



## Chapter 5: Out of the frying jar And into the bleach

Somehow Rock heard it. He couldn't quite figure out if God was talking to him or the ant but he sensed the urgency. He turned around so fast that he lost his footing and started to slide down the stepladder. The sight in front of him however, made him scramble up the steps again and grasp at the shelf of jars.

There at the bottom of the stepladder with his front two claws squarely on the bottom step was Hector. He was looking straight at Rock, his tongue flickering in and out.

Rock was panting with fear. His body was shaking. He turned quickly to glance up at his ant in sheer disbelief. He could have sworn that his ant had been speaking to him—had *warned* him that Hector was behind him.

Then Rock's eyes met Hector's and the strangest thing happened (well, perhaps the second strangest thing—an ant warning him of danger might possibly have qualified as *the* strangest thing). In that instant Rock had the overwhelming feeling that all was okay— that Hector had not approached him to harm him but rather to *help* him.

Just then the door of the classroom opened and Professor Pethers entered. Hector's eyes darted towards the Professor's and then he slowly stepped down off the ladder and made his way toward a desk in the corner of the classroom.

"I got some more, let's go," Professor Pethers said holding up a jug full of clear fluid for Rock to see. He strolled past Rock and climbed into Hector's hood seemingly unfazed at the sight of Hector loose and Rock in the midst of a panic attack.

Rock quickly tried to compose himself. "Yeah, uh, cool. I'll be right there. I was, uh, just checking on my insects. Making sure they were okay and all."

“Yes, Rock. I noticed you have one mighty fine ant there. I’d keep an eye on him too if I were you,” Professor Pethers grabbed the broom and started sweeping up the loose dirt in the bottom of the enclosure.

Rock’s head started swimming again. Was the Professor kidding? Was it a coincidence? Why would he say something about that ant? The ant that he could have sworn was warning him about Hector? Did the Professor know something he didn’t? Or was the ant just some special type of ant that was going to be cool to study? This was weird. *Get a hold of yourself Rock*, thought Rock, *Ants do not talk and Nile Monitors do not have mental telepathy with teachers.*

“Here Professor,” Rock said regaining his composure. “I’ll get into the corner with that small sweeper and the dust pan. You just sweep everything into the middle and then I’ll get it.”

“Okay Rock. Sounds good.”

After the hood had been swept, Professor Pethers threw down some bleaching scrub and the two of them used giant hard handled broom heads to scour the floor. Rock didn’t know which smelled worse: the scrub or Hector’s heat rock. He decided Hector was in need of some good aftershave or at least a heavy duty air freshener.

Rock got fresh water in a bowl while the Professor retrieved his royal stinky-ness from under the corner desk. Hector had not moved since finding his way under the desk but had very graciously gotten up and lumbered back to the enclosure for the Professor. In fact, Rock was almost certain that Hector had started to get up *before* the Professor had even reached Hector and tugged on his leash. His head began racing again. He tried to shrug it off.

“So Professor, how are the sunflowers growing this year?” Rock wanted to think about something other than the insects and reptiles in the room.

“Fine, just fine. I’ve been using a new weeding technique that appears to be working quite well although I haven’t quite worked out all the bugs in it yet. But I think I should have some very good sunflowers and, if so, a good head start on my pumpkins for next year’s pumpkin festival. Do you go?”

“Oh yeah—I love the pump-fest.” That’s how all the kids at school referred to the festival. For whatever reason it had grown into a very social affair for the kids at Fiercedale and absolutely everyone waited in line for Mrs. Spellbound’s pumpkin jambalaya surprise. However, she had been quite ill for the past sev-

eral months and people were speculating on whether or not she would be able to make it back this year or even next.

“Have you talked to Mrs. Spellbound recently?”

“Yes, yes. Still no change in her condition but she has asked me to supply her with the usual number of pumpkins. I don’t think we’ll have to worry about the jambalaya—she’s got the whole summer to recover and she’s determined to be better for the festival.”

Just then the door to the science lab flew open and a disheveled, heavy set round-eyed man burst into the room. It was Professor Fahid, the mathematics teacher, and he was obviously worked up about something.

“Professah Petha. Professah Petha. You must come quick. It has happened again.” His speech was quick and clipped. He spoke with his hands and ignored, or at least did not seem to see, Rock. “I left dah room to go home for dah evening but I realized when I got to my cah that I hat forgotten my algebra-ic folder. When I returned- it was right dere on dah black-board. You must come see.”

Professor Pethers turned to Rock, “Would you mind finishing up here? Hector is all set, we just need to put the cleaning products away.”

“No problem, Professor. I’ll take care of it.”

“See you tomorrow then Rock.”

“See you Professor.”

Professor Fahid led Professor Pethers out the door, his arms flailing with his worry. Rock overheard him say, “I can not make it out. It’s meaning is beyond my comprehension,” but the rest was lost to his ears.

