and his wet hair, which had stopped dripping into Keith's eyes and was probably drying into tight, dark blond curls.

"No," he said.

"Are they dead?"

Keith choked on a mouthful of coffee. "God, I hope not."

"Why make statues of them?" Mike asked.

"I don't know. That's what I have to find out." Who had cast this spell, anyway? Did it have anything to do with Ma and Pa's new project, or did somebody just not like them?

"Someone made statues of your family, you're hauling them around, and you don't know why." It wasn't really a question.

"Yeah, I guess," said Keith. He wondered if he should nudge Mike. Oh, for the days when he had been terrible and careless and flung power around at random.

Well, no, he'd never had days like that. Calvin had fantasized about days like that, what he'd do if he had the power, but Keith had never really let go, except maybe a couple times with Brenda Hall back in tenth grade. She'd had been interested in him already. He just nudged her toward being very interested in him. Wahoo, the things they did together. He still dreamed about them.

He'd seen Brenda at the high school after hours a couple months ago, and she had dragged him into an empty classroom and pulled his clothes off without any nudging at all, so he figured she was okay with what they'd done.

How was he going to fix Mike? Keith wondered. Well, heck, why should he worry what Mike thought? It wasn't like they were ever going to see each other again.

"You're not a career trucker, are you, son?" Mike asked

"Nope."

Mike rolled a new cigarette from makings he took out of his shirt pocket. "So where are you taking the statues?"

"Crescent Valley."

"Why?"

“Someone who lives there might know what to do with them.” Keith finished his meal, even the pickle slices on the side, and sat back. Nancy bustled over and dropped his check beside his plate. If he had more time, he might have tried a nudge or two on her. She was very cute. Instead, he stood, opened his wallet, and dropped cash on the check. “Thanks,” he said to Nancy, who by that time was pouring coffee for someone halfway down the counter.

Mike stood up, too, and shrugged into a ragged, full-length black leather jacket with dirty white fleece peeking out from cuffs and opening. “I want to see these statues of yours,” he said.

Keith wondered if he should nudge Mike now. The less anyone else knew about his family and his dilemma, the better.

But the crossword guy on Keith’s other side was staring at them. Maybe Keith should nudge Mike outside, where no one would notice if Mike suddenly lost interest in something.

“You’re not used to this, are you?” Mike asked when they had stepped outside into the pouring rain.

“Used to what?” Keith had to raise his voice to be heard over the water.

“Dealing with people like me.”

“People like you?” Keith asked.

“Yeah. People who do things like this.” Mike’s hand gripped the back of Keith’s neck, and Keith felt heat flash from Mike’s fingers into his brain. Keith’s volition drained away like sand from an open hand.

“Tell me your name,” Mike said.

“Keith Sharp,” said Keith. The words fell out of his mouth.

“Sharp. Yes. You have the look. Never expected to find such a helpless Sharp. Guess I can blame that on your loving parents; they must have squashed you good and hard for some reason. Show me your family,” Mike said.

Keith led him to where the van and trailer were parked, beyond most of the other cars in the lot, far enough away so casual passersby wouldn’t go over to see it. Despite his wanting Sadie to be gone.

I shouldn’t be doing this, Keith thought. Thinking didn’t stop his eager trot toward his cargo, though. Mike’s fingers were hot on his neck, invasive, as though they were plugged into him. Something flowed from Mike’s fingertips into Keith’s brain, disabling his ability to tell his voice and muscles what to do.

The trailer was untouched. The edge of the tarp was still turned up. Sadie’s blue eyes glared at him, her face wet with rain, her hair wet but still poufed up in her carefully styled do, stone hairspray — maybe there was a future in rock-hard hair. She stood with her arms at her sides. Now that he thought of it, the whole family stood with their arms at their sides, their expressions variations on upset. So they had known before the spell hit them that something was going to happen.

“Statues,” Mike murmured. He dragged Keith closer, never relaxing his grip on Keith’s neck, and reached for the rope that held the tarp down. A touch from his nicotine-stained fingers, and the rope untied, slapping back and unlacing from the cleats edging the trailer. Wind sneaked under the tarp and lifted it, revealing Ma and Pa, James and Olivia, Mary and the rest of Sadie. Hurt rose up Keith’s throat, heat behind his eyes. What was he going to do? What if Janowary Jeanne couldn’t or wouldn’t help him? He had avoided most of the wizard parties Ma and Pa went to. He liked regular people better.

Now, when he needed to know wizards, he couldn’t dredge up names. Sadie knew them all, of course. But she wasn’t talking.

Why was he thinking of options when he couldn’t even control his own body?

“Mighty fine collection,” said Mike.

Keith could swear Sadie's glare intensified, and it was aimed at him. I should be struggling. I've got to fight this man. I don't know what he wants, but it's probably not good. He didn't have to do this to me. He could have just asked.

"You'll give them to me, won't you, son?" Mike said. "Say yes."

No! Keith thought. "Yes," he said.

"Good boy. I'm going to have me some fun with this lot. Give me the keys to your car."

Keith fished the keys out of his pocket. None of his reluctance showed in his actions. He shook his key ring — keys to the house, the shed out back where he built his models, the family post office box, his bike lock, the car, a key to the high school that Mr. Falcon, the janitor, had given him when he told the janitor how sometimes he just needed to run away. All those keys he loved that let him into special places. He dropped them in Mike's outstretched claw.

Mike cackled. "Good boy. I'd take you with me, but you might try to interfere. And I already know you're small fry. Sleep now."



Keith woke even wetter than he'd been when he'd fallen asleep. He was lying on a wet grass verge beside the truck stop parking lot, blinking up at the rain. It took a moment for things to fall into place. The back of his neck burned, and that reminded him of the grip Mike had had on him.

His car. His trailer. His statues. All gone.

The family! He had betrayed them! He had to get them back!

He got up and ran into the truck stop. It was past lunchtime; customers had thinned. A stocky young Hispanic man was clearing the tables into a gray dishpan on a rolling cart. The waitress, Nancy, was punching buttons at the cash register. She glanced at him, then away, then back. Keith squished toward her, leaving puddles on the linoleum.

