



Chapter Five

‘Bella, Bella,’ Race whispered across the blackness. ‘Come on Bella.’ A little patter of feet could be heard tapping across the dormitory floor.

‘Here, get in.’ Race pulled back his blanket to let Bella into his bed. Race moved his mouth close to Bella’s ear.

‘I think Solo wants to talk to us. Have you noticed this?’

‘Yes, I think so. He does treat us differently, and his eyes always seem to be checking us. Look at all the other children. They’re locked into those horrible pills that the Lairs are always counting out. Have you seen how ours come from Solo’s pocket, not the bottle? And how he keeps Jip away from sensing us?’

‘It’s been days now since we’ve been sensed. Bella, I’m going to talk to Solo when he’s next by us.’

‘No Race. Don’t do that; what I think you should do is touch his hand. Make contact when he puts down our pills. I’m scared, Race. Fear for our future. Its nothing like Shanks said it would be, like where is the sun and grass and clean air? There’s none. Just this oppressive place with these ugly cruel Lairs and that new Lair they call Dr Hasame. He is so powerful and mean. Have you noticed how he is dressed differently?’

‘Yes I have. I think he has done something terrible to Jip. Solo looked like a ghost when he came out of the Resting Room with Hasame. And the smell that came out of the room – by jingoes, it was bad.’

‘Oh Race, our parents would die if they knew the truth, if they could see us now. They were so proud to see us transcend. Now I know why Shanks’s children never transcend. He knows what happens to us children. Race, I miss Mount Paris so much. And I miss Mum and Dad.’

‘Don’t cry, Bella, I’ll look after you. I promise. I’m going to get Solo to help us. I know he wants to. Bella, can you see that?’

‘What, Race?’

‘Can you see that sparkle of light above my bed?’

‘No, what sparkle? Hold on, wait, yes I can. I can.’

‘Shhh, not so loud. The Lairs will hear! Look at it. It’s growing, what is it? It’s shimmering. Quick, get under the blanket. Please, Bella, don’t cry.’

Bella and Race huddled together. Race had put his hand over Bella’s mouth.

‘I’ll see if it is still there.’

Quickly, Race pulled his head back under the blanket.

‘Jingoes, it’s still there and it’s getting much bigger. It’s hovering right above us. It’s quite beautiful. The most lovely blue I’ve ever seen.’

‘Let me have a look.’

Bella slid the blanket down, with one wide eye peeking over the rim of her protection, then two, now her whole face. She started pulling herself into an upright position.

‘Bella, Bella, what are you doing? Don’t..’

Race was trying to pull her back down into the bed, next to him.

‘You should have a look at this, Race. It’s amazing. It’s so, so wonderful. Don’t worry. I know it won’t hurt us. Look, Race, it’s so, so lovely.’

Bella’s face, tear stained, reflected the glow of the most vivid ultramarine blue as Race pulled himself up to a sitting position next to her. Both children were mesmerised by the ethereal shape that seemed to be struggling to find its form, going in and out of vision. Transparent almost, like cellophane. You felt you could fall through it, like diving into the perfect surface of a still lagoon.

The children were transfixed, their mouths open, with little smiles that they couldn’t wipe away. There it was, hovering, shimmering, a celestial light show. After a final wobble, it snapped into its final form, a flower that floated as an angel might. Petal wings graced the dormitory silence.

‘Oh Race, what is it? Why is it here? I want to touch it.’

Bella was on her knees, reaching out, when the creature murmured their names. Bella fell back into Race and his arms wrapped around her in time to stop her crashing to the floor.

‘Hello Bella, hello Race,’ the creature said, in a low, mellow voice.

‘Don’t be afraid. I’m here to help you. My name is Powerflower, friend of the Sansvira, ally of the Keywee. I am not a dream, but the representative of all fauna, their voice and ambassador. You, my dear children, are needed in the Truth Stream – the Outer-world – amongst the stars and sky, where the grass and the trees grow, where the mountains reach into the heavens, and pure white snow cleans all. Where you can wash yourselves anew, where the Lairs have no power and would shrivel under the sun. Children, I need you to follow me into the Library. I must show you the secret that has long been held, hidden in this very place. This secret will free the world from the Lairs. You will know what to do with this secret. This is what the Sansvira have told me, so you must come.’

