



Prelude

Sarah awoke in the dark. She listened to the rain pitter-patter on the roof. She sat upright as images from the dream filled her mind. She had been lost in a forest at night. Her best friend, Timmy, was there. A burst of light shattered the darkness, then it was gone. She and Timmy moved slowly through the woods until they came to a field with a barn, and a cottage behind it. Lightning flashed. A tall man stood before them.

“You have a gift,” the man said, “—a magical power. But with the gift comes a weakness. Beware of the gift and the weakness.”

Sarah didn't understand.

The dream changed. She found herself in an immense field before a towering silver wall. A cat bounded up with long, shimmering silver fur and gleaming emerald eyes.

“You have brought a sapphire fruit,” the cat said.

Sarah looked at her hands. A glittering blue object rested in them.

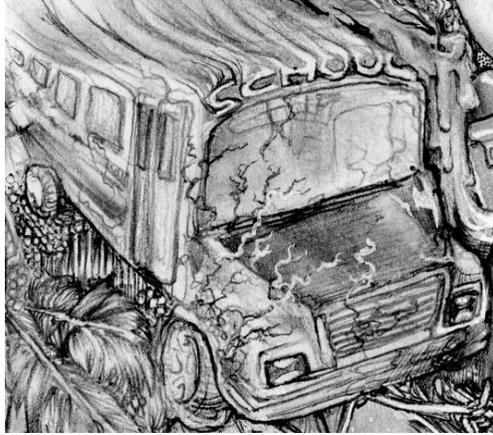
“What is this?” she asked.

“The fruit of power.”

“What is it for?”

The cat didn't answer and bounded away.

Sarah awoke. She had dreamt the dream three times that night. She decided to tell her brother. She threw off the covers and jumped out of bed.



Chapter 1: The Yellow Beast

Wesley strolled toward the yellow and red signpost, drawing his coat tight around him as wind scattered rain across the pavement. A crowd of kids waited at the sign, while an occasional car rushed down the road sending waves of water splashing into the air.

Ahead, the Kadean sisters stood side by side in matching blue parkas. Beside the girls, Barth Ricci squatted, his eyes focused on a stream of rainwater rushing toward the curb.

The kids met there each weekday morning to catch the yellow beast, which everyone knew was the oldest, ugliest, and loudest school bus in Annaberry, New York. Although the bus looked like it would break down any minute, Ben, the driver, claimed it had run perfectly for thirty years straight. Wesley didn't believe that. He expected it would be going to the junkyard any day soon.

Wesley twisted and called to his sister, Sarah, who was crouched beside a hedge several houses back. "Come on, Sar. The beast will be here any minute."

Sarah tipped her head and peered under the hedge. She was two years younger than Wesley and petite, with shoulder-length blond hair, an oval face, and bright green eyes. "Wait, Wes. Look at this," she cried. "It's a cat just like the one in my dream."

Wesley rolled his eyes. He didn't want to hear any more about her dreams. She'd kept him up half the night telling him about one. But Sarah was like that; when she got something in her head, she had to tell someone about it.

The air filled with engine roar, and the yellow beast rumbled around the corner. Dark yellow with a rounded front hood, the bus thundered toward the crowd of children and screeched to a halt at the signpost.

The door swung open. Wesley turned and called to Sarah again. She leaped to her feet and dashed down the sidewalk, her raincoat flapping in the wet wind.

As the other kids boarded, Wesley waited for Sarah. She bounded past him with a laugh and sprang into the doorway. At the top of the stairs, she gave Ben, the bus driver, a high-pitched hello!

"Morning," Ben replied with a mustached smile. "Don't get your seat wet."

Momentary confusion appeared on Sarah's face.

Ben laughed. "Just kidding," he said. "That's not possible in this weather."

Wesley climbed the stairs, feeling the heat sweep over him. At the top, he grinned to Ben and turned down the aisle. He passed several rows and dropped into the first empty seat, scooting over to the wall.

