

# Color Vision

## MARY ROSENBLUM

*When wizards are involved, sometimes a lot more than beauty can be in the eye of the beholder . . .*

*One of the most popular and prolific of the new writers of the nineties, Mary Rosen-blum made her first sale, to Asimov's Science Fiction, in 1990, and has since become a mainstay of that magazine and one of its most frequent contributors, with almost thirty sales there to her credit. She has also sold to The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Sci Fiction, Science Fiction Age, Pulphouse, New Legends, and elsewhere. Rosenblum produced some of the most colorful, exciting, and emotionally powerful stories of the nineties with titles such as "The Stone Garden," "Synthesis," "Flight," "California Dreamer," "Casting at Pegasus," "Entrada," "Rat," "The Centaur Garden," "Skin Deep," "Songs the Sirens Sing," and many, many others. Her novella "Gas Fish" won the Asi-mov's Readers Award Poll in 1996 and was a Finalist for that year's Hugo Award. Her first novel, The Drylands, appeared in 1993 to wide critical acclaim, winning the prestigious Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel of the year; it was followed in short order by her second novel, Chimera, and her third, The Stone Garden. Her first short story collection, Synthesis and Other Virtual Realities, was widely hailed by critics as one of the best collections of 1996. Her most recent books are a trilogy of mystery novels written under the name Mary Freeman, and a major new science fiction novel, Horizons. A graduate of Clarion West, Mary Rosenblum lives in Portland, Oregon.*

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I

'M staring at Mr. Beasley while Mrs. Banks drones on about fractions.

He's some sort of python, I can't remember what kind. Mrs. Banks is my teacher. Her words come out a dull, dirty sort of blue-green, like the ocean right before a storm comes in. Fits the fractions. Mr. Beasley hisses purple at me. I don't think he likes me. But then, I don't like him either. He has *fun* when he squeezes the poor little mice Mrs. Banks feeds him.

Snakes aren't supposed to have fun.

"Hey, what color am I now?" Jeremy's leaning across the aisle. "I'm trying to talk green."

Jeremy's mom is the school counselor. But I like Jeremy anyway. "Shut up," I tell him, because Mrs. B is just looking for a reason to stick us both with detention. It occurs to me that she has fun, too, when Mr. Beasley squeezes those mice. "You're always yellow," I whisper to Jeremy to shut him up. Which he knows, because I told him how synesthesia works about a hundred times. But he thinks it's cool, so I don't care. It scares my dad, I'm not sure why. I think he worries that I'm like my mother. But this doctor said it was just a brain thing, that I'm kind of cross-wired and sound turns into color for me. But it still scares him. I liked the doctor, but his voice was a yucky, puke green color, and we moved again right after. We move a lot. Even if I don't talk about synesthesia.

"You can put your books away now." Mrs. B is staring at the clock, and her hands are kind of fluttering. "We're going to have a special visit from the new principal. Mr. Teleomara ran a very successful private school in New York and we're incredibly lucky to have him." She pats her hair and glances at her reflection in the glass of Mr. Beasley's aquarium. Is that lipstick? I can't believe it, but yeah, she's smearing it on, real sneaky, with her back to us like we can't see. And she has to be a hundred years old. Well, fifty anyway.

"I want you on your best behavior," she says, and pins Jeremy and me with the Death Eye. "Any disturbance and we'll have a quiz on fractions every single day for the next week."

Great, now everybody's looking at us. Jeremy makes this innocent face that makes everybody laugh and I just look at my book. Trying real hard to look real well behaved. Nobody's seen the new principal. He's supposed to be real strict and probably eats babies. You know. I keep pretending to be really into my fractions as Mrs. B goes all high-pitched and breathy at the door, welcoming him.

"Hello, class. I'm delighted to meet you." Deep voice.

Silver?

I blink. It kind of sparkles in the air, like glitter. Never seen *that* before. So I look up and he's tall and looks like a movie star, which is why the lip-stick on Mrs. B, I guess. She's patting her hair again and smirking and

her voice has this greenish tinge now. Even Mr. Beasley gets into the act, hiss-ing purple all over the place. And I look, and then I look again. He's now got a bright blue jewel right in the center of his head and he's got human eyes, you know, with an iris and pupil.

And yeah, he does *not* like me.

Something is wrong here.

"Ah, a reptile lover."

Mr. Beasley hisses real purple and I look back quick at my book, but it's too late. The new principal comes over to stand right next to my desk. He's smiling, and you know what? His smile makes me think of Mr. Beasley's. I don't think he likes me, either.

"Melanie has an attention problem," Mrs. B twitters. "She's a special ed student."

Catherine Summers, head of the In Crowd, kind of snickers, and I can feel my face getting hot. But then I notice this ugly old dish on Mrs. B's desk, the one she puts paper clips in.

It's gold. With like . . . rubies in it.

Yeah . . . something is *really* wrong.

"I am so looking forward to working with everyone in the school." Mr. Teleomara's glittery silver words are kind of hanging in the air. Like fog. And that's not how synesthesia works either. They're drifting around me and I can *feel* 'em, like powdered razor blades or something. They make me itch.

Mr. Teleomara smiles even more like Mr. Beasley. "Melanie Dreyling, it has been a long time."

Uh-oh. Dreyling is my *real* name.

He can't know that. But he's smiling right at me and that razor-dust silver is so thick I can barely see Jeremy's surprised look. I got to get out of here. I got to tell Dad. Better yet, I got to tell Cris. He'll know what hap-pened to Mr. Beasley and the dish.

But I can't move. Can't breathe. The silver stuff is clogging up the air.

“I know your mother,” he says. “You look just like her.”

There’s this buzzing in my ears, and I think of Mr. Beasley grabbing the poor mice and how they scream one little mousey scream before he squeezes them. There’s this buzzing in my ears and my stomach kind of turns inside out, maybe from breathing the razor-dust air. And Mrs. B is clucking about my name and I’m going to faint or ...

. . . throw up.

All over my math book. And the desk. And the floor.

The silver goes away. Then Mrs. B is scolding ugly, storm-colored words and everybody is making *yuck* noises and the colors are all off and sick. I’m going to puke again, so I just bolt. Out the door, down the hall; no way I’m going back in there again.

Mr. Teleomara is having just as much fun as Mr. Beasley does with his mice.

“Hey, wait up!” Jeremy catches up to me as I duck out the fire door at the end of the hall. “Are you okay?” His voice is worried, kind of this off-orange.

“No. Yes. I’m okay.” Which I’m not. I look back but nobody comes charging out after us. “I’m going home. You better get back in there before you get detention.”