"Say, you were in here before, weren't you?" she said. "At the counter."

"That man," said Keith.

"Who, Mike?"

"Yeah. That man Mike mugged me. He stole my van and my cargo."

"Mike? Mike did that? I can hardly believe it. He's been coming here every afternoon for two-three months, and he's never done a worrisome thing."

"He stole my van and my statues." Keith felt in his back pocket, found that he still had his wallet. Whew. "I have to call the police."

"Oh, now," Nancy said, and then Keith opened up to his power, and nudged her. Police might not be the best answer, not if Mike could touch their necks and make them do what he wanted. Maybe he should go after Mike himself. Nancy probably had a car.

Ten minutes later, Nancy had told her boss she was sick and needed the afternoon off, and she and Keith were driving north in her Mazda Protege. Keith lay back in the passenger seat and closed his eyes. He wasn't sure about north; Mike might have mentioned it to throw him off. He needed to lay out a line to Sadie. All that nagging she had heaped on him, all the tracking she had done — could he follow the leash back to the hand that held it? He hadn't shrugged off her latest tail, because he was just going to the dentist, and she knew it. If he was lucky at all — and he had been lucky more times than he deserved — she would still have a tail on him. She was too nosy to let any of them out without a leash if she could help it.

Cobwebs touched him. Not north. Mike had gone west. "Turn left," Keith told Nancy, backing it with a nudge, and she turned at the next major intersection.

"Keith," she said, an hour and a half later, when he was still tracing cobwebs and nudging her accordingly, "how long is this going to take? My little boy's in daycare, and they expect me to pick him up in half an hour." She glanced behind them. The storm was lighter now, but true night was dropping. They'd had the headlights on all afternoon.

Remorse crashed over Keith. He hadn't even bothered to check what Nancy was leaving behind, seventy miles back. "I'm sorry." Should he let her go? "Let's try that truck stop. Maybe you can call daycare, find out if your kid can stay longer." Maybe he'd find someone else there he could nudge in the right direction. The threads between him and Sadie were strengthening with every mile, but he was afraid Mike was never going to stop. The Quest only had half a tank of gas. Mike would have to stop to refuel. But that wouldn't take long.

Keith wished he knew someone to call in an emergency. Everyone he would have called was frozen on a trailer somewhere ahead of them. Janowary Jeanne didn't have a phone, or he would have called to ask her to come to his house. Why hadn't he made friends with more wizards?

Well, most of them were sucky at social skills. Why wouldn't they be? They didn't have to blend, and most of them didn't want to; they considered themselves superior. They could get what they wanted by unspoken persuasions or outright magic. Wizards in general were mean. Sometimes Keith was glad his talent was so small.

Hope for the future. Sadie was out of her mind.

Nancy pulled into a parking spot at the truck stop and climbed out of the car, purse in hand. She rushed inside. Keith felt her pull loose of his hold, but he didn't have the heart to drag her back. He took the keys from the ignition, locked the car, and followed her into the truck stop. Nancy was at a phone booth, feeding quarters into the phone. He put the keys on the ledge in front of her. She cast a look of pure hate at him and began to talk, frantically. Keith backed away.

Should he nudge her to forget what he had done? But that would confuse her, and might interfere with her picking up with her regular life. On the other hand, what if she called the cops on him?

He went to the dining room and looked over the prospects. A few guys drinking coffee, and one tall, slender woman in an olive-green raincoat at the counter, getting a thermos filled with coffee. She glanced toward him. Her eyes were large, outlined with black, the irises deep brown dappled with caramel. She had a cap of short, sleek dark hair.

She looked nothing like any woman he had ever fantasized about, but there was a spark between them when her gaze met his. Maybe she would help him. "Which way you headed?" Keith asked.

"Toward Eskerville," she said.

"Could I catch a ride with you?"

"Lady, don't let him," said the counterman. "I mean, just look at him."

Keith glanced down. His clothes had had time to dry while he and Nancy were driving around, but it hadn't helped much. His jacket was already so beaten up the rain hadn't added to the damage, but his pants were a mess, and his shoes were still muddy. Who knew what his hair was doing. Did he look dangerous? Should he nudge her into taking him? Not here, where there were a lot of people who would see it, some who might notice; he was so tired he might be sloppy. Wait and see what happened from straight contact, and if all else failed, follow her and nudge. But maybe he should look at the men more closely? There might be someone sympathetic here. "I won't hurt you," he said to the woman.

"Sure won't," said the woman as she marched past him. She glanced back over her shoulder, tossed him a smile. "Come on if you're coming."

As they passed Nancy, she slammed the handset down on the pay phone. Her eyes glittered. "I hate you," she said to Keith.

He cringed. "Sorry, Nancy. Is he okay?"

"He's fine, no thanks to you! Give me money for gas and day care."

He pulled out his wallet and gave her forty bucks, which was all he had.

She grabbed it. Breath hissed loudly from her nose. "I better not ever see you in my restaurant again."

"Okay." Keith glanced at his new ride, who waited by the door, a faint smile on her face. Was he going to need to nudge her now? She jerked her head toward the outdoors and went out.

"I'm sorry," Keith told Nancy again, and followed his next fate.

His new driver moved with confidence. Her jaw was powerful. She was taller than Keith. She unlocked the passenger door of a silver four-door Honda, then went around and climbed in behind the wheel. "What'd you do to piss her off?" she asked as Keith got in. "You her ex-husband or something?"

"No. I never met her before today. I convinced her to drive me too far from home," Keith said. "Someone kidnapped my family, and I'm trying to catch him."

"Kidnapped? A whole family? Why didn't you go to the police?"

"I don't have time for that. I don't want him to get any farther ahead of me than he already is. He's got my van, too." I should stop somewhere and rent a car, Keith thought. If I were sensible, that's what I would do. But then I'd have to drive, and I don't know if I can drive and track at the same time.

"How hot on his tail are you?" asked the woman.

The cobweb threads had been growing stronger as he and Nancy raced east. The Quest, loaded down with the trailer, couldn't go as fast as any decent car alone. "Pretty close."

"Do you have a strategy for when you catch up?"

"Don't let him grab me by the neck this time," Keith said.

