

*eleven.*

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME! HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR MEE! HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME!” I sing, as I jump out of bed. I put on a shirt and some jeans. Then I run to the bathroom. I bunch up my hair in a ponytail, and run down the stairs. My mom and dad hug me. For breakfast I get a pancake with a candle in it. My cat, Luni, has left me a present (in his litter box). I scoop it into a plastic baggie and throw it in the trash. Then I grab my backpack and run out the door to the bus stop.

I know the route. Straight, turn left at the pink house, straight for two blocks, right at the house with the crooked tree, straight. The bright yellow paint of the bus slashes through the foggy air. Something is odd. Something isn't right. Then, I see it.

The bus's wheels don't touch the ground. They hover an inch above it. I blink. Same. I pinch myself. Same. Cautiously, I approach. The bus driver is not the usual one. It's a young woman. Maybe in her twenties, or thirties. Her short blond hair is streaked with hot pink. She has crescent moon earrings. She's wearing jeans, and a faded T-shirt.

“Hi! I'm Tina West! You're Charlie, right? Yup. You suuuure are! Get on, we're on a tight schedule, caaaaaan't be late!” She talks like she's really excited about everything.

How does she know my name? I don't move towards the bus. I just stare.

“Oooooooh, I forgot. You're a new one, aren't you? Yes you are! You want to know more, don't you? Of course you do!! To make a long story short, I work for an organization called Purple, and our goal is to stop the world from getting destroyed. There was this prophecy by my great-aunt Laura, and she said that on this day, four children turning eleven of *which* you are one, would gain magical powers that we would need so that they can help us save the world. Now, you can either get on this bus and join Purple, or you can run away, or call the cops on me, most likely signifying the end of the world.”

This. Is. So. Not. Happening. I don't move. I barely breath.

“C'mon, it's OK. She's not as crazy as she sounds, so get on.” I look up, startled. In my confusion, I hadn't noticed that there were already three kids on the bus. The one who is talking is a boy. His bright red hair sticks straight up in the air. Then a girl speaks. She looks Asian. Her hair is long, black, and braided.

“Bryn is right. This isn't a trick. How could we get the bus to float without it actually floating? Come. It's common sense.”

Something about the girl's gentle, but steady voice reassures me. And she did make a good point about the floating bus. *This is probably the stupidest thing I am ever going to do and ever have done.* I slowly climb the steps of the bus.

“Welcome to Purple, Chaaaarlie Redwell!!! Now get that backside of yours on a seat and hold on tiiiiight!! Cause we are gooooooing!!”

I sit next to the Asian girl with the long braid.

“Hi.”

“Hey. My name's Sasha, by the way. The annoying guy in the seat across from us is Jack, and the even more annoying guy in the seat behind us is Bryn.”

Bryn is the boy who first spoke to me. Jack is tall, with blond hair.

The bus suddenly jolts forwards. I hear a loud cracking noise. I feel like I'm going to barf. The bus stops. We're on a field. There are no signs of civilization in sight. Suddenly, the patch of grass beneath us turns purple. A mechanical voice comes from underneath.

"Please say access code."

"4PX2Y0."

"Access granted."

The purple, glowing earth beneath us lowers. The earth closes up above us. It's too dark to see. After a while, we stop moving. A light comes on. We're in a plain glass room. Tina leads us off the bus and to another room with a couch in it. We sit and wait. Finally, a woman enters the room. She walks with a sense of authority.

"Are these the ones, West?"

"Yes ma'am."

"No troubles, I suppose?"

"No, ma'am, none."

Turning to us, she spoke, "I am Adaria Zen, head of Purple. Has Tina told you about us?"

"Yes." We answer.

"I will explain further. There is an evil sorceress named Malforce. She wants to become one immortal, all-powerful dictator. There is only one more thing she needs. It is the Sword of Qunuali, a bewitched item that will make its user unbeatable. We must find it, and destroy it. Sources tell us the Sword is on a remote island somewhere in the Arctic Ocean. You will be accompanied by Tina West. You will be departing shortly. Questions?"

My hand shoots up. "What will our parents think when we are missing?"

"We will make a time fold, so that when you return, you will be at your bus stop and ready to ride the correct bus, as if no time has passed."

I feel like it would be a bad idea to inquire what a time fold is and how they work, so I keep my lips together. Adaria Zen exits the room.

Tina leads us back to the bus. We get on. I brace myself. And we're off. And then, we're there. We're on a glacier, near the water. A tall wooden pole stands far away from us. It's ginormous. It's probably about a yard wide. It's so tall I can barely see the top of it. Far away, barely visible, is a sword, floating in mid-air. Tina hands each of us some warm clothes. We put them on.