“What happened?” He doesn’t go. “How come he called you Dreyling? How come you threw up?”

“Food poisoning.” I head across the playground, waiting for somebody to start yelling. I guess maybe I could tell myself that I was imagining a weird silver voice like that . . . but I *felt* it and it hurt. And then there was Mr. Beasley and the gold dish.

And Mr. Teleomara.

I gotta talk to Cris.

“I ate in the cafeteria, too.” Jeremy catches up to me. “And I’m not puking. And what about your mom? My mom told me she was dead. She said not to talk about her because you were in denial.”

“She’s not dead.” I really snap at him, then I feel bad. Jeremy stuck up for me when I first came here, last winter. He talks to me when the In Crowd won’t. “Sorry.” I sigh. “Look, I gotta go talk to somebody. It’s really impor-tant.” We’re across the playground now, still nobody yelling. I can’t believe how easy it is to skip school. I duck through the hedge beyond the swings and monkey bars, into the yard where the yappy little dog lives, but he must be inside. Jeremy’s still following me.

I should tell him to get lost. So what if I hurt his feelings? But I don’t want to. He thinks hearing color is cool, even if his mom is a counselor and thinks I’m in denial. And I wonder if maybe, just maybe, he’d be okay with Cris. So I don’t say anything and he climbs over the old board fence with me and we cut through the weedy lot and head down Fir Street, which turns into the rutted gravel road that leads way back into the woods to the dump we rented. I’m not going home, though. I need to talk to Cris first, because as soon as I tell Dad about Mr. Teleomara, we’re gonna be in the car and heading for another state.

And that hits me, all of a sudden. That we’ll leave. I mean we always do, but I’ll really miss Cris, because before Cris I didn’t really have a clue. And my throat starts hurting because we’ve only been here a few months and I like Jeremy and I don’t usually make friends. And now I have two and I have to leave. A mower’s buzzing out hot red-orange and spring birdsong sparkles blue and pink and gold in the trees, and it would be a really pretty day if Mr. Stinking Teleomara hadn’t walked in.

It’s all dark and quiet now, all thick Sitka spruce and salal thickets, and it’s almost dark as twilight. The old bullfrog is thumping in the scummy pond.

“Hey, what color is that?” Jeremy asks. “I bet it’s dark purple.”

He always asks and it makes me smile. “Wrong,” I say. “It’s dark brown, like chocolate.”

“Okay, want to tell me what’s wrong?” He’s walking right next to me now. “What’s with you and the new principal. Mr. Teleo-whatever?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “Something weird happened. I think it was the color of his voice.”

“What color was it?”

“Silver. But not. . . not like color usually is. When I hear words, I just see blue or yellow or whatever. It doesn’t really get in the way of anything else I’m looking at. You know what I mean?”

“So this did?”

“Yeah, it did.” I’m watching him from the corner of my eye . . . waiting for him to stop believing me. “I felt it... and it kind of hurt. And it made me sick.” Never mind Mr. Beasley and the dish.

“So how come?” And he’s frowning, but not like he doesn’t believe me.

What have I got to lose? We’re gonna hit the road as soon as I tell my dad, so if Jeremy thinks I’m crazy, who cares?

Well, I care, I guess.

So I don’t say anything and just walk faster so he has to catch up.

“You mean you walk this far every day?” He’s panting now. “Geez that’s bad. Why won’t the bus come pick you up?”

The bus would, but buses are worse than class: I found that out a long time ago. “I don’t mind walking.” I cut through the woods before we get close to the house. Dad might be home and he’ll know in a second that something’s wrong. I’ve never lied to my dad, so I just head for the path I made back when I first found Cris.

“Where are we going?” Jeremy looks around. “Want to come over to my house? This is Mom’s day at the high school and she won’t be home un-til five. We can go play that new Xbox game I got. Before Mom tries it out and takes it away from me. It’s real cool so it has to be psychologically damaging.”

“We’re almost there,” I say. I guess I really do want him to meet Cris. “I ... I’ve got this friend. I need to talk to him is all.”

“Okay.” Jeremy shrugs. “Then can we go to my house? He can come, too.”

“He can’t. He’s in a wheelchair and ... he just can’t. This way.” The path takes us left, closer to the ocean. I can smell it and hear the surf in the distance. I’ll miss that, too.

“Nobody lives out here.” Jeremy yelps as a blackberry cane snags him. “There aren’t any houses out here. I’m bleeding.”

“No, you’re not.” I work the thorns out of the back of his shirt. Well, not much. “It’s just ahead.”

“This better be ...” He shuts up as we push through this thick wall of salal and some kind of creeper. “Wow!” He just stares for a moment. “How the heck did *this* get out here?”

Well, yeah, it sort of looks like Sleeping Beauty’s castle with the gray stone wall and all the blackberry canes. Actually, it looks a *lot* like Sleeping Beauty’s castle. I’m bleeding, too, and I suck at the scratch on my wrist.

“Melanie, hold on.” Jeremy’s words have gone dark yellow. “I know what this place is. The guy who built the lumber mill . . . the one that’s shut down . . . He built this mansion out here on the point. But that was forever ago and it’s all falling down, now. My cousin and his friends came out here last Halloween. On a dare. He said the roof had fallen in and it was all grown over with blackberries and stuff. They couldn’t even get inside. He said it was a waste of time.” He stared at the big stone wall. “He didn’t say anything about a wall. Or a castle. It isn’t like *this*.”

“How do you know?” I smile at him.

“ ‘Cause my cousin . . .” He looks at the wall again. Touches it like he expects it to bite him. It doesn’t. “He would have told me. If it was here.”

I’m waiting. To see if he gets it. He probably won’t, but you know something? I really really *want* him to get it.

“And where’s a road?” He’s looking around. “How would they get groceries here? Go to church? Melanie, nobody can live out here like this.”

I quit waiting and head for the old apple tree, the one that kind of leans on the wall like the old guys you can see through the doors of taverns at noontime, leaning against the bar. I start climbing up.

“Hold on. Wait for me.” Jeremy scrambles up behind me and he’s bet-ter at climbing than I am. And you know what? I don’t care.

I’m glad he didn’t turn around and go home.

The apple tree's branches sort of make this leafy cave at the top of the wall and one thick, knobby branch sticks out like an arm to keep you from falling over. Funny. I probably never would have met Cris if this apple tree hadn't been here. But I climbed it and there Cris was. Jeremy leans over the apple-arm like he's done it a hundred times.

"How did a castle get out here? There isn't any road." He's still fuss-ing. "Hey look!" He points. "Is that your friend? In the wheelchair?"

"Yeah, that's Cris." I grab the apple branches and kind of let myself down, kind of slide down the wall.