His friend Corey Pan lay on the bench in front of him reading a sci-fi paperback. Corey was a math and science wizard who had skipped a grade and could recite an endless array of scientific facts. He was so smart that all the kids called him CPU after the chip that runs a computer. CPU was two years younger than Wesley and short for his age, with brown eyes, a broad face, and black hair that stood straight up, exposing his slightly oversized ears.

“You look out of it today,” CPU said, using a finger to mark his place in the book.

Wesley sighed. “Sarah kept me up half the night, talking about a weird dream.”

CPU grunted. “Glad I don’t have any younger sisters.”

Wesley shrugged, thinking Sarah was easier to deal with than the twins – CPU’s older sisters – who were so proud and conceited that everyone called them the ice queens.

Wesley leaned forward, resting his head on his folded arms and closed his eyes, hoping to get a few minutes of shuteye before the bus got to school.

A minute later, a cough awoke him. It was Annie Perel, who was sitting across the aisle. She coughed into her arm and wiped her nose with her sleeve, then returned to scribbling into a binder. Annie was a slim girl with bony features, warm brown eyes, and shoulder-length wavy hair that always looked like it needed brushing. She seemed to be working on her homework, which surprised Wesley because she usually finished hers at home the night before and helped other kids with theirs on the way to school.

Wesley liked Annie. She had a big heart. If a kid fell on the playground, she was usually the first one to help.

And if someone forgot their lunch, she always offered to share hers.

Rhea Morgan sat behind Annie. Wesley knew better than to bother Rhea in the morning. Bad moods were normal for her, but mornings were the worst. Even a friendly hello could provoke a hostile glare. Rhea was tall for her age, with pale, freckly skin, gray eyes and thick red hair, which she parted on the left side. Today she had on blue jeans and a pale orange shirt peeking out from under her brown jacket.

Rhea's family had moved to Annaberry from South Carolina when she was ten years old, and she still spoke with a slight Southern accent. Although naturally pretty, Rhea's square jaw and permanent frown gave her a hard look that scared many of the kids.

Annie finished her scribbling and set down her binder.

Rhea glanced over the seatback. "That's mine, you know."

Annie turned. "What's yours?"

"The binder."

Annie stared at the three-ringed folder. "No, it's not."

Wesley winced.

"Yes, it is," Rhea said firmly. "All my binders have orange borders just like that one."

"So? Tons of binders have orange borders. It doesn't mean they're yours."

"Just saying," Rhea said. "If you borrow something, you should return it."

"I didn't borrow it!"

"So you took it?"

Annie's mouth tightened. "You want my binder?"

"No... I want what's mine," Rhea said.

“Okay, take the stupid thing.”

Annie threw her math book down and grabbed the binder. She yanked it open and started ripping out the pages. “Ahh!” she cried, momentarily losing grip.

Ben glanced over his shoulder, and the bus slowed. “Hey, what’s going on back there?”

Annie tore out the last pages and threw the binder over the seat. Rhea caught it in midair.

Ben swung the wheel to the right and steered over to the curb, bringing the bus to a screeching halt. He leaped out of his seat and stormed up the aisle. “What’s going on with you two?” he shouted.

“She took my binder,” Rhea said calmly.

“That’s crazy,” Annie cried. “Everyone knows it’s mine. But if she wants it, she can have it.”

“Okay, this needs to stop,” Ben said. “It’s the third incident with you two this month. If there’s any more yelling or throwing things, I’ll march you both down to the principal’s office.”

“I didn’t throw anything,” Rhea replied coolly.

Ben eyed the redheaded girl skeptically, his cheeks puffing, and his face flushed. Rhea stared back calmly.

“This is the last warning,” Ben said. “No more trouble from you two.” He strode back to the driver’s seat and jammed the key in the ignition, starting the engine.