Jack walks off the bus first. The second his foot touches the ice, a crack starts to spread a few yards in front of us. Soon, we start to slowly pull away from the beach. In a few minutes, we will be on an island of ice that is slowly melting in the middle of the Arctic Ocean. *No. No, no, no. No! Nooooooooooooo!!!! Why? Why? I want to feel my mom's arms around me again. To feel my dad's arms picking me up one more time.* Then, another voice enters my head. It's sharp, it's painful, but it is wonderfully clear. Like cold water to a cut. It stings, but it soothes. *Snap. Out. Of. It. You're no dummy, Charlie Redwell. You've got brains. But it's about time you start using them. You are strong, you are intelligent. So prove it!!*

Sometimes, I think about something, then it leads me to another thing, and another, until I end up thinking about something completely different from what I started with. This is what happens now.

I give a little shake, as if electrified. *Electrified. Electricity. Telephones use electricity. Telephones need telephone poles to work. Hey, that big wooden pole looks kinda like a super-sized telephone pole. Sometimes telephone poles fall over, because a car hits them. I wonder what would happen if that pole fell over.*

“OHMYGOSHIFOUNDIT!!!!!!!!!!”

“Huh?”

“Guys, if we could get that pole to fall over at just the right speed, and just the right angle, it would form a bridge that we could use to get back to the island! Oh, wait, crap. We can't move it.”

“Charlie! Yes we can! The prophesized four's powers were said to be telekinesis. If they all work together, they are said to be able to move anything!”

“But how the heck are we supposed to do this?!”

“Concentrate on what you want to do. Focus your every thought, your every breath, your every heartbeat into what you want to do. If your mind is focused, your determination unbending, your whole body put into that one thought, you will succeed.”

Wow. I did not know Tina could be so philosophical.

We don't talk. We don't need words to know what we have to do. We step together, and form a half circle. We hold hands. I don't even flinch when Bryn touches my hand, like I usually do when boys do that. And then, something in my mind clicks. Something opens. Something reveals itself to me. It's been there my whole life, but hiding, blurry. It's as if I finally find the last piece in a puzzle, and the piece fits perfectly. We all close our eyes. Though I cannot see, I know exactly where the pole is. I know every dent in every inch of ice. Every tiny breath of wind. Every single blade of grass. Every single ocean wave. I am alive. I know the world. I am the world. I can do anything. I focus my attention on the pole. I let my mind flow into it, joining every splinter, every knot, every grain of wood. I wrap my very soul around it, embracing it, becoming it. I feel three other spirits press up against mine. We wrap, and wrap, until there are no four, there is only one. Now, Sasha, Jack, Bryn, the pole, the world, and me are one. And we are strong. We push. We strain. Every drop of sweat that comes to our faces, is a dew drop on a field of grass. Every groan is the roaring of the sea. Every grunt is a bear's growl, a bird's song, a whale's call. We are the wind, we are the world, we are the pole. We push. Push. Push. We move, we sway, we dance. The pole falls, we break apart.

For a few seconds, we all remain completely frozen, like when you're watching a really action-packed movie, and you really need to pee, so you pause it. And then, the watcher of our movie comes back, and clicks the unpauser.

“Oh. My. Gosh!! Guys, we did it!” We all high-five and congratulate and hug each other, and squeal.

“Let's go get that sword!” We race over the pole, to the other side. We run, and run. We never tire. We get to the Sword. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

It is so bright, it looks as if it is made of sunlight. So magical, like it was made from moonlight.

We know what we have to do. We weld into one, flow into one, are one. We wrap around it. We seep into it, we sink into it. And then, we snap it. It's light has flown up to the sun again. It's magic has reunited with the moon. We have done our job. We break apart.

We each move to hug Tina, and say our goodbyes to each other.

“You guys ready?”

“Yes!”

“Happy Birthday, all of you, and bye!”

A flash of light. A crack.

I look up. A bright yellow bus. I look down. The wheels are firmly touching the ground. The driver is the one who usually drives it. I climb up the steps.

“Hey Charlie! Happy Birthday!” It’s my friend, Sarah. I sit next to her. I look out the window. The birds sing, the wind blows, the sun shines. The world is still the same. And I am still Charlie Redwell, an 11 year old fifth grade girl. I smile, and look away. I barely know what is real and what is not, what is the truth, and what is a lie. I have just gone through what people only ever imagine. But my life will go on, and more birthdays will pass, though most likely none of them will be as crazy as this one.

But Malforce is still out there, and there is said to be another prophecy. A prophecy that says that when the four turn twelve, they will be called upon again, and reunited in an adventure even greater than the last.