"Hi, Melanie." Cris tries to push the wheelchair closer, but the vines that grow all over the ground always seem to tangle up in the wheels. They remind me of skinny, green Mr. Beasleys, and I don't think they like me any more than he does. At least they're always trying to wrap around my ankles and trip me. I don't know how he gets into the castle at night. Maybe his uncle carries him. I wonder why they don't just get a Weed Eater and chop all those vines down.

Cris doesn't look good. His brown arms are real skinny and his black hair is stuck to his forehead today, like he's been sweating, but it's only May and not very warm at all. His words are the color of dog poop.

"I can't make these vines let go." He gives up and slumps in his chair. "Hi," he says, as Jeremy kind of falls down the wall. "Nice to meet you. I'm Cris."

"Hi, I'm Jeremy." Jeremy shakes what looks like a bird's nest out of his hair. "I've lived here all my life and never heard of a castle back in here." He looks around. "This is so *cool*."

"Oh, it's a true-shape." Cris shrugs. "You probably saw something else here is all. You know ... a house or a barn or something."

Jeremy looks real blank. Okay, here goes.

"He's magic, Jeremy," I say. "There's this whole world around us and we don't even know it's there." You know, I used to think I'd maybe made it up, like my teachers said, all the stuff I used to see when my mom was around. But then I found Cris and he told me I wasn't making it all up. "You just don't usually see it," I tell Jeremy. "Unless you're around some-body magic."



“Oookay,” Jeremy finally says, real slow. He gives me this look, like he thinks I’m jerking him around. And I could get Cris to show him, but I’m too worried.

“We got a new principal today,” I blurt out. “Cris, he’s like you. Weird stuff happened when he walked in the room.”

“Puking is weird?” Jeremy gives me another look.

“I saw true-shapes, Cris. And Mr. Teleomara knew my name. My mom’s name, I mean. My real one.”

“Zoroan.” Cris looks scared. “Your mom has to have been one of the First Born. That means he’s after you, too. You’re her firstborn, right?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Okay, this is a cool club.” Jeremy’s words are pill yellow. “But I don’t speak the language. I’m going home to play with my Xbox.” And he starts for the wall.

“Wait a minute,” I say, because I really want him to stay. But all of a sudden those stupid vines start really wrapping around my ankles.

“Go hide!” Cris looks over his shoulder at the castle. “My uncle is coming. I’m not supposed to have any visitors.”

Jeremy’s already on top of the wall and I scramble up after him. I don’t know why his uncle is so paranoid about visitors. Cris says it’s because his uncle thinks this Zoroan is prowling around. I catch up with Jeremy at the top and grab his leg as he starts to climb over. “Lie down flat,” I whisper. “Cris’s uncle is coming and we’re not supposed to be here.”

“Oh, thanks.” Jeremy is *really* pissed now. “Get me arrested for trespassing, why don’t you?”

“Just shut *up*.” And I shove him and he sprawls flat on top of the wall under the apple branch that hangs over it and I’m on top of him and there’s no time to do anything else because all of a sudden, I see this silver sparkly shimmer at the other end of the garden and all the vines just kind of curl aside, like Sunday school pictures of Moses parting the Red Sea, you know?

Oh, shit.

“Let’s just climb down and get out of here,” Jeremy grumbles.

“Shut up.” I whisper it this time and pinch him. Hard. The silver stuff flows along that parted-Red-Sea path and coils around Cris’s wheelchair like Mr. Beasley might. If he was *really* big. And I don’t think Cris even sees it, he’s just kind of looking at the door at the end of the vine’s path. And I don’t know if I should yell or go back or what. I start to sit up but the apple limb gets caught in my shirt or something and I can’t get loose.

The door opens.

“That’s Mr. Teleomara,” Jeremy hisses. “What’s *he* doing here?”

And I look at Cris, and it’s like he got turned to stone in his chair. He just sits there, doesn’t move, doesn’t say anything. Mr. Teleomara walks down that path, and the vines kind of cringe away from him, and then he bends over Cris. And I want to scream and I think I’m maybe going to throw up again, and the apple limb is squashing me, and even Jeremy is quiet, be-cause there’s something really nasty about the way he’s looking at Cris.

Then he puts his hand on Cris’s throat and Cris screams.

It’s not real loud, it’s like how you scream in a nightmare when you want to scream really loud and it just comes out little and breathy. But it’s an awful scream, and his eyes are closed, and he’s kind of twitching, like he’s trying to struggle or wake up or something. And all the time he’s screaming.

And I *really* want to puke.

And Jeremy looks like he does, too.

“Not much longer,” Mr. Teleomara says quietly and that razor-blade mist starts forming around Cris. “A few more sessions and I’m done with you. You’ll be a husk. Empty. A few more First Born and I’ll have it all.” Then he strokes Cris’s face, like real tenderly, and that makes my skin crawl. “Sleep well, child,” he says. “We don’t want anything to happen to you. Yet.” Then he laughs and walks away, back through the door, past the shivering vines.

And the door closes.

“Holy shit, what was that all about?” Jeremy’s voice is sort of lemony.

“What did he do to Cris?”

“Nothing good.” I start scrambling down the wall.

“Are you crazy?” Jeremy leans down. “What if he comes back? This is right out of a late-night vampire movie.”

“He didn’t bite Cris.” But yeah, he’s kind of right. And I keep one eye on that door as I scramble through the stupid vines, which leave me alone for once. “Cris, Cris, wake up.” I shake him, really scared now.

“Is he okay?” Jeremy leans over my shoulder.

I thought he’d be on his way home by now. “I don’t know.”

But then Cris blinks, yawns, and smiles at us. “Sorry. Guess I fell asleep waiting for you. How was school today? Did you see that weird principal again?”

Jeremy and I look at each other. “It’s still today,” Jeremy says. “We didn’t leave.”

He doesn’t sound like he’s going to go home and play with his Xbox anymore. “Mr. Teleomara was here,” I tell Cris. “The weird principal.”

“He couldn’t be.” Cris looks kind of confused, like he just woke up. “My uncle was just here. He would have seen him. He won’t let anyone in. Because of Zoroan.”

“We just saw the new principal here with you,” I tell him.

“My uncle was here.” Cris is really confused now. “And ...”

“What did you and your uncle do while he was here?” Jeremy inter-rupts. “What did you have for dinner last night? What did you talk about?”

“Oh, we ...” Cris gets this weird look on his face. “I ... I can’t re-member. I mean I know ... I know I live here with my uncle. That he keeps me safe here. But I just...” He’s looking really confused now. “I just can’t remember what...what we did last night. That’s all.”