CPU leaned on his seatback, staring open-mouthed. Wesley rolled his eyes. Something had happened between Rhea and Annie recently. They used to be best friends, but now they seemed to be mortal enemies. Wesley didn’t know what had caused the change, but he guessed it was Rhea’s fault because Annie was the nicest person he knew.

Wesley scooted over to the window and stared out through the glass, watching as the bus rumbled through

the old Eastwell neighborhood with its large homes and broad lawns. Brown and gray elm trees lined the streets, and leaves blanketed the grass and walkways, piled high in soggy mounds.

As the bus picked up speed, a car darted out from a side street. Ben slammed on the brakes and hit the horn, which blared so loudly that pedestrians a block away leaped in fright.

CPU grabbed his stomach and hooted. "Did you see that? I love it!"

Wesley frowned. He hated that horn. It was louder than tugboat foghorns at Port Liberte. He remembered standing beside the yellow beast one day when Ben blew on that horn. The sound enveloped him like a tidal wave, causing his brain to empty out, and his muscles to jiggle like Jell-O.

They neared another cross street, and Ben slowed the bus, spinning the wheel to the right. The yellow beast swung around the corner and screeched to a halt before another crowd of kids. Among the children, Wesley spotted Josh Hester and Bobby Forester. Bobby's mother stood behind the two boys holding a big red umbrella above their heads.

Bobby climbed onto the bus first. He gave Ben a lopsided grin and started down the aisle, walking awkwardly like a toy with a broken spring. Last summer, he'd had a terrible accident. He was playing in Newbury Park when a bolt of lightning shot down from the sky and struck him.

Bobby survived the lightning strike but spent weeks at the hospital, then months at home recovering. He had only recently returned to school. He now walked with a limp and slurred his words when he talked.

The other children boarded one by one. Josh climbed on last, pausing briefly to talk to Ben before turning and striding down the aisle in his usual cool, confident way. Tall and slim, Josh had coffee-brown skin, and short black hair cropped close to his head. As usual, he wore a dark brown shirt beneath a long gray coat.

Josh nodded to Wesley as he passed and swung down in the seat behind him. Wesley nodded back. He admired Josh, who seemed to be good at everything. Josh was captain of the school baseball team and the soccer team. He was near the top in every class, and last year he had starred in the seventh-grade production of the Shakespeare play *As You Like It*. He and Wesley took an art class together, and Wesley had seen Josh draw beautiful sketches of clipper ships crashing through ocean waves.

Despite his many talents and being popular at school, Josh rarely smiled. This seemed strange to Wesley because he thought if he were Josh, he'd be the happiest guy in the world. Wesley knew Josh's mom had died when Josh was little, and Wesley sometimes wondered if that was the reason for Josh's melancholy.

Ben steered the bus into the intersection and swung the wheel to the right. He turned onto the old highway road. Soon they were passing fields and farmhouses. Wesley leaned against the window, watching tiny droplets of water slide down the glass, collecting at the edges.

The rain stopped, and the air glistened. Wesley peered through the glass, spotting shimmering colors on the asphalt beside the moving bus. He watched the glittering colors curiously, then inclined his head, gazing up at the sky. High above, a pinprick of blue light darted down

through the clouds like a luminous needle. He blinked at the strange sight and leaned back.

Suddenly, the brakes screeched. Wesley flew forward, bouncing against the seatback. Screams erupted as the bus slowed sharply. He raised his head and saw a blue wall of light—like the rolling surface of a swimming pool—rise out of the roadway. Ben had slammed on the brakes, but it was too late. The bus barreled into the rocking blue wave. As light rushed down the rows, Wesley twisted, searching for Sarah. He caught her eyes for an instant, wide with fear. Then an electrical sensation stunned him, and everything went black.

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Wesley awoke on the floor beneath his seat, rolling back and forth as the bus bounced and lurched. He grabbed the seat bar and hauled himself up. Josh stood braced in the aisle a few feet ahead, while other kids lay sprawled unconscious on the benches and floor. At the front of the bus, Ben was slumped over the steering wheel.