Rock put the bleaching scrub back in the closet and emptied the last bits of scraps from Hector’s hood into the trash bin before putting the dust pan and broom away as well.

He walked back to his desk to grab his backpack and glanced up at the shelf of insects. He wanted to take another look at his ant. He looked back at the wall to check the clock. Jules would be getting out of detention right now and he didn’t want to miss her. He stared at the clock again—maybe he’d sneak back with

Jewel later before they went home – that way she could check out the ant too.

Rock took off down the hallway and made his way to the library where detention was being held. He saw Jewel step backwards into the hallway. She nodded her head as she talked to someone inside the door. “Sure, sure. Yes, I understand Ms. Jitherburrs. I’ll try to remember next time.” She turned to go and saw Rock. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Get me out of here,” Jewel whispered. “That woman is a *freak*.”

Rock chuckled at Jewel’s expression. He loved how animated she could get.

“Why do you dislike her so much Jules? She seems perfectly normal to me,” Rock replied innocently although he knew this would wind Jewel up.

“Normal??! She’s about as normal as Spencer who kept his protective face mask thingy-thing on throughout detention! Meanwhile, she’s got Spencer and me writing out these dreadful recipes on index cards and then she disappears for almost the entire time to go to the bathroom. I tell you, it’s not a good sign Rock when your cooking teacher’s stomach is so upset that it takes her all of detention to use the potty.”

“Spencer got detention too?” Rock asked. Spencer was odd but he never got into trouble.

“Yeah, he refused to eat any of the food we made in Unified Arts today. I can’t blame him either. The stuff smelled so bad – like the bottom of a garbage can – and tasted that way too. No wonder her stomach was upset.”

“Well it couldn’t have smelled much worse than Hector’s hood which, by the way, I uh,…” Rock suddenly had a hard time figuring out what to say. How exactly do you tell someone that you think an ant saved your life from a Nile Monitor today by yelling at you?

Jewel turned to Rock, “What’s up? Is something bugging you?”

“Well, yeah sort of. Listen I know this is going to sound awfully weird like I’m losing it or something but I, well, I want to go back and check on the ant in my jar. I don’t think I left enough food for him.” Rock just couldn’t bring himself tell her the whole truth.

“Yeah but Rock we’ve got to get going. It’s time to clear out of school and if we get caught we could get

another detention and I just don't know if I could handle another hour of Ms. Jitherburrs."

"Aw, please Jules I'll be really bummed if he doesn't make it because of me. It will only take a second and if we do get caught I promise to tell them it was all my fault. And lastly, if we do have to sit with Ms. Jitherburrs in detention I promise I'll sit next to her and you can fire spitballs at me the whole time." Rock winked at Jules.

The possibility of spitballs misfiring and hitting Ms. Jitherburrs sealed the deal for Jewel. "Deal. Let's go, but let's try and be quick. I've got a ton of homework tonight."

Rock and Jules carefully inched their way along the back wall of the entrance area as the other students who had stayed after school made their way out the door. Spencer Bluecraft was sure not to touch the doors on his way out, so the teacher on duty had to hold the door open for him. It was then that Jewel and Rock were able to slip down the hall towards the science lab out of sight from everyone.

The science lab was still open and Rock put his backpack down on the Professor's desk. Jewel placed her pile of books next to it. Rock pulled out the stepladder again and placed it on the floor in front of the shelf.

Inside the jar, XL and Gunther started to freak: XL by repeating, "Oh mucus. Oh mucus. He's here. He's here," and Gunther by simply staring with his mouth wide open, half eaten leaf dangling out.

Charlie who had been resting in the corner, mulling over the events of the day, suddenly realized that Rock was indeed approaching the jar again. Thoughts raced through his mind once more, *Did he hear me before? Did he turn around to see Hector because of my warning or was it simply a coincidence? What was he doing now? Were they in danger? Should he try to speak to Rock again? And who was that girl provider with him? Boy, was she cute.* She reminded Charlie of Mitzi, an ant that Charlie had had a huge crush on and in fact, he still daydreamed about from time to time, although he would never admit that to anyone.

Rock grabbed the jar and placed it on the counter below where both he and Jewel could easily have a look inside.

"See, look Rock. He's got plenty of food. Let's go." Jewel said pointing at the very noticeable mound of food Rock had left for his ant.

"Uh, yeah you're right but I, uh, I think there might be something wrong with him. He looks a little ill to

me, don't you think? I think I'd better take him out to have a better look."

"Rock, he's fine. And plus, what's the big deal? It's just an ant. It's not like it's a kitten or something. Come on, let's go. I'd really rather not get caught and if we leave now I think we could still avoid detention."