‘No, we can’t do that. The Lairs will hurt us. No, no, go away. You must, before the Lairs come. They will tear us apart and throw us to the Chute. It’s impossible. You are the most beautiful creature we have ever seen, but...’

‘Children, it’s alright. All is well. The Lairs are all plugged in after the chaos of today. They are battered and broken, scared. You will be safe.’

‘How do you know about today? How do you know these things? Bella..Bella...get back here. Bella.’

Bella was now standing on the bed, reaching up for Powerflower and to Race’s amazement he too started to cry. Slow, small tears ran down his cheeks as Powerflower wrapped its transparent petals around Bella and hummed a gentle note.

‘Everything is fine, little Bella.’

Race too was now on his feet inside the arms of Powerflower.

‘How, Powerflower? How do you know?’ whispered Bella.

‘I’ve been here in the Library since you were brought up from Mount Paris. I’ve been watching you, waiting for the right time. It’s just as the Sansvira said, that the time would be revealed, and now it is. So you must follow me.’

‘What do you think Bella? Shall we follow Powerflower?’

It was too late for an answer. Bella was on the floor ready to go. Race had no option but to follow.

‘But the door will be locked,’ Race murmured, more to himself than to anyone else. Powerflower was at the door, hovering, shimmering, waiting for the children. With a quick glance over their shoulders, the children took a deep breath, looked at each other, put their hands

together and moved gingerly towards Powerflower and the locked door. Powerflower was half in and half out of the room.

‘Oh Bella, how can this be? We must be dreaming. This can’t be happening. Pinch me Bella. Please wake me.’

The door opened with a soft click and the Library was in full sight. Powerflower waited, beckoning with its petals, fan-like. The children crept through the door, their little fingers gripping the doorframe, their heads slowly peering around. Finally, they pulled their bodies through and quickly found each other’s hands again. They trembled, fear in their eyes and their legs wonky with terror.

‘Come children, you must. Now is the time.’

Their eyes darted around inside their sockets, scanning the empty Library. The coast was clear. They tiptoed past the Lairs’ private rooms and it was just as Powerflower had said. Powerflower’s petals comforted their shoulders, and then it was off, flying around the Library like a trail of fireworks. It glittered as it swooped down across their path.

‘Come children, follow me. Now is the time.’

‘Yes, Powerflower, we’re following.’

They ran across the Library floor, past the great long table and empty chairs, into the maze of bookshelves that were stacked almost to the ceiling, feeling safe amongst the columns of books and timber. Race let out a squeak of relief. As the two children collapsed into each other’s arms, Powerflower swooped over them again.

‘Here, follow me; it’s just around the corner in the next corridor of shelves. Come my dear little children, the secret awaits. The way of the Truth Stream and the Outer-world awaits.’

They followed the phosphorescent glow that trailed off the magnificent creature, into the next hallway of books. Their hearts lightened and a skip entered their step, replacing the shuffle and drag of the last few months. Powerflower’s luminous light danced like a firefly, creating long shadows of the children’s bodies in the eerie corridor.

‘Here we are.’ An edge of excitement spilled from Powerflower’s voice. It floated perhaps fourteen feet directly above the children’s heads. ‘This book, this one here,’ it said. It was all buckled up, inverted like a squid in water. ‘This one here.’

To the children, it seemed impossible. It might as well have been on the ceiling.

‘How are we to get it? It’s far too high for us.’

‘But you must. It’s inside this book and only this book. The feather of Superbird is in the spine.’

‘But it’s too high,’ Bella said, with a slice of disappointment in her voice. ‘I can get it, Bella. I know how. I’ll remove a few books on each shelf and climb up. I’ll pass each book to you till I can grab the book that Powerflower has shown us.’