The woman glanced at him, narrowed her eyes, shook her head. He wanted to nudge her, but he didn't want to irritate her. Without any push from him, she put her key in the ignition and started the car. They headed out on the highway, going east without slowing for the stop sign at the truck stop's exit.

"What are you using to track him?" asked the woman.

"Intuition," said Keith.

"Oh, sure. Why me, Lord? Why is it always me?"

"Always you?" Keith tested the cobwebs again. They were actually pretty close.

"Every time I make a move on a guy, he turns out to be weird. I thought I had this under control, but maybe not. You're the first guy I picked up since I got my curse lifted. I guess that doesn't mean you're not wacky, though. How weird are you?"

"Extremely," said Keith. Though he wasn't sure he believed it. He wasn't as weird as, say, his Uncle Desmond, who regularly buried himself in the ground, saying it helped recharge his spiritual batteries.

Uncle Desmond. He could have tried to call Uncle Desmond, but Uncle Desmond was in South America at the moment, sampling Brazilian earths, and Desmond wasn't gifted with instant travel.

"I wonder if you mean weird the same way I do," the woman said thoughtfully, giving Keith a long look. He looked back, even though he was nervous that her gaze was on him instead of the road. "How likely is that?" she asked herself. She faced the road, shook her head. "Then again, I might still be a weird magnet, just in a different way. I hope — well, maybe I should get to know you better before we go there. So what's your name?"

“Keith Sharp. What’s yours?”

“Tegwyn Morada.”

Whoa. Not a name he had ever heard before. Keith studied the woman anew. Maybe she was weird too? What if she was a wizard? “Thanks for the ride, Tegwyn. Hey. Wait. That exit, right there.” He pointed, but she passed it before she could turn.

She pulled a wild U in one of those slots across the center divide reserved for cop cars and took them back to the exit Keith had pointed out.

“My fate to be with weird guys, if at all, I guess,” Tegwyn muttered. “But better than Mom’s plans for me.”

The Quest was by the side of the road, and Mike was next to it, kneeling beside a jack, one tire on, one tire off. The trailer was re-covered now, the tarp hiding everyone, including Sadie.

“That’s what you’re looking for?”

“My family,” he said, and jumped out before she stopped the car. She pulled in front of the Quest, blocking its escape.

Keith kept the van between him and Mike as he ran back to the trailer, where he climbed under the tarp. Everyone was still there, still frozen in the same position. He hugged the nearest statue, which happened to be Sadie.

The odor of cigarette smoke warned him. He whirled.

“Well, look who turned out to be more resourceful than I expected,” Mike said, and reached for Keith.

Keith, his arms still around Sadie from behind, nudged with everything he had. He nudged Mike to fall on his ass and lie there in the road without moving. Mike dropped. His cigarette fell from his mouth as he collapsed, but then his agate green eyes heated up and he bounced up sitting right after he hit the ground. “Well,” he said, “so you had a tooth or two, eh? Should have taken you with me after all. It’s not going to be that easy, Keith, boy. I already got a claw in you. Left it there just in case.” Keith felt burning in the back of his neck. Something reached into his brain the way Mike had done before, clamping down on everything he wanted and needed.

He yelled “No!” and tried to push it back, hugged Sadie hard enough to hurt himself on her rockness. Where was she now? Why wasn’t she here, shoving people around against their wills? “Stop it!” he yelled, but Mike just chuckled.

“Come on out of there, like the good boy you’re going to be from now on,” Mike said. “The very good boy. Oh, I’m loving you more all the time.”

Keith’s arms dropped to his sides. He eeled out of the trailer to stand, dejected, before Mike. Mike reached for the back of his neck again. “Yep, better strengthen that grip,” he muttered, which made Keith wonder what he could have done to get out of this if he had only known better. A surge of hot pain rose up his neck as Mike’s fingers made contact.

“You leave him alone!” yelled a voice.

Mike turned.

Tegwyn stood there, a gun in her hand, the hammer cocked and her finger on the trigger.

“Run!” Keith cried in the momentary fluctuation of Mike’s attention. “Tegwyn, get out of here!”

“Isn’t this nice?” Mike said. “Where’d you get the girlfriend, son? She’s quite the looker, if you like ’em skinny.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. She’s just someone I met at a truck stop. Whatever you want, leave her out of it.”

“Well, isn’t this sweet, you telling me my business, boy? It’s entertaining, but I don’t know how much longer I’ll be amused by it. Maybe I’ll just stop you from talking now.” Mike gripped Keith’s neck harder, and burning tendrils of pain shot into Keith’s skull. “Don’t speak,” Mike breathed, “don’t yell, don’t vocalize at all.”

“Hey!” cried Tegwyn. She aimed the gun and pulled the trigger.

Mike jerked. His hand fell off Keith’s neck, and he staggered a couple steps, then sat down in the wet road and clapped his hands to his left thigh. “Never turn your back on a woman with a gun,” he muttered as blood seeped between his fingers.

Tegwyn rushed up and shoved Mike aside with her foot.

Don’t let him touch you! Keith tried to yell, but no sound came out. Tegwyn grabbed him and tugged him away from Mike and the trailer.

“What did he do to you?” she asked.

Keith opened and shut his mouth. The nudge Mike had laid on him — if that’s what it was — was still working. He couldn’t speak. He glanced at the trailer, anxious, then at Mike, who glared at them. Keith gripped Tegwyn’s arm and dragged her away.

“Wait. What about — were those people on the trailer? Who were they? Was that your family?”

Keith nodded.

“How’d they get under the tarp? Why aren’t they struggling? Are they still alive?” She jerked Keith to a stop before they reached her car. “We came here to find your family, and now you’re just going to leave them behind? What’s wrong with this picture?”

Keith tugged on her arm again, pulled her closer to her car. The back of his neck still burned with the aftermath of Mike’s touch. He wished Mary weren’t frozen: she could untangle sorceries better than most people he knew. She hadn’t untangled the one that had frozen her, though. Maybe there was nothing she could do now. Who had cast this spell on his family, and why? He needed someone who could see under the surface, trace the psychic fingerprints of the spell and track them back to the one who cast it. He needed an untangler who could cut the threads that held the spell in place.