"Wait, wait. I've almost got him." Rock had unscrewed the lid and picked up the stick that Gunther had been resting on. With a quick shake, he had sent the frozen Gunther to the ground and was now maneuvering the twig so that his ant would crawl up on the end and he could hopefully lift him out. Rock was concentrating hard—he knew they had limited time and he really wanted to have a closer look. "Come here boy. You can do it. Right on the end... I promise I won't hurt you... I just want to have a better look at you, that's all."

Charlie decided to take a chance, after all what did he have to lose? He was already captive in a jar with an indescribably slow caterpillar and a more than slightly anxious worm. He climbed up onto the twig and felt himself instantly being lifted into the air.

"Got cha, boy!" Rock exclaimed and brought the twig closer towards his face. He stopped when the ant was eye level about a foot away from his nose. Jewel squeezed her way onto the stool next to Rock to get a better look as well.

"He looks fine to me," Jewel said. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess so..." Rock was twisting his head this way and that to see if he could see *anything* unusual about this ant but so far... nothing.

Charlie's mind was swimming again, "What to do? What to do?" He was shaking. He felt very unsteady. However, he decided it was now or never and with all the courage he could muster up, he stood up on his back two legs, took a deep breath and squeaked out, "Hi. I'm Charlie the ant."

*(DUH he immediately thought to himself in the silence that followed it. It's good you cleared that one just in case they thought you were a dog.)*

Rock and Jewel stood frozen. Neither of them could take their eyes off the ant standing there in front of them, while Jewel's jaw actually dropped open an inch. Rock was both in shock and relieved. It had been the ant warning him about Hector! He was not going crazy... or was he?

He turned to look at Jewel who turned to look at him as well. "Did you just hear what I heard?" she asked him as their eyes met.

"Y..." Rock started to reply but was suddenly interrupted by the sound of footsteps approaching the science lab door.

Both Rock and Jewel looked towards the door and then at each other, perfectly unclear about what to do. Charlie was frozen as well, not knowing what it all meant.

Rock rushed to put Charlie back in the jar. He was shaking. The jolt of movement sent Charlie over the side of the twig and he found himself clinging desperately to its edge, his hind legs dangling below him. And then, just when he thought he was going to make it back to the comfort of his strange friends, Rock's hand misguided the twig. Instead of getting the end of the twig into the opening at the top of the jar, Rock slammed it right into the side. It was as if Charlie had been clinging to a medieval ramming rod that had just smashed into the castle door. The shock of the hit sent him flying from the twig and he felt himself falling helplessly towards the ground. He landed with a thud.

Rock and Jewel were panicked. Just nanoseconds before they had discovered the first talking ant in the universe and now he had fallen somewhere on the black floor below. Worse yet, they had no time to look for him as someone was coming and they were now just another few more nanoseconds away from being discovered.

"Where is he?! Where is he?!" Jewel yelled in a whisper.

"I don't know, I can't see him anywhere," Rock replied, his eyes scanning the ground around the stepladder for some sign of the ant.

The footsteps were getting closer. Rock and Jewel had no time to lose. They could not spend another moment looking for the ant. Rock quickly threw the twig in the jar (narrowly missing XL in the process), screwed the lid on, half-threw the jar back on the shelf and scrambled down the stepladder with Jewel.

Charlie opened his eyes to see the sole of Rock's sneaker descending on him.

He gasped. For the second time today he was sure he was going to die.

He sucked in a load of air—and the fumes of bleach scrub which were still on the bottom of Charlie's shoe.

His head started to spin. The room started to spin. And it got darker. Just before Rock's shoe fell on top of him, Charlie fainted.

**Discussion Questions:** *Take time to read through all the questions first to find out which ones you feel will be right for you and your family. Not all will be suitable for all families since these questions were made to appeal to many different ages. And, of course, they are simply suggestions. Feel free to ask any questions that come to your mind and don't forget to get CURIOUS about the answers your children give! Ask questions related to their answers if you can.*

1. Rock thought that Hector might have some mental telepathy. What is that? Do you believe in it?
2. Make up a recipe for pumpkin jambalaya surprise. What do you think is in it? What's the "surprise" ingredient?
3. Professor Fahid is described as "disheveled." What do you think that means? Do you know someone you would describe that way? How does it influence your opinion of someone if they are disheveled? In other words, does someone's appearance influence how you feel about them?
4. Have you ever been sent to detention? If so, how come? Can you name a reason why someone might get sent to detention? What do you think the purpose of detention is? Do you feel like detention serves its purpose? What would be an alternative to detention that you think might be better?
5. What type of food do you think "tastes like the bottom of a garbage can?" Do you know someone who likes that food?
6. Have you ever fired a spitball? Been hit by one? Would you find that funny or annoying?
7. What would you think if an ant started talking to you? What would that be like? What would you do? Who would you tell first?
8. Have you ever stepped on an insect or bug in your bare feet? What did that feel like? Do you sometimes step on bugs on purpose with your shoes on? Why? In your opinion, is it okay to do that?