‘It’s too dangerous, Race. What if you fall or drop them? The noise will wake the Lairs.’

‘I can do it Bella, just help me.’

Powerflower was hovering near the spine of the book bathing it in luminous brilliance.

Race began removing the books on the bottom few shelves and started to climb, passing each book, one by one to Bella. It was easy at first, until he was out of reach of Bella’s outstretched hands. The going got difficult. He had to retrace his foothold, hanging on one-handed while he leant down to pass yet another book to Bella, who placed them on the floor in a neat pile.

‘Race,’ she squeaked, ‘I know, I’ll make two piles and stand on them. Will that help?’

‘You’re so clever. That would be great. Yes, that’s it.’

‘Come on Race, you’re almost there,’ whispered Powerflower. ‘Just a few more shelves and you will have it.’

Bella’s balancing act, now precarious and unstable, threatened to send her and the stack of books collapsing to the floor. Both of them stuck, so near yet so far from the very book that Powerflower was touching with one vibrating petal.

Race started to sweat. His hands felt slippery.

‘I think I’m going to fall Bella, I can’t make it.’

‘You must. Try harder. You are so close.’ Powerflower urged,

‘I know, Race. I’ll climb up behind you, then you can stand on my shoulders. Will that help?’

‘Yes Bella, but...’

‘No Race. We must do it. Here I come.’

‘Hurry Bella.’

So Bella climbed hand over hand, lifting herself off the wobbly stacks of books that tilted and swayed as she cast herself from their insecure safety on to the empty shelves. She was close to his hip, clinging tightly to the wooden frame.

‘Come on Race, do it, do it now.’

‘Are you sure? I’ll be heavy.’

‘Yes, do it now Race.’

He tentatively placed one foot on her shoulder. He felt it buckle slightly as an ‘oohfff’ sound escaped her.

‘It’s okay’, she said between gritted teeth. ‘Just do it Race.’

He placed his full weight on her. He could feel her body shaking under his feet, and then in one springboard stretch he pushed up off her shoulders and grabbed the book, slipping right through Powerflower at the same time.

The creature abruptly fled back a few feet or so, still illuminating the secret book.

‘I’ve got it Bella, I’ve got it!’

She was straining under his frame, teeth grinding, face flushed and puffy, her knuckles white from gripping the shelves. For a moment, it seemed all was lost. She was going to crumble. But she found the strength she needed as one foot, then the next, lifted off her bruised shoulders. She let out a stream of air, as a train does on reaching its destination.

Here they were, fourteen or so feet above the library floor, Race holding the book in one hand, the other clinging on for dear life.

‘Pass the book to me, Race,’ Bella said, ‘you look like you might fall.’

‘Thank you, yes,’ Race replied, leaning down to give it to his beloved friend. ‘You got it?’

‘Yes, let it go.’ He passed it on and quickly grabbed the shelf with both hands.

‘Down you come, children.’ You could hear the joy in Powerflower’s voice.

The two children descended to the floor, standing next to a pile of books as tall as themselves. It was tricky but they had done it. They huddled around the book.

‘What do we do now? Where is the secret?’ asked Race.

‘It is as I told you. It’s in the spine. You have to open the book so the spine has a little freedom, then you will find it tucked inside.’

‘You do it, Bella.’ Race said.

Bella opened the book. ‘Why, it’s just the same as our text book. Nothing more. Just the Master’s words. Look Race,’ she said, passing the book to Race with bitter disappointment.

‘No, you have to open it at its centre, children. Keep turning the pages.’

They stood together, Race holding it, as Bella turned the pages until it lay equally in Race's hands. At its centre, they saw two blank pages, and the spine now looped in a half circle. The children looked at each other, then back to the blank pages.

'There's nothing here, Powerflower, the book is empty. Just blank pages,' Bella said. But as she said this, a glow spread across the pages. At first, they thought it was just reflected light from Powerflower, but it continued to glow more and more intensely.