Josh bounded up the aisle, but as he neared the driver's seat, Ben abruptly lurched upright and grabbed the wheel. Josh dropped into the seat behind Ben. Wesley glanced out the window. His heart thumped. They were rolling through a grassy field with no roads or buildings in sight. At the edge of the field, immense brown and gray trees towered into the morning sky.

The bus slowed, then hit a dip in the meadow and jolted to a stop, throwing everyone forward.

CPU raised his head above the seatback. "What happened?" he mumbled, touching fingers to his bleeding lip.

Wesley shook his head and twisted, hearing hiccups somewhere. Sarah lay sprawled in the aisle. He called her name, and she sat up, gripping the seat cushion.

“You okay?” he yelled.

Sarah rubbed her cheeks as her eyes gained focus. “I think so.”

Wesley glanced back out the window. Above the field and trees, blue sky ran to the horizon, only broken here and there by puffy white clouds. The rain had stopped.

“Where are we?” CPU asked.

Wesley didn’t answer.

Ben turned off the engine, and everything quieted.

Then a cry rang out. “Wuur huur!”

Wesley turned as Bobby Forester sprinted past, eyes wide and mouth hanging open like a fish. Bobby reached the driver’s seat, and Ben stuck out his arm, catching the boy. “Where are you going?” Ben asked in a shaky voice.

“Wuur huur! Wuur huur!” Bobby yelled breathlessly.

“What?” Ben said with a grimace. “I don’t know where we are, but we’re not where we should be. Go back to your seat, Bobby.”

The words had no effect on the boy. Bobby squirmed and bounced around in the driver’s arms, his head swinging from side to side as he struggled to peer out the window. But Ben didn’t release him, and Bobby finally calmed down, meeting the big man’s gaze.

“Whaa yooou waanna, Been? Caana I go oouut?”

“I’m sorry,” Ben answered, claspings Bobby by the shoulders. “No one’s going outside. You need to go back to your seat.”

Bobby searched the bus driver's eyes, "Buut wuur huur."

Ben shook his head. "No, we're not where we should be, Bobby. We need to find out what happened. Go sit down."

Bobby shifted his weight from foot to foot. He nodded his head as if he wanted to say something more to Ben but didn't. Then his shoulders slumped, and he shuffled back to his seat.

Ben rose and faced the children. "Is everyone okay?" he asked, wiping sweat from his face with a hand towel.

Wesley heard hiccups again. Annie leaned forward, pressing a tissue to her forehead.

"I think she hit her head," CPU said, indicating Annie. Ben strode up the aisle and put his hand under Annie's chin, raising her face. He lifted the tissue away and winced at the sight of a nasty gash dripping blood down the bump of her nose and freckled cheeks.

"Ouch, we'll need a bandage for that," Ben said. "Let me get my medic kit."

After dressing Annie's gash, Ben checked on each of the kids. When he came to Wesley, he gazed worriedly, his breath coming in gasps, and his face red and puffy. "You alright?"

Wesley nodded, wondering the same thing about the big man.

The driver moved on to CPU. Wesley turned to the window. Dense woods surrounded the field, but ahead of the bus, the meadow rolled for some fifty yards to a narrow opening in the trees that led toward a barren hillside rising beyond the field and the woods.

Ben returned to his seat and started the engine. The bus rolled forward a foot or two, then the wheels

began to spin in the mud. Ben tried backing out, but again the wheels spun uselessly. After several failed attempts to go forward or backward, the driver turned the key, and the engine quieted.

With a sigh, he plucked a cellphone out of his coat pocket and tapped in a number. He listened for a long moment, then threw the phone down.

“Jeez!” he shouted. “Nothing works!” He turned to the kids, with a look of exasperation. “Okay, I want you all to call or text your parents. Let them know you’re fine. My phone isn’t working.”