Jeremy and I look at each other again.

"I think your 'uncle' is Zoroan, Cris." I'm guessing, but the image of Teleomara bending over Cris as he struggled and screamed still makes my stomach twist. "Cris, you need to come with us." I go around and grab the handles of the wheelchair. "You can't stay here. He'll be back."

"But my uncle. . ."

"He was *hurting* you, whoever he is." I lean on the handles of the chair, but the vines are all wrapped through the spokes. And I have this scary vi-sion of Cris sitting in this chair in the middle of the night, in the rain, frozen in silver fog.

"I think this is called kidnapping," Jeremy says. And he starts kicking at the vines, tearing them loose from the wheels with both hands.

I start tearing at 'em, too, and I swear they wrap back around the chair as fast as we tear 'em loose. But finally we get the chair moving, with Jer-emy pushing and me stomping on the vines in front of the wheels. "How do we get out of here?" Jeremy pants.

Not through the door Mr. Teleomara went through, that's for sure. "Is there any other way out, Cris?" I ask.

He shakes his head, still looking like he's not really all there yet. We just push the chair over to where the apple branch leans over the wall.

"You climb up," Jeremy tells me. "I'll boost Cris up and he can grab your hand. Then I'll climb up and help you pull him up. We did this in Scouts once. Okay, Cris?"

"Sure," Cris says, but he sounds scared.

I never did this in Scouts, and I look at the wall. It's real high. But I scramble up. I don't know if we can pull Cris up, skinny or not. But I can't think of anything else to try, so I brace my feet and lean way over the apple branch.

"Come on, Cris, I'm going to boost you up." Jeremy lifts Cris out of his wheelchair. "Man, you don't weigh any more than my little sister. Hang on. I'm going to try and step up on your chair."

Jeremy grunts as he climbs very slowly and carefully up onto the seat of the wheelchair. It's not gonna work. "Ready, Melanie?" He wobbles a lit-tle and I hold my breath. "Okay, Cris, just reach up. Grab Melanie's wrists.

You grab Cris's, Mel."

I can't reach him.

"Lean out as far as you can," Jeremy gasps, his words hot yellow. "Can you stretch up farther, Cris?"

I can't. . . quite . . . reach him. Zoroan, Mr. Teleomara, will be back any second.

The limb falls out from under me. I yelp, grabbing at the limb, then Cris's face is right in front of mine.

"Grab him, grab his wrists," Jeremy is yelling. And I do, and Cris's hands close around my wrists. And then we're swinging *up* and my arms are coming out of their sockets, and then we're falling and my ribs hurt and I see leaves, sky, leaves, and then . . .

... I land flat on the grass on my back and I can't catch my breath. Sky. Leaves. Sky. I sit up and nothing hurts *too* much and Cris is lying on his back, giggling softly.

"What the heck happened?" Jeremy's head pops up at the top of the wall and a second later he scrambles down. "You guys okay? I swear that tree just boosted you right over the wall. I'm not kidding! You should have *seen* it."

"It's an apple." Cris sits up. "That's my birth tree. We've got to get out of here. That was a trap. Zoroan's trap. He had me imprisoned in it and was draining my First Born power."

"Right now, I believe that." Jeremy looks back at the castle. "Wow, look."

I look, and it's not a castle anymore. It's this big, old, fallen-down house, just like Jeremy said it would be.

"So what's a First Born power and why does he want to drain it?" Jeremy asks.

"You know, we could maybe talk about this later," I snap. "Like after we get a long way away from here?"

"Yeah, we need to get out of here," Cris says. "I think ... I think maybe

I can walk. The wheelchair thing . . . that was just part of the trap. I think.”

We both have to help him up, but yeah, he can walk. Not very well and he’s really weak and almost falls down a lot even with us helping him. He looks better, though. And older, I realize. I thought he was younger than us, but now I think he’s more like fifteen or sixteen. And his words aren’t dog-poop-colored anymore. They’re gold and glittery . . . sort of like Mr. Teleomara’s, but they don’t hurt. He’s still real skinny. I guess you would be if someone was draining your life out of you. “Where should we go?” I’m not really asking, I’m just wondering.

“The police?” Jeremy says.

I give him a look. “Hello, Officer,” I say sweetly. “Here’s this kid whose life force is being sucked out by the school principal. Could you go arrest the principal, please?”

“I get the point,” Jeremy says, sour-lemon yellow. “What about your dad?”

I want to look away. “I don’t know.” I swallow. “I... don’t think we can take Cris there.” And they’re both looking at me and I just can’t say anything else.

“Okay. We better figure something out.” Jeremy sighs. “If Mr. Teleomara is like your guardian or something in the real world, they’ll just give you right back to him.” He frowns, thinking hard. “My dad’s a lawyer, so I know how this kind of thing works. They don’t take a kid’s word for stuff over a grown-up’s. Cris, what about your family?”

“They were both First Borns.” He says it so softly that I can hardly hear him. “Zoroan got them.”

We’re all real quiet for a minute. It’s getting dark under the trees. An owl hoots dark green and suddenly flits down to land in the path in front of us. Its eyes glow with yellow light, and I never saw an owl like that before.

It hoots softly green, and Cris says something to it in a language I don’t know. “Zoroan knows I escaped.” Cris leans on us like he’s about to fall down.

“We can go to my tree fort,” Jeremy says, kind of doubtfully. “I can sneak you in there and nobody’ll know we’re there. Maybe he’ll be afraid to do anything right in someone’s backyard. Man, will I get in trouble if I get

caught.”

And I don't think he really wants us to go there, but we can't think of any other place. And maybe he's right and Zoroan will be afraid to do any-thing so close to houses and people. I don't think that's going to matter to him, but like I say, we can't think of anything better. So we go.

It's kind of a weird walk. Some trees, mostly the really old ones, you can almost see this person inside. It's like they're made of see-through glass and someone is inside the trunk, only the glass isn't really clear, so you can't make out a face. And I'm pretty sure I see the little people I used to see with my mother . . . the Shy Folk, she called 'em. And Jeremy is seeing 'em, too; I can tell by the way he looks quick, then stares. I guess it's be-cause we're with Cris.

I'm kind of sorry when we get to Jeremy's house. It's in one of those nice developments, all nice houses and neat yards with swing sets and flow-ers. Jeremy's house is at the edge, and the backyard comes right to the woods. His fort is back here, kind of out of sight. I bet it embarrasses his mom because it's a mess of plywood and stuff and he built it himself. We sit out there sometimes and talk about school and listen to CDs that his mom says are bad for us.