On the other hand, he knew who had spelled him, and it didn’t help. He didn’t have the technique to undo Mike’s spell.

Or did he? Which kind of wizardry was Mike practicing? Think, Keith.

But first — he glanced over his shoulder. Mike was crawling toward them. He’d done something to stop the bleeding of his leg, but he hadn’t healed it yet — he was still unable to walk. But he was muttering, and pausing every once in a while to form mudras with his hands. Keith saw the words in the handshapes: Nets. Trap. Stop. Hold. Sleep.

He turned on Tegwyn, carried her around the car and opened the door, shoved her into the driver’s seat while she was still sputtering. Something rose up in Keith, a power of his own, stronger than nudges: a compulsion. He gripped Tegwyn’s wrist and laid the compulsion on her. Start the car and drive away. Then he opened the back door, dove into the back seat.

Tegwyn started the car and speeded away from Mike, the trailer full of family, the van. She accelerated so fast that it pressed Keith down in the seat. He was glad he had managed to close the back door before she took off. Gradually the push holding him to the seat eased. He lay quiet and collected himself. He needed to fight. Not one of his skills. Mary could persuade him to do things, and Sadie could bully him, but he didn’t actually fight back. He evaded. Everyone else in his life had been responsive to nudges except his parents, and he had always figured it was his job to take what his parents dished out. When he didn’t, they turned him into an animal or an inanimate object, depending on the severity of the offense.

He needed to fight now. What had Sadie done when a bully attacked Keith in fourth grade, before he came into his powers? She had centered her forces in her palm, then placed her palm on the bully's chest and sent him reeling across the corridor to crash into the wall.

What kind of wizardry was Mike using on Keith? Touch control. Much more violent than the kind Keith's Pa used on people. Pa only used it when he had to, and then in its mildest possible form. This felt pretty toxic.

What counteracted it? After one of the Wizard Councils Keith had gone to, a girl had touch-controlled him into kissing her, not just once, but six or eight times, each one longer and more involved than the last — in fact, until one of the grownups came by to take her home, and touch-repelled Keith with exclamations of disgust. Keith had fallen, loosed the girl. His lips were still in kiss mode, though. He hadn't even been able to explain to his mother what had happened. She had flicked a show-me spell on him, seen the nature of the touch-control spell, and —

“Keith, you insane maniac, what did you do to me? Stop it! Stop it! Let me stop!” Tegwyn cried from the front seat. Keith realized she had been saying things like that for some time. “I'm about to run a stop sign, and there's a cop right there!”

Touch control! He'd just done it to Tegwyn. He sat up, touched the back of her neck, sent a message to his compulsion to dissipate and leave her system intact.

“Oh, thank God,” she said, and the car slowed and stopped. Then she screamed. “What did you do to me? How?” she asked while the scream still rung the air. She turned around, aimed her gun at him, sighted down its barrel.

To undo touch control, touch again. But his mother hadn't had to take him to the girl who had touched him. She had undone the spell herself. How?

Another touch spell on top of the first, a spell that acted on a spell. He collected his own power in his right palm, waited until he felt a strong glow. Then he pressed his palm to the back of his neck with a message: root out the spell Mike laid on me. Kill it.

His own power seeped under his skin, warm and familiar and smelling of fresh popcorn. It followed the heat of Mike's spell; his own safe warmth wrapped around Mike's fiery spell and smothered it.

“Tegwyn,” he said, experimenting.

“Keith! What the hell did you do to me, and how?”

“I'm sorry, Tegwyn. Mike put a shut-up spell on me, and if we'd stayed there, he would have done worse to both of us.”

“A spell,” she said. She was still fuming, but she lowered the gun.

“So I had to get you away from there. I put a spell on you to make you move. I'm sorry. He's scary, and he's got my family. I need to go back, but first maybe I need to find someone with stronger magic.”

“A spell,” Tegwyn said again, more slowly. “Get up here, Keith.”

He sighed, got out of the car, came around and settled in the front passenger seat. They were off the highway, in some neighborhood somewhere, parked on a side street near lawns that led away to large, somewhat battered houses. Porch lights and street lights bloomed in the gathering dark. There was a smell of wet mown grass, meat cooking, and roses. An intersection was nearby, with a stop sign facing them.

“Okay,” Tegwyn said. “I might not have believed any of that, only I experienced it, and Lord knows, I've experienced stranger things. You did something that made me act against my own wishes. That was a spell?”

“A compulsion. A kind of spell. He put a spell on me so I couldn't speak to warn you, Teg. He was building more hand spells to trap and control us while he crawled toward us. I had to get us away.”

She frowned and stared out the window as a car drove slowly by, its middle-aged female driver studying them. Tegwyn turned the key in the ignition. “We may have worn out our welcome in this neighborhood.” She put the car in gear and started slowly down the street. “A compulsion, huh? Something you do often?”

“No. That was my first, actually.” A nudge wasn’t a compulsion. It was more like a suggestion, only subvocal. Why not do this? A compulsion: Do this.

“You’re talking now. Did the shut-up spell he put on you wear off?”

“No, I figured out how to break it.”

“What are we talking about here, Keith? Witches? Why does it always have to be witches? First that curse my mom put on me seven years ago, and all those weird boyfriends I got as a result, then the witch I had to pay to take the curse off me, and now this.”

“Wizards is what we call ourselves. I don’t know what Mike is, except powerful.”

“How’d he get hold of your family?”

“He was in a truck stop diner when I went in for lunch, and he just kind of took them away from me. He touched the back of my neck and then I did whatever he said.”

“A spell is like a date rape drug?” said Tegwyn.

Keith thought of Brenda in the deserted chem classroom, a couple years after he had touched her with any nudges at all. No, he hadn’t nudged her. Not that time. Maybe earlier, though, when he had first nudged her — maybe that was this kind of evil. Messed with her against her will, the way he had treated Nancy.