CPU had his mobile phone out immediately and keyed in a number. Wesley saw the screen flash, “Network not found”. CPU grunted in surprise.

Wesley didn’t have a phone, so he glanced around at the other kids. Their phones all flashed the same message.

“No one has a connection,” he shouted.

Ben groaned. He seemed to think for a moment, then he stood up. “All right,” he said, “I’m going outside to check on the bus. You all stay in here. No fooling around.”

Ben lumbered down the stairs and leaped to avoid the mud. He trudged around the yellow beast, stooping to his knees several times to examine the underside.

CPU leaned over his seat. “There’s probably no damage,” he said, pointing back along the field. “We didn’t hit any rocks or stumps.”

Wesley scanned the meadow. “But how’d we get here?”

CPU put his hand on his chin, then his eyes gleamed. “I know! We went through a micro–black hole.”

“A what?” Wesley snorted.

“A micro–black hole. Don’t you know what that is?”

“Yeah, but—”

“You have a better explanation?”

“Don’t black holes destroy everything that goes into them?”

CPU shook his head. “Actually, no one knows what happens in a black hole. One theory is that it’s a shortcut from one place in the universe to another.”

“But I didn’t see anything black,” Wesley said, frowning. “There was a blue light. Are there blue holes?”

“No, that’s stupid,” CPU said, rolling his eyes.

Outside, Ben trudged to the tree line and studied the branches and underbrush. He walked along the woods, circling behind and to the left of the bus until he reached the opening in the trees which led to the hillside.

Ben gazed up the slope. After a moment, he turned and plodded back to the bus. The kids were quiet as he climbed the stairs.

“Well, it appears we’re stuck,” Ben said, standing beside the driver’s seat. “I need to get help. You all should stay here. Any questions?”

There was silence except for a steady series of quiet hiccups from the back. Wesley couldn’t tell who they were coming from.

Sarah timidly raised her hand. Ben nodded. Sarah ducked her chin and didn’t speak.

Ben tapped his foot. “What is it, Sarah?”

“I have... have... to go to the bathroom,” she mumbled.

There were groans and laughter. “Your sister!” CPU said, slapping his forehead.

Wesley sighed, knowing this was a frequent issue with Sarah.

“All right!” Ben said over the noise. “Does anyone else have to go? ‘Cause if you do, now’s the time.”

The kids looked at one another, but no one else admitted they did.

Ben squinted at Annie. "Are you feeling better? Can you go with Sarah?"

"Sure," Annie said, standing up. She grabbed Sarah's hand and led her up the aisle and down the stairs. Ben followed the girls to where the woods parted. Annie guided Sarah into the trees.

CPU's brow wrinkled. "Even if we went through a black hole, we must still be on earth. The air, vegetation, and gravity are the same."

Wesley shook his head. He didn't believe they were anywhere but a field near Annaberry. CPU was smart, but black holes were crazy?

CPU crossed his arms. "Considering the temperature and climate, we must be in the Southern Hemisphere, maybe Africa or South America."

Wesley rolled his eyes.

Annie and Sarah reappeared out of the trees. They followed Ben back to the bus.

As the girls climbed the stairs, some kids hooted and laughed. Sarah's cheeks reddened, but Annie shook her finger at the laughing kids. "Yeah, we'll see how funny it is when it's your turn."

After the bus quieted, Ben said, "Okay, I'm going to find help. If you get hungry, you can eat your lunches. I'll be back soon." He clambered down the steps.

Wesley bit his lip. "He's not supposed to do this."

"Do what?" CPU asked.

"Leave us alone. We should go with him."

"Did you see his face, all puffy and red? I don't think he's thinking too straight."

"Hopefully, he'll find someone and get back soon," Wesley said.

CPU bobbed his head.

Ben passed out of the meadow and climbed the barren hill. At the top, he turned slowly, seeming unsure of what to do. Then he lowered his head and started down the far side, with each step disappearing further from view.