It sure doesn't look real safe from Zoroan. But the owl with the glow-ing eyes flits down to settle on a limb of the old apple tree it's built in, so maybe it's better than nothing. We help Cris up into the fort and scramble up after, and I'm looking around everywhere for silver glitter, but I don't see any.

I like it, inside. Clean plywood floor, even if it's gray and weathered, shelves made out of old apple crates turned on their sides, full of CDs, books, and stuff like that. I like it better than some of the dumps we've rented. Cris kind of falls down on the old sofa cushions against the wall.

“You okay?” Jeremy asks.

“I guess so,” Cris says. “Just tired.”

“Look, I'd better get in the house.” Jeremy glances over his shoulder. “I'm gonna be in trouble for being late, even if the school didn't call about me skipping out. I'll see if I can sleep out here tonight. It's a weeknight, but sometimes Mom lets me anyway. I'll sneak you out some food and stuff.”

“Water, too, okay?” Soon as I say that, I'm dying of thirst. I bet Cris is,

too.

“There’s some pop out here. I hid a couple of cans here last week so Mom wouldn’t know.” Jeremy rummages in the apple crates, brings out a can of Coke. “Here’s a flashlight, in case I can’t come back out right away. Don’t shine it out the window or Mom might see. I’ll be back as quick as I can.” And Jeremy jumps down from the fort and heads for the house.

It’s starting to get kind of cold. I open the Coke and sit down by Cris. I hand it to him and he drinks some and sits up. That warm Coke is the best thing I’ve ever tasted and we finish the can in about a minute. Birds are making night noises; soft pink and blue and green, little bursts of light, like the fireflies I remember from when we lived in Ohio once.

“How can you be a First Born and not know about magic?” Cris asks after a while.

I think about that for a while. “I never really knew it was magic, I guess.” I shrug. “That’s just how the world was . . . there were Shy Folk, and unicorns, and some animals talked to her and some didn’t.” I shrug.

“How did . . . how did Zoroan take her?”

I swallow. I still dream about it. Nightmares. “She . . . fell through a door that just opened up one day. We were walking in the woods. I was pretty little.” I shrug, although I can still see that door and the *nothingness* behind it, and the look on her face as she fell backward through it. “Dad said never ever talk about it. And I don’t. Until I met you,” I tell him. “And I don’t know . . .” I look down at the empty Coke can. “I guess I was starting to think that. . . you know . . . it maybe didn’t happen the way I remember. “ No sign of Jeremy. His mom found out, probably, and he’s in real trouble. I wonder if he’ll rat on us. Maybe, if he’s in too much trouble. He didn’t really want us to come here. Will they call the police? Give Cris back to Mr. Teleomara, like Jeremy thinks? I watch for the muddy gray sound of a police car, and I watch for silver, and what does it matter if I see ‘em? What are we gonna do about it? And I think of Cris screaming and it all of a sudden hits me that Zoroan did that to my *mom*, too. And then I realize Cris is crying, real soft, a dark gold sound that makes me even sad-der.

And I put my arm around him because I know he’s thinking the same thing.

“Hey, you guys there?”



Jeremy's whisper sounds so *good*. "Yeah, we're here," I say, and I want to hug him as he scrambles into the fort, lugging a backpack. "You didn't tell."

"What d'you mean? Did you really think I would? Thanks, Melanie. I don't run out on my friends." His words come out an ugly orange.

"I'm sorry." And I mean it. "I guess ... I never really had a real friend before. I kind of don't know the rules. Did you get into trouble?"

"Oh, tons. Gimme that flashlight." He sets the backpack down on the floor, clicks on the light. "I'm grounded *forever* for skipping school, and your dad called the police, I guess. When you didn't come home. And somebody saw us leave together. I said you were really upset and I was just trying to counsel you and you wouldn't talk to me, so then I figured as long as I was already outside, I might as well enjoy the skip. My mom liked the trying-to-counsel-you part, so I think she sort of believes me. Maybe. I brought you guys some water—filled up an empty milk jug—and I snuck some stuff out of the pantry in the garage. I didn't dare go into the kitchen ... I have to go right past Mom and Dad's bedroom. They're hav-ing a fight right now about whose fault I am." He grins, but it's kind of weak. "I think Mom's winning and I'm Dad's fault."

The water tastes a little like sour milk, but I'm not complaining and neither is Cris. Jeremy brought peanut butter and a box of Saltines, too. "This is the best I could do." He makes a face. "Everything else is in cans. So okay." He digs a battered old table knife out of an apple crate and starts slathering peanut butter on crackers. "You want to tell me what's going on, Cris? Before the police show up and we all get arrested or something?"

"Don't worry about the police." Cris starts stuffing crackers into his mouth and I think again about him maybe stuck in his chair, night and day, in those vines. "Worry about Zoroan," Cris says, with his mouth full. "He wants all the First Born power." He swallows, gulps more water. "It's get-ting more concentrated. The First Born power. Used to be a lot of First Born. But some people don't have kids before they die, you know? So fewer and fewer share it. If he ever got it all..." Cris shrugs. "I think . . . our world would just go away or something. Or maybe Zoroan would turn it into something different or use the power to mess with you all. I just. . . don't know. But he's been secretly kidnapping the First Born for, oh ... maybe a thousand years or so. People figured it out after a while, so we're real careful. But he has so much of the power now that you can't really fight him. It's more a matter of staying out of his traps. Like the one I was in." Cris looks away. "It takes him a while to empty all the First Born power out of one of us."

I shiver and Jeremy's looking real wide-eyed. "What happens when he ... takes it all out of you?" he finally asks.

"I don't know." Cris looks down at the cracker in his hand. "I guess you just die. I mean . . . nobody has ever come back. There's this prophecy . . . that he can be destroyed only by a First Born using a true-shape weapon. And I guessed ... it was a trap." He stares at the cracker, all squashed to crumbs in his hand. "I guess ... I just hoped ... I thought. . . What did I have to lose?" His voice is dull, like old metal now. "I thought... it might bring them back."

I'd have tried it, too. If I thought maybe it would bring my mom back.

"Okay, okay, time-out here." Jeremy starts waving his hands. "I now believe in magic. I am grounded for the rest of my life for skipping school. I am probably going to get arrested for kidnapping. For that, I want to hear what is going on in *English* please." He glares at Cris. "What is all this First Born stuff. What did we see when we were coming over here . . . the weird trees and stuff? Where *is* your world?"

"Right here." Cris shrugs. "I guess you maybe saw true-shapes because you were with me. It's like this . . . what if you could only see red and blue and green, and anything yellow was invisible to you?"

"We'd bump into a lot of school buses."