What was the first nudge he ever did? He and Calvin had been playing Monopoly, and Keith wanted to be the shoe. Calvin didn’t figure out the nudges until the night when Keith made Calvin give him the biggest piece of chocolate cake. Desserts were Keith’s downfall. Calvin was upset with him at first, but then argued with him. “C’mon, Keith. Don’t be such a sissy. Nudge me hard.” And when Keith un-nudged him, Calvin wrote down all his feelings and reactions to the nudges. They’d had a treehouse where they kept all the documents and talked about the results. At Calvin’s urging, he’d nudged other people. “Make him wink.” “Make her turn around.” “Can you make her give me her phone number? Really, you can’t? Aw, c’mon, Keith.” It was a game. They didn’t do it to hurt anyone.

It wasn’t until Sadie was pushing him to make people buy her things that Keith felt guilty about his talent.

Mike, on the other hand, was three kinds of bad, any way you looked at it. “So he’s got my family,” Keith told Tegwyn. “They were petrified when I loaded them on the trailer. I was taking them to a powerful wizard who lives in Crescent Valley to see if she could break the spell on them.”

“I guess I woke up in the Twilight Zone again today,” Tegwyn muttered. “Oh well, I like the Twilight Zone better than most places I spend my time, and I was headed home for a confrontation I’m not looking forward to, so I might as well work on your troubles instead. Who put a spell on your family?”

“I don’t know,” Keith said. He still hadn’t answered any of the basic questions: who, how, why, why everybody but him? What if he had been home? The spell could have frozen him, too, and he wouldn’t have had to figure out what to do next. He could have waited and done nothing, the way he usually did when he was home: He waited for other people to do things to him, then resented them, and did nothing.

He remembered that he had broken a spell on himself. Maybe he could use touch magic to break the spell on the family. If he could get close to them. How could he defeat Mike?

“Teg, thanks for all your help. I need to go after them by myself now. I could rent a car.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m the one with the gun,” Tegwyn said. “And it actually worked against that guy, wizard or not. I’ve got fourteen shots left. I’ll take you back.”

“It’s not safe. He was talking like he was going to do horrible things to my family, and they can’t defend themselves right now. He could do worse things to you, Teg. And to me. I’m not a very strong wizard. I can’t just leave my family there, though.”

Tegwyn turned the car around and drove back along the residential street they had been cruising.

Keith had been lying on the back seat when they arrived here, but he saw the highway ahead, the one where they had found Mike and his family.

“Don’t argue,” Tegwyn said. “I’m coming too.”

“I don’t think I can protect you from him.”

“Let me worry about that.”

Keith sighed and left it at that.

When they arrived at the site of their previous encounter with Mike, the van and the trailer were gone. Blood spotted the wet pavement, and a flat tire lay beside the road, but there were no other clues.

Keith gripped his hands, closed his eyes, and fished for mental cobwebs again. “Straight ahead,” he said, “and not that far off.”

“I didn’t think he’d have much of a lead,” said Tegwyn. “Winged him pretty good, and he hadn’t finished changing the tire when we took off.” She speeded ahead.

The highway was empty of most traffic. It wasn’t long before they caught sight of the trailer, its silver tarp flapping. “What do you want me to do now?” Tegwyn asked. The trailer, with its standing, tarp-draped cargo, was wider and higher than the van; Tegwyn snuck the little Honda close behind it, out of sight of the van’s back window, beyond the range of its mirrors. “I could shoot out another tire, and he wouldn’t have a spare.”

“But he might crash. I don’t know what’ll happen if my family chips.” If he could break the spell on Sadie, Ma, or Pa, they could take things from there. “Can you get even closer to the trailer?”

“I guess, but it worries me. That thing is veering back and forth. I don’t want it to whipsaw into us.”

“Maybe I can jump.” Keith was strong, what with all his work at the gym, and more graceful now than he had been at fourteen, when he was chubby bully-bait. He’d started working out so Sadie wouldn’t have to rescue him all the time; it was worse than poison to owe her anything.

He didn’t think of himself as an acrobat. But maybe he could persuade Tegwyn’s car to hang onto him until he was ready to let go. He rolled down his window, unbuckled his seatbelt, and stuck head, shoulders, and arms out of the window into the wind of passage, gripping the edge.

“Keith, are you crazy?”

“Probably.” The rain had stopped, but the air rushing at him and over him was still cold and damp. He put one hand on the wet side of the car and thought, Can you hear me?

The metal warmed under his hand, but he wasn’t sure that was an answer.

Can you help me?

A ripple of chill crossed his palm. Was that a no, or another question?

I need you to help me hang on until I’m ready to let go, he thought.

Warmth.

He tried to pull his hand off the door, but it wouldn’t come.

He guessed the car understood him well enough. I need to move forward onto your hood, without falling off. Then I need to jump onto the trailer ahead of us. Understand?

The door's hold on his hand eased. He twisted in the window and pulled himself out onto the Honda's roof. It sucked him to it as though it was frozen and he was wet. He tried to swim forward, and after a moment, it let him slide down across the windshield and onto the hood.

"Keith!" Tegwyn cried out her window. "You are crazy!"

"Get me close," he called back. Hold onto my feet, please. Thanks. He eased up off the hood until he was standing. Pulling free of the metal was like pulling his hand off a surface coated with strong adhesive. He wasn't sure how the car had magnetized him, but it certainly cut down on his fear.

He looked ahead. The trailer still eclipsed his view of the van, so he was pretty sure Mike couldn't see him or Tegwyn's car. He slid forward until he was on the edge of the hood, the cold, damp wind around the trailer ahead buffeting him. Tegwyn's headlights splashed across the back of the trailer, outlining the bumper in shadow and glaring off the tarp's silver. The tarp snapped and rattled under its ropes. The end of the trailer he was facing was covered well enough with tarp to obscure the lines of his family beneath.

Keith flexed his toes, held his arms out toward the trailer. He glanced down at the half-lit road whizzing by in the narrow gap between the car and the trailer, and dizziness swamped him. No. Don't think about that. He closed his eyes, felt how his feet stuck to the car's hood, despite the bumpy road, the wind, and the whip of damp in the air as it blew into his bomber jacket and up the cuffs of his pants.

He opened his eyes again, and this time he only looked ahead to where the silver tarp covered his family. The trailer was racing away from them into darkness, but Tegwyn raced too, keeping them close.