Two black shapes, triangles, spread from the bottom of the right-hand page upwards, then another much smaller triangle, also black, appeared at the top of the page. Now blue lines, as if someone was drawing, were connecting the three triangles in a smooth linear sweep. The page started to vibrate, to hum, as an even more beautiful blue than Powerflower materialised within the outlines.

'What is it Race?' whispered Bella.

'I'm not sure, Bella, but it looks as fantastic as Powerflower.'

'It's SUPERBIRD. It's the child of the Sansvira. His name is Epic,' Powerflower said in an excited, trembling voice. 'It's as the Sansvira have promised.'

The image grew into focus with such clarity and started to fly around the pages, flittering from the right-hand page to the left, wings spread, revealing a white patch on its chest that looked like an egg. It danced all over the two pages but could not release itself from the book, bouncing back from its edges, looping, circling around the perimeter.

'Race, it's trapped, the poor thing. Look, it's trying to find a way out.'

'It's not possible. That's why Superbird has been revealed to you both. You are his liberators. This is what the Sansvira have said. You will know what to do. I was to show you the book. Now I must leave, but we will meet again. We will meet in the Truth Stream, in the Outer-world. Good-bye, children, I have carried out my instructions and I'm needed elsewhere.' Powerflower wrapped itself around the children as a parent does, its transparent petals encompassing their whole beings, creating a luminous cave-like environment.

'Please don't leave, Powerflower,' Bella pleaded. 'We don't know what to do. We don't know what you mean. It's all too new to us. Please Powerflower, stay.'

Tears were in her eyes again, and they were dropping onto the book that she and Race were still holding with a muffled splash.

‘Oh Bella,’ Race said, ‘look at your tears, Bella look!’

She looked down as her tears hit the pages. They turned into sparkles of light and evaporated instantly. It was as if Superbird was flying around in a celestial sky, full of stars.

‘Oh Race,’ she said, a sniffle replacing her tears. ‘Race, what’s happening? How can we help Superbird when we’re trapped as well?’

Suddenly, Superbird stopped flashing around the pages and came to rest in an upright position, as a person walks, his tail feathers as legs, feet. He stood, bringing his wings around his body like a wrap or shawl. He glowed magnificently, expanding, taking up the whole page, then vanished from the page into thin air. The children were devastated. It was then that they realized they were alone in the library, for Powerflower, too, had vanished. All they had for company was the stack of books that lay around them and the magic secret book in their hands.

‘The binding,’ Race said. ‘Powerflower mentioned the binding.’

Bella held the book at arms length above their heads to peer into the binding, which had parted from the book in a loop. A feather slid out of its hiding place softly, rotating to the floor. It was the same colour blue as Superbird. Cerulean blue, clean as the most perfect summer’s day sky; the colour of the sky that Carroll Shanks had promised them. The colour of the sky they had never seen, only dreamt of. Race lent down and picked it up. Between his index finger and thumb, he turned it slowly in his hand. It was real. It was magic. It was a feather from Superbird!

‘Tomorrow, we must show this to Solo. I know this in my heart Bella. Solo will help us.’

‘Yes, you’re right, Race, but now we must put the books back, before the Lairs find them here on the floor, and us, for that matter.’

So the children replayed their effort in reverse. Race climbed the shelves, Bella too, passing a book at a time to her best friend until they had replaced all the books. It was as if nothing had happened. The books stood undisturbed, asleep in their beds up against each other, as they had been for decade after decade, full of the Master’s words, the Master’s wants, the Master’s indoctrinations.

‘We should put the feather inside one of our own books for safe-keeping, Bella. That way, when Solo comes to give us our pills, it will be close.’

‘That’s a very good idea,’ Bella said.

The two children tiptoed their way to the great table, to where they always sat. There, their books lay waiting for Race to slide the feather inside the binding of his book as it had been in the book Powerflower had shown them, and they retreated to their dormitory. All was still. No one had stirred. The door shut with a soft click; the Library lay silent behind them. The other children were at their Callic rest. It wouldn't be long before the Lairs would come and order them to their studies.