"But you couldn't *feel* yellow things, either. You just wouldn't know they were there. You'd walk right through yellow things."

"World would sure look funny." Jeremy's frowning.

"No sun, just light. No sunflowers, no buttercups, no yellow M&Ms." I'm thinking about those Shy Folk and the unicorns I used to see sometimes with my mom. "So we don't know yellow is there?"

"Oh, that was just an example." Cris shrugs. "Nah, it's more like you *can* see yellow. Just not all the *other* colors." He picks up the old knife that Jeremy was using to glop peanut butter on the crackers.

It turns into a cool dagger with blue jewels in the handle.

"Wow!" Jeremy's eyes really do bug out. Well, it *is* pretty cool.

“How’d you do that?” Jeremy touches the knife, yelps, and sucks on his finger. “It’s just something I found out in the old dump, way out in the woods. I cleaned it up before I used it, honest.”

“I guess you guys can see true-shapes when you’re close to one of us.”

Cris looks at the knife. “I don’t know what you saw . . . or didn’t see . . . on our way here, but that’s probably why. Because you’re with me.”

I’m thinking about Mr. Beasley with that jewel in his forehead. I wonder if he told Mr. Teleomara that I was in Mrs. Banks’s class? Cris is looking at me. “I still don’t get it why you can’t see everything, Melanie. You’re a First Born.”

“Uh . . .” They’re both looking at me. “I guess it’s because . . . my dad’s not magic.” And doesn’t ever ever want to talk about it.

Cris looks shocked. “That’s not supposed to happen.”

“Well, I’m here. And what’s so wrong about it?” I’m glaring.

“So hey . . . how come this fort isn’t a castle or something?” Jeremy breaks in. “How come it looks like always?”

“It’s made out of dead trees.” Cris’s lip kind of curls. “This *is* its true-shape.”

“Okay.” Jeremy’s frowning. “But how come I could skin my elbows sliding down that rock wall and then, when we all climbed over, I look back and yeah, it’s the old haunted house, same as I thought it was?”

“Because I wasn’t there anymore and neither was Zoroan.” Cris frowns. “I don’t know why you saw it in the first place, Melanie. If you can’t see the true-world?”

I shrug, still a little mad at him. Actually, I saw the apple tree first, I remember now. And then I noticed the wall. Which is kind of weird, because the tree is leaning *on* the wall. I remember that I went for a walk in the woods that day, feeling pretty sorry for myself. The In Crowd again. And I was walking along and thinking about my mother and the fun stuff that had happened when she took me for walks in the woods, and how I wished my dad would talk about her. And I saw the apple tree and wanted to pick some

of the blossoms on it. And I was still thinking about her when I noticed the wall and climbed it and . . . well, you know the rest.

And you know ... I wonder if maybe . . . maybe the world hasn't changed. Maybe it's *me*. That it isn't that I *can't* see the Shy Folk and the unicorns and the people in the trees that I remember. Maybe ... I just *don't*. I mean, you tell people about meeting a unicorn or one of the Shy Folk, they think you're lying or crazy. I wonder if maybe I started, well. . . *believing* them? That I was crazy? Like deep down inside?

And that makes me sad, like I'm betraying my mom or something. And it's not like Dad ever said that it wasn't real. He just said not to talk about it. But maybe that made me listen too much. To the people who said it didn't happen. Jeremy's going on about magic and what Cris sees that he doesn't, and I'm not really paying attention. I'm just feeling sad and looking out into the darkness of Jeremy's yard.

Only . . . it's not darkness.

Oh, crap.

"Look." I grab Cris's arm. "Look there. Can you see it? No . . . there!" Silver. Powdered razor blades. The owl we saw before suddenly darts down through the darkness, hooting urgent green, circling the tree.

"Look at what?" Jeremy blinks. "The bird?"

Cris looks blank, too.

"Mr. Teleomara . . . Zoroan." All of a sudden I'm freezing, shiver-ing. "Can't you see that silvery stuff over there by the house? He's out there."

"Zoroan's umbra?" Cris is staring at me, and I never noticed before that his eyes are green, and they glow like the owl's eyes glowed. "I can sense him," he says. "He's close. You mean you can see it?"

"I don't know. What's an umbra? I can see when he talks. Like you talk gold and Jeremy talks yellow. Maybe we ought to get out of here?"

Too late. A river of silver, razor-dust fog snakes across the yard, circling the swing set and disappearing under the fort where I can't see it. The owl drops like a stone. With a glittery flash, the silver strikes, wrapping the owl just like Mr. Beasley would. It lets out a single, high-pitched hoot,

then pops like a bubble pops and just. . . disappears. Then . . . too fast to really see . . . the razor-fog is in the doorway, like a huge silver Mr. Beasley. Just like Mr. Beasley going after a mouse, it goes after Cris.

And I step in front of it.

It slaps into me like a hose turned on real hard. And it hurts. Like it *is* made out of razor blades, and I can't help it, I yell, and I'm trying to grab on to it, but it's like water, too, and my hands just kind of go through it. And it feels like it's burning my skin off and I close my eyes and I can't stand it any longer and . . .

... it stops. And Cris is standing in front of me with that gold dagger and a few wisps of mist are sort of trickling out of the fort.

"Yahoo, Cris, way to go!" Jeremy claps Cris on the back, and he stag-gers and it's like the dagger is real heavy for him, like it weighs a ton.

"What happened?" I look at myself. I'm okay. No burns, not even like a sunburn. "That hurt."

"He's really strong." Cris sits down on the floor all of a sudden. "Maybe from all the First Born power he's taken. I... I don't think I can stand up to him."

And his words are kind of tinged with that dog-poop color again. I figure that is not good. He looks at me. "Melanie, it really helps that you can see it ... his umbra. Tell me where it is. If I can cut through it, it doesn't have any power anymore."

"You're a First Born, maybe you destroyed him when you stabbed it with that dagger, huh?" Jeremy sits down beside Cris. "I couldn't see any-thing, but isn't that what the prophecy said?"

"I have to stab his body with a true-shape weapon, not just stab his umbra." Cris's head droops. "He won't let me get that close, and I don't think I'm strong enough to fight through." He looks at me. "That was re-ally brave, Melanie. Trying to stop his umbra. It can kill you. You're lucky," he says. "As well as brave."

Lucky, yes. Not brave. Just stupid. I rub my arms. Jeremy's looking at me like he's impressed. I make a face at him. "What do we do now, Cris?" My voice comes out shaky. "Is there any way to keep it out?"

“There’s nothing else I can use to stop it.” He looks around the fort. “If I had another First Born, we might be strong enough to keep him at bay. Maybe.”