The bumper at the rear of the trailer was covered with damp mud. It might be a slippery place to land, so he'd need to grab something to hold onto immediately. He fixed his gaze on the ropes over the tarp. Yes. He could grab those and hang on.

Please be ready to let me go, he thought to the car. A dusting of warmth across the soles of his feet. He bent his knees, imagined that he was a coiled spring, then glanced back through the windshield at Tegwyn, who looked terrified and grim in the lights from the dashboard, her hands gripping the steering wheel so tight her knuckles were white.

Family, he thought. Now, he thought to the car, and the sticky glue that held his feet released him. He stepped back, then lunged forward, pushed off the hood of the car. Then he was airborne between two careening vehicles with no idea of where his own gravity lay. His feet ran on air, one step, two, and he had time to wish he had James's developing power, which manifested as flight and storms — air was James's element. His feet slammed down onto the trailer's back bumper, and his face and front bashed into the tarp. Something hard beneath the silver tarp whacked his cheek. Warmth spurted in his nose, cooled as it crossed his upper lip; he stuck out his tongue and tasted the sour salt of his own blood. His hands groped and found rope, closed tight. Gradually, his heart stopped crashing around inside. He rubbed his nose on his sleeve.

The trailer had dipped with his added weight, but maybe, with all the bumps and jerks because of the speed and the bad road, Mike wouldn't notice. In case Mike had noticed something, though, Keith better had to get to work.

He managed to loosen one hand and lift the tarp. Yes, he had crashed into someone's front — Ma's, actually. He lifted one leg over the trailer's edge and stepped inside, followed with the other leg, and finally, braced by the trailer's sides and the crush of statues, he let go the rope. He put one arm around his mother and reached for his power. Power collect in my right hand. Craft yourself to seek out the stone spell and smother it. When his hand tingled and burned with power, he pressed it to his mother's sternum and sent his spell into her. Would it be enough? He wasn't quick and bright like the others, but even so, Pa included him in every family spellcrafting. Ma said they needed everyone. They trained as a unit.

Keith had always been a disappointment in individual skills. Sadie had let him know often enough. Now, when it really counted, could he do what he needed to?

He rested, his arm around his mother, his cheek against her shoulder. If it didn't work, Mike would catch him again, and who knew what would happen.

The trailer rumbled over road, pitching back and forth, but it didn't slow. With his free hand, Keith lifted the tarp enough to check Tegwyn's car. The Honda was still coming, close, close, Tegwyn's face a green underlit blur through the windshield.

"Keith," Ma murmured. Her shoulder was soft under his cheek now, and she was warm in his embrace.

He straightened. "Ma? Are you all right?"

"Better every minute. What you did to me?"

"I broke the spell on you, Ma." He sucked in a breath flavored with surprise and pleasure.

Ma kissed him on the cheek. "Good. Excellent." She glanced around, focused on the tallest of the other statues. She reached out a hand, patted Father's stone face. "Help your father now, Keith."

He reached for his power, found only flickers. "I used up all my oomph on you."

She sighed, put her arm around him. "Well, bud, I guess you did your best. Fill me in. Where are we, and what's going on?"

"You've been kidnapped, or statuenapped. Who turned you into statues, Ma? I came home and found you all frozen."

"Wizard Ficula Rickwen. I don't think you've met her. I always thought she was my friend, so when she came to the house, I invited her in for tea. She drank a cup and ate three cookies before she spelled us. The last thing I remember is her smirk. I never knew she could look so repellent and calculating." She hugged him, let go, turned her head. "What is this place, and why is it swaying?"

"We're in the trailer. The kidnapper's driving. I put you all in the trailer to take you to Janowary Jeanne, because I didn't know how to break the spell. This guy put a spell on me and stole the van and trailer. I've been chasing you ever since, one way or another. Even caught up to you once before, but he spelled me again. I'm sorry it took me so long to figure out how to wake you, Ma."

"It's all right. At least it's done now." Ma looked past him. "Who is that determined young woman in the car behind us?"

"Her name's Tegwyn. She's helping us freely." Keith turned and waved to Tegwyn, who nodded, eyes wide, and kept tailgating.

"Tegwyn? Tegwyn. Interesting, and how nice of her. Let me see what I can do." Ma pressed her hands palm to palm and closed her eyes. Light leaked out around her fingers, shone pink and red through them, edged past bone shadows, grew stronger and stronger until Keith couldn't look. Ma let out a breath and loosed the pale light; Keith felt it pass him like warm wind. He squinted, saw light sink into Pa and the others in the undertarp distance. The world under the tarp glowed faintly blue.

"What?" muttered someone.

"What?" Squeaks as they moved against the Styrofoam, rattles, gasps. People grabbed for each other as the trailer swerved. Someone sat down.

"Huh?" They shifted out of the ropes, curly cables, and bungee cords that had held them in place when they were statues, and the tarp tried to blow off.

Keith grabbed its edge. "Hang onto the tarp!" If it flew away, Mike would definitely notice that something was going on in the trailer. The ride was increasingly bumpy and erratic. Keith suspected they'd left the highway, but despite the bad road, Mike didn't seem to be slowing down.

One or two of the others understood, grabbed for the tarp, held it.

"Hey!" said Sadie.

“Quiet,” Ma said. “We’re in a situation, here, everyone.”

“I feel sick,” said Olivia’s plaintive voice in the flapping darkness. She was not a good traveler.

“Lloyd,” said Ma to Pa, “engage us in a time phase, please.”

“Everyone hold hands,” Pa said.

Keith grabbed Ma’s hand and James’s, without letting go of the tarp. He sensed the others linking. Pa spoke words over the rattling and bumping. A golden glow flowed from Pa’s head down his arms, and then along his hands to each of the other family members, lighting them one by one as though outlined with sunset under the tent of tarp. Light reflected from the tarp’s silvery underside. Pa called one last word, and the trailer, with its ropes and tarp, slid through them, leaving them hanging in the air. Tegwyn drove on through them, too. Still wrapped in a glowing golden haze, they drifted down like dandelion parachutes to land on the wet, pitted dirt road. Keith was afraid it wouldn’t be solid enough to support them, but it did. This spell technology let surfaces be solid to them, because some surfaces were solid across time. They could go through trailer, ropes, and tarp because all those things were moving on; but the road was here before and here now and here in the slight future Pa had chosen.