Well, I can’t help it if my dad isn’t magic and I’m not magic.

“Come on, Cris.” Jeremy is kind of hopping up and down. “Melanie can see this umbra thing. You have the dagger. We gotta work together on this. You can’t just sit here and wait for him.”

While Jeremy’s going on, I’m looking out into the yard. It’s real late now, the empty, cold part of the night like when you wake up and you feel like you’re the only living thing in the world. And there he is. Walking into the yard just like he walked into class. And I can see him real easy, even though it’s dark and there isn’t even a moon. That silvery stuff kind of drifts around him, like he’s walking in his own fogbank.

“Hello, Melanie.” He looks up and smiles like a teacher smiles when you’re doing something wrong, but he’s not real upset by it. “Jeremy, you don’t want to be here,” he says. “You’ll get into a lot of trouble and your parents won’t ever really trust you again. They won’t wake up if you sneak back in, now. I won’t even give you detention for skipping. You were wor-ried about a friend, and that’s a good thing. Go to bed now, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

He sounds so warm. So *worried* about Jeremy. And I look at Jeremy, and he’s squirming. And even I want to go inside and go to bed and see him in the morning.

“Melanie, you need to go home right now. Your father is really worried about you, you know. He might. . . well, you know that if he thought he had lost you, too, as well as your mother, he might do something terrible to himself.”

And I’m on my feet. Dad. I haven’t really thought about him, and Mr. Teleomara is right. . .

“Stop it, Zoroan.” Cris’s voice sounds like a frog croaking, but the gold is real bright, all sparkly. “Don’t play your tricks on them.”

And it’s like someone dumped a bucket of water on my head. : “He’s lying, Jeremy.” My voice sounds ugly, too. “Don’t listen to him.”

“This is not your worry, children.” He’s still smiling. “It’s not your world.

Nothing that happens here has anything to do with you. Go home. Go to bed. Everything will be all right in the morning.”

The silver words smell sweet. Words don't *smell*. Wrong, wrong, wrong. “Don't, Jeremy.” I grab him as he makes a move toward the door. “It really is a trick or a spell or something.” But he's not hearing me, and he pulls away, and I really want to do what Mr. Teleomara says, too.

And then . . . my dad walks out of the woods.

“Melanie?” he calls. He stops at the edge of the yard. What is he *doing* here? “Melanie?” he yells again. His green words sound . . . scared.

“Dad,” I say, and it comes out like a mouse's squeak. But he hears.

“Are you okay?” He starts for the tree fort like Mr. Teleomara is in-visible. “Are you all right, sweetheart?”

Mr. Teleomara steps in front of him and blocks his way. “Go home,” he says, and that silver stuff gets thick all around my dad. “Go home now.”

And I realize all of a sudden that he wasn't going to let me leave, that Cris is right, and he wants me, too.

“I see you. I know what you are.” My dad doesn't move. “She doesn't belong to your world. Get out of my way.”

I've never heard my dad talk like that, not to anyone.

“Too late.” Mr. Teleomara smiles. “She's mine now, too.”

My dad punches him.

Jeremy whoops and Mr. Teleomara falls on his butt and all the silver vanishes, and for a second I think it's going to be okay.

And then the silver stuff just sort of rises out of the grass and it wraps around my dad. He stumbles back, his mouth open like he's screaming, but I can't hear anything, and he's all arched backward like he's going to fall, but he's frozen in place.

And he's going to die, any second now, pop like a bubble and just van-ish. Like the owl. I know it like someone told me.

I'm firstborn. I'm my *mother's* firstborn. And I grab the dagger out of Cris's hand and he yells and I don't care. I jump down from the fort and land on my hands and knees. Zoroan doesn't notice, he's looking at my dad and having fun, just like Mr. Beasley with his mice. And I crawl over, and on my knees, holding the dagger with both hands, I stab him in the leg.

The dagger melts.

Just like that.

And Mr. Teleomara looks down at me and smiles. "Half-breed," he says. And something like a giant hand slaps me and I hit the trunk of the apple tree and end up on the ground.

Firstborn, but my *dad's* firstborn as well as my mom's. Maybe he's right. And maybe there's no true-world for me.

"Melanie, Melanie." Jeremy jumps down from the fort, pulls me to my feet. "Are you okay? What happened?"

And I get it. I hope I do. I look up at the fort and I see a place where the plywood has split. Grab it. A long splinter comes off, about as long as my finger. "Stab him with this." I shove the splinter at Jeremy. "You're a first-born, right? Just do it, Jeremy. This is *your* true-shape weapon. Stab him!" And I don't wait for him to answer, I just throw myself on Zoroan, trying to scratch his eyes, pounding on him with my fists. And the silver stuff wraps around me like a burning hand and I can't breathe and I was wrong, and Zoroan is laughing and I'm going to die, too . . .

. . . and over his shoulder, through all the glitter and the hurting, I see Jeremy do this wild, crazy stab with the stupid little splinter and it sticks into Zoroan's back.

It goes right in, so easy that Jeremy trips and falls flat. Everything starts to shake, like an earthquake or something. And I'm on the ground looking up, and Cris falls out of the fort and nearly lands on top of me. The fort is falling apart. All the tree branches are waving. I roll over, and Zoroan is standing with his arms in the air, and the silver stuff is all gone. His face is changing, melting into another face, and another, young, old, men, women, even kids' faces, faster and faster, until his face is a kind of blur. Then this icy wind like the middle of winter starts blowing, and it smells like the dead possum I found under the porch of our house when we moved in.

And this hole opens. It goes down forever, and that's where the smell



and the cold wind are coming from. The last of the fort shreds apart, books, CDs, and boards all falling into the hole, and I'm sliding toward it, like the wind is dragging me, and Jeremy's at the edge, going over, and I grab him, and Cris is sliding in, too, and . . .

. . . something hard wraps around my waist and yanks me back and all of a sudden I'm up in the apple tree. And the wind stops. And the hole is gone. Another limb is holding Jeremy, and Cris is sitting in the crotch of the tree where the fort used to be. There's nothing left of it.

My dad is lying on the grass like he's asleep, and all of a sudden the limb under me bends down and sort of dumps me on the grass. And I run over to my dad, who's starting to sit up, and I'm so glad that I can't talk and I'm crying and all I can do is sort of burrow into his arms. And he holds me so tight it hurts and that's fine.

"Wow." Jeremy's voice is a real pale yellow. He's still up in the tree. "That was cool." His laugh is kind of shaky. "Make a good end for a horror movie."

"He's gone. He's destroyed. Zoroan can't ever come back. You fulfilled the prophecy. How did you do that?" Cris slides to the ground looking confused. "You're not. . . you're not one of us. You can't have done that."

"He's a firstborn, too," I say, still hanging on to my dad. "And the prophecy said true-shape. You said the wood in the fort was a true-shape for us ... for Jeremy. I think the dagger melted because I don't. . . belong in either world." The words are really hard to say and I don't look at my dad.

He gets to his feet, pulling me with him, then he turns me around so that I have to look at him. "You're part of *both* worlds," he says, real low. "That's what your mother and I wanted." He swallows hard. "When he ... took her, I was afraid. I wanted you to ... be safe." He kind of brushes my hair back from my face. "I was wrong," he said. "I should have taught you about her . . . your world. When the owl came, I saw it was one of the owls that your mother used to talk to. And I knew I'd made a mis-take. So I followed it."

The owl with the glowing eyes? "Zoroan killed it," I whisper. "I didn't know ..." I'm not really sure what I want to say.

"I know." He pulls me real close. "I'm sorry."

“Ouch.” Jeremy yelps as the apple tree dumps him onto the ground. “Okay, I’m sorry I built a fort in you. Hey.” He ducks as a twiggy branch swipes through his hair. “Now cut it out.”

“I can’t believe you really did that.” Cris holds out a hand to Jeremy. “Every true-being owes you thanks. I’ll never think that you people are less than us again. Just because you can’t see the true-world. He could have killed you in a second.”

“Glad I didn’t know that.” And Jeremy shoots me a look, but his words are sun yellow. “You’re cool, Cris.” He combs leaves and twigs out of his hair. “Hey, are you gonna stick around? For when I get done being grounded forever? I really want to see what your world looks like. Can you show me?”

That’s Jeremy. I smile.

“Just give me a call. Whenever you’re not grounded.” Cris laughs. “I’ll hear you.” And he looks thoughtful. “Maybe I should find out more about your world. I don’t know ... I never thought it mattered. But maybe it does.”

“Well, I think so.” Jeremy makes a face. “Hey, you can come with us to a baseball game. I bet you’ll like it.”

“It’s a deal.” Cris smiles. “And I’ve got some friends who’ll give us a ride and then you can really see a lot.”

“Oh, cool, what kind of friends? I hope they can fly. Oh gosh, look.” Jeremy points at the sky. “It’s getting light. Oh, man, I’d better get inside. Or I’ll get grounded for *two* forevers. You gonna come to school, Mel?” He’s already heading for the house. “I bet they won’t let me say I’m sick.”

“I’ll be there,” I tell him. I guess I want to prove to myself that Mr. Teleomara isn’t there, that we really did destroy him. “What about you, Cris?”

He shrugs. “I’m going to go find people ... let them know what happened.” He gives me a shy smile. “I’ll tell ‘em about you, Melanie. And Jeremy. I think we’ll all feel a little different about you people from now on.” And he holds out his hand to me. “Can I come back and visit?”

“You bet.” And then I look up at my dad. “Uh ... are we gonna stay here for a while?”

“Why not?” But his smile is kind of sad. “I don’t think we have to run anymore. This is as good a place to live as any and you have friends here.”

Cris turns and walks away and I notice that he doesn’t leave any tracks in the dew-wet grass. Then he fades into the tree shadows. Jeremy is al-ready inside. It’s just Dad and me, and the sun comes up and makes the dew glitter like diamonds. And all of a sudden, I see diamonds hanging on the bushes and sprinkled on the grass. And then it’s just dew again.

Dad’s looking at me and he looks . . . well. . . shy. “It’s okay,” I tell him. “I get it. You were afraid someone was going to come after me. And he did.”

“No.” He puts his arm around me. “It’s more than that. I was angry. At her world. Because it... took her.”

He can’t say it either . . . that she’s dead. What did Jeremy’s mom call it? “I guess I’d have been angry, too,” I tell him, but he’s shaking his head.

“It’s *your* world, too. That apple tree that saved you all ... the apple is your birth tree.”

Mine, too? And I think how that old apple sort of helped me over the wall, back when I found Cris.

“I think you’ll find that you’re more a part of your mother’s world than you realize.” Dad sighs. “Maybe Cris can help you.”

Lights are going on in the houses, people are letting dogs out, and a kid on a bike pedals up the street, tossing papers into yards from a bag on the handlebars. I know him. He’s in the other sixth-grade class and put a green bean up his nose in the cafeteria last month. He talks bright pink. “Maybe I can be sort of in between,” I say. I’m trying out the words, but they feel right. Half-breed. Maybe that’s a *good* thing. I stop talking because there, back in the tree shadows, I see one of the Shy Folk. She notices me looking and waves one pale hand. Huh.

“Does it bother you?” Dad asks. “Being . . . between worlds?”

“No.” I say it first, for him, but then I think about it. It really doesn’t. Cris seems so ... well . . . alone. Why didn’t the First Born get together to stop Zoroan? Why didn’t someone help him or come looking for him when Zoroan trapped him? I think of Jeremy, and I think maybe I like my world.

But the unicorns were cool. I smile up at Dad. "I like being part of both."  
And I really do.

"Your mother would be ..." He clears his throat. "Your mother would be so proud of you." He looks around. "We'd better get home if you're re-ally going to go to school. If we hang around here much longer, we'll get arrested for trespassing."

And we both laugh, and he keeps his arm around me, and we take the path through the woods back to the little rental dump where we're living. We can stay. That thought sort of feels like . . . well, like a birthday pres-ent. You know, the kind you don't really want to unwrap because you know what it has to be and it's gonna be so cool and you just don't want that feeling to be over yet.

Dad keeps his arm around me and that feels good, too.

I see a unicorn when we're almost home. Not close, just kind of drift-ing through the woods like a pale deer with a single horn. Wow. To quote Jeremy. Maybe, when Zoroan died he let loose all that First Born power. Or maybe it was me and I didn't want to see, before. I can just make out our house in the deep shadows of the tall Sitka spruce that sort of leans over it.

Dad left the lights on.

"I didn't leave the lights on," Dad says.

We both stop under the Sitka's branches. Dad is holding his breath and he's scared and so am I. The door opens. This woman comes out. Black hair, like mine, all curly around her face, and she's wearing a white dress. She's shorter than I remember. Well, I guess I'm taller. I look like her. That shocks me. I didn't know that.

Dad lets go of me and charges through the ferns that grow behind the house. She opens her arms to him and I can see diamonds that are probably tears in her eyes. Or maybe they are diamonds. She looks just like I re-member.

Oh, Cris, I think. You, too, I hope. Then I stop thinking.

"Mom," I yell, and charge after Dad.

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