Not too far up the road, Tegwyn slowed, stopped. The Quest and the trailer whipped on into their own future and out of sight, despite the fact that as soon as they lost touch with the now, the Sharps had lost hold of the tarp, and it had lifted and blown away.

Tegwyn backed and turned.

Pa spoke another spell, and the glow around them flickered out. The ground grew solid under Keith’s feet, and the air was cold and wet again, and smelled of woods; for a moment, it had been empty, almost warm. He shivered. Someone summoned a witchfire ball and let it loose above them, so they could see each other by its green glow.

“What happened, Persy?” asked Pa, when everyone had stopped groaning and stretching.

“You remember Ficula,” Ma said.

“That meddler!”

“I offered her tea, and she gave us paralysis.”

“Uninvite her, Persy. Never let her into our house again.”

“Oh, that’s so done it’s overdone.”

“Any hint of why she did it?”

Ma sighed. “I think it may have something to do with our timeslide technique and the upcoming Council. We need to round up some our-siders and call a hearing.”

Pa nodded. “Tomorrow.”

Sadie’s sharp tone cut through the murmurs of the others. “What’s happening now? Ficula paralyzed us, and suddenly we’re riding through a strange land swathed in plastic and ropes?”

“We’re lucky Keith was away from home when Ficula got there,” Ma said.

“Oh, yes, of course, thank God for small favors,” said Sadie.

Keith felt the shrivel of soul Sadie managed to inspire in him most days of the week.

Tegwyn’s Honda rolled close, pulled to the side of the road, and stopped. The engine coughed and died, and the headlights flicked off.

James tugged on Keith’s sleeve. “Thanks, Keith,” he said. It countered a little of the Sadie-wilt.

Keith gave his brother a hug, though normally they didn't touch. "But Sadie's right," Keith said. "I messed up and got us in worse trouble. I was driving you guys to Janowary Jeanne's, 'cause I figured she'd know what to do, and a guy spelled me, and kidnapped you."

"Janowary Jeanne's? Sure, she'd help." Sadie snorted.

"We're not kidnapped anymore," said Mary, but her statement was half question, the way her statements usually were; in the shade of Sadie, Mary was always wispy.

"I caught up with the kidnapper and managed to wake up Ma," said Keith.

Tegwyn got out of her car and wandered over to them, her right hand down at her side. "Keith?"

"So who's this?" Sadie asked. She lifted her fist.

Keith didn't care which spell she was collecting. He left James and hurried to stand in front of Tegwyn. "It's Tegwyn, your rescuer," he said. "She drove me after I lost the van. I never would have caught up to you guys without her help. Leave her alone."

"Where did you get her?" asked Sadie.

"At a truck stop."

"How do we know she isn't more of Ficula's meddling?" Light leaked between Sadie's fingers — the bluegreen of something transformative. Keith backed up, reached behind him. Tegwyn's left hand slid into his, and he pulled her forward against his back, where she would be shielded from Sadie's casting. She smelled spicy and good, cinnamon and vanilla. He got a better feeling for how tall she was; her chin bumped the top of his head, and her breasts touched his shoulders. He heard her breathing, felt it stir through his hair. It sped up.

"Quit it, Sadie," he said. "Just because I did something doesn't make it wrong."

"Keith, did you compel her?" Sadie asked, with her usual glare.

"No." Sadie thought no one would be interested in him without the help of magic? He felt Sadie-wilt working on him again.

"I think Keith's cute," Tegwyn said across the top of his head, "and I was looking for a new boyfriend. He's better than my last three."

In Keith's preoccupation with the rescue, he had never looked at Tegwyn as anything but a chauffeur and maybe a friend. He glanced back and up. He liked the way she looked. He liked what he was feeling now, a warm, tall, soft-breasted figure against his back, one hand in his, the other — the other hand down at her side, hidden in the skirt of her coat, probably holding the gun.

"Stephanie Lucinda Sharp," Pa said, "disassemble that spell right now. We do not punish those who help us."

It was the first time in Keith's memory that Pa had sided with him against Sadie.

Frowning, glaring, Sadie closed her hand tighter on the spell she had been crafting, took it back inside her.

Ma stepped forward. "I'm sorry, young woman. We're not at our best right now. Thank you for coming to our aid."

"Sure," Tegwyn said. "I'd rather help strangers than have to go home. Can you people transport yourselves out of here? I can't fit all of you into my Honda."

Wow, Keith thought. He wondered exactly what the witches she had met before had done to her. She sure was calm around magic. She was the first person he'd been up front about the wizardlyness in his family with since Calvin had figured it out, and she was doing really well.

"We'll manage," said Pa.

“Good. Nice to not meet you. Keith, let’s go, before I have to shoot someone else.” She tugged him toward her car, away from his family.

“Um.” Keith resisted her pull. He looked at his family. All capable wizards, much stronger than he was, and now that they were unspelled, he was sure they could take care of themselves without him around to mess up. “Okay.”

The Quest, empty trailer rattling and bucking behind it, came racing back along the bumpy road, headlights careening across them in wild arcs. Tegwyn dragged Keith behind her car, pulled him down so they were shielded by the Honda’s body but could see over the hood.

Keith yelled, “Ma! Pa! That’s Mike, the kidnapper! Get out of the way!”

His family stood in the road, facing the car. Why weren’t they mobilizing, either to lift out of the road before the van drove over them, or to cast spells that would turn the van into a ham sandwich or a cloud of feathers?

The Quest stopped, its headlights trained on his family. The door opened, and Mike got out. In the backwash of the headlights, Keith watched to see if he limped, but no. Somehow he’d healed from the gunshot already. “So it is you,” Mike said in his raspy voice, “you Sharps. I knew I found something worth stealing.”

“Mikulty,” Ma said.

“Almost had you, but that stupid boy of yours — ” Mike laughed. “Oh, well. I can mend it now.” He lifted his hands in a series of double mudras, nets, trap, bind, hold, disable.

“Family, glutar,” Pa cried.

Keith released Tegwyn’s hand and raced back to the family; he couldn’t help it. Pa had drilled them in defense, and now the commands were printed on Keith’s soul.

He joined a circle his family formed, all facing outward. He stood between Mary and Olivia; their hands slid into his. Glutar. Great star rising. Power whipped through him, pulled from him, circled around and through everyone, growing as it went.

Power. He had used up almost everything he had when he waked Ma. Yet Pa could pull more from him. Was he holding more, hiding it from himself? A pale glow rose from his chest, traveled along his arm.

“Fescar,” said Pa, and the collected power shot from Pa’s chest in a green stream to Mike. It shimmered and sheeted and sparked against a bubble around Mike. A shield. Mike laughed, his hands shaping more mudras. “Bliskip,” Pa said. This command was new, something related to the timeslide technology; maybe Pa was sending the power to Mike before Mike raised the shield, or after he dropped it.

The rising power shot from Pa’s chest again, this time orange, and it pierced Mike’s shield and drove into his chest. Mike screamed, danced like a bug on a hot griddle, and collapsed in a cascade of whistling wheezes.

“Mosola,” Pa murmured. The whirl of power streaming through the circle of family slowed, settled. Keith’s hands loosed Mary’s and Olivia’s and dropped to his sides. He felt tired and sad.

“Mikulty, did you say?” Pa asked Ma. He wandered over to stare down at Mike, who twitched and wheezed on the ground, crackles of orange light sparking through his hair and clothes. Ma followed.

“Ah, yes. Different hairstyle, and some attempt to disguise his features, but it’s Mikulty, all right,” said Pa. “He’s been laying low the last twenty years. I wonder why he resurfaced now.”

“Who is he, Pa?” Keith asked. Tegwyn approached, stood just behind his shoulder. He reached back with his left hand, and her hand slid into his again.

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear: “That was awesome. You guys do things like this all the time?”

“He’s been banned from the Wizard Councils for twenty years,” Pa said. “He’s a guy who bears grudges.”

“Does he hate you in particular, Pa?”

“Probably.”

Ma said, “It might have something to do with you unmasking his power-sucking scheme. That led to his downfall. He’s the kind who would plot to get back at you. I wonder if he and Ficula were working in concert.”

“Keith?” said Pa. “He mention Ficula, or anybody else? You get the feeling he was playing you?” He prodded Mike with his toe.

Keith was distracted by Tegwyn’s warm breath in his ear. “Huh? Oh. I don’t think so. Nancy, the waitress at the truck stop where I met Mike, said he was a regular there. I just ended up beside him at the counter.”

Sadie said, “I bet he influenced your mind. You’re easy to manipulate.”

Keith guessed Mike might have nudged him to sit at the counter. He thought he had sat at the counter to get closer to Nancy. He shrugged. “Okay. I can’t say for sure. You guys figure it out. I’m leaving.”

“You’re not leaving, you know,” Sadie said. “We need you.”

“You don’t. You’re all loose now, and what have I ever been but a second-rate wizard? You’re better off without me.”

“Keith!” cried Ma.

“You’re our hope — ” Sadie started.

“Why do you keep saying that? Will you just shut up?” Keith yelled. “I get the joke. I’m no one’s hope. Cut it out, now.”

Pa said, “But it’s true, Keith. You’re our hope for the future. We all are. It takes everyone to work these maximum impact spells, including you.”

Keith froze. His skin prickled as though a cold wind blew over it. Glutar. Great star rising. Family, assemble; and he went to his place in the circle, and let Pa pull power out of him. Power he didn’t know how to access himself. Why didn’t he know how to access it himself? Why hadn’t anybody ever taught him to undo spells?

He glanced across at Sadie, who glared at him, still, always, but something hid behind the glare, a flicker, maybe, of fright.

Keith stared down at Mike, who had stopped crackling and wheezing and now just looked deeply asleep.

“He’s bound, isn’t he?” he said.

“Right and tight,” said Pa. “He’s not going anywhere until we’ve had a chance to question him. We’ll find out whether he’s in league with Ficula, and what it is they want, separately or together.”

“You don’t need me right now.”

“We do,” said Pa. “We always will.”

Keith turned to Tegwyn, who gripped his hand. The corner of her mouth quirked into a half smile.

“Well, maybe I need to go somewhere else at the moment.”

Pa’s eyes narrowed, and he went remote. Keith sensed a command coming, and stiffened his shoulders. If Pa put all his power into a command, no way could Keith resist; he was as helpless against Pa as he had been with Mike. Or was he? He flattened his hand on his chest, searching for the power reservoir Pa had opened during the spell.

“Maybe you could take a vacation from the family,” Ma said. “Just a little one. Where are we?”

“I don’t know. I was so busy tracking you I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Just outside of Moorend,” Tegwyn said “We drove there when Mike attacked us, then came back because Keith said we had to rescue you.”

“And you did. Thank you, Tegwyn. Thank you, Keith.”

Warmth bloomed under Keith’s hand, spread through his chest.

“You’re welcome,” Tegwyn said. “I’m borrowing your boy now. Don’t you people come after us.” Tegwyn looped her arm through his and tugged him toward her Honda.

Keith glanced over his shoulder at his family. Sadie was glaring as though she’d never been unfrozen.

Tegwyn shifted her arm in his, and he glanced up at her face. Witchlight behind them halflit her smile. Boyfriend?

“See you later,” he said to his family.

Tegwyn opened the door to the Honda’s passenger side, held it until he climbed in. She closed it after him, then went around the Honda and got into the driver’s seat.

“Okay,” she said. “We solved your problem. Time to go home and deal with mine. Will you help me?”

“Sure,” said Keith.

“I need you to tell my mother we’re married.”

“Okay,” said Keith.

“The wizard thing might work in my favor, too,” she muttered. “But the married part is the most important. Mom wants me to marry my horrible cousin. She’s always wanted me to marry him. She did her best to make sure I couldn’t find anybody else, but I finally got the curse she put on me neutralized. Now I might be able to convince her and Mark to leave me alone.” She turned the key and started the car. “A wizard husband. Perfect. Strap in and hang on.”

The End