

Charlie the Ant:
The Adventures Begin

written by Chris Parrott

Illustrated by Caitlyn Coneta



Prologue

Charlie's memory of the event was vague, scattered at best. Mostly he remembered the smell: like nasty old sneakers worn by an 400 pound ogre with a bad case of foot fungus. The images he did remember, barely made sense to him, and so when his Uncle Jaxx had sworn him to secrecy, Charlie did not hesitate to agree. He doubted he would ever be able to make sense of everything, let alone explain it to someone else.

The evening had started like any other evening with his Uncle Jaxx. They had snuck out of his hole at dusk. But, in hindsight, Charlie would recall that his Uncle Jaxx was particularly alert that evening and unusually quiet. Most of the time when they'd "escape" from his hole his Uncle would be joking all the way. On this night, however, his Uncle had made an extra effort to be extra silent.

"Where are we going?" Charlie had asked once safely outside his family's hole.

"Shhh..." his Uncle Jaxx had replied winking at him.

Charlie lowered his voice. "Sure, O.K., but where are we going?"

"Somewhere only few ants ever get to go Charlie. You are among the chosen few that have been picked for tonight's events."

Charlie had giggled, thinking his Uncle was teasing with him as usual. “Right. Chosen one. Yep. That’s me. So let’s bring it on,” he had joked.

His Uncle Jaxx nodded back slyly and then looked to the sky. There was no moon out that evening, which as every ant knew, was a night to be wary. Strange things happened when the moon was not out to watch over everyone, to keep an eye on outlaws, ant-eaters and night crawlers. But, he never would have imagined something as strange as what did happen.

After following no particular route for what seemed like hours to Charlie, his Uncle had then guided him through a series of rotted out tree stumps, abandoned ant colonies (always a bit creepy), several water crossings and hidden ground passages that looked as if they had been built hundreds of years ago.

Charlie emerged from the last of these coughing and gagging from the sheer amount of mushroom dust that had covered the walls. He glanced over at his Uncle about to give him the “what was up with that route?” look, when he suddenly noticed the large slug standing not more than an inch away from them. Before Charlie could scream his Uncle Jaxx had covered his mouth and whispered, “OK Charlie. This is it. From now on, you are not to utter a single word. Do you understand? Simply nod if you do.”

Charlie nodded slowly although he never took his eyes off the enormous slug which seemed to be eyeing him with more interest than Charlie liked. Of course, ants are not typically food for slugs, but no ant ever wanted to get run over by one. If the smell didn’t kill you, the slime likely would.

“Not an even a burp, Charlie. It is critical that you remain silent from this point on. I know this seems strange but trust me, this will be the greatest gift that I have ever given you, although I will not be able to explain it all to you until much later. OK?”

Charlie simply nodded. At the time it seemed such an easy promise to make.

His Uncle Jaxx moved closer to the slug and then, horrors, bowed to him. The slug nodded briefly and then slowly moved off to the left (slugs, of course, are not known for their speed), revealing a small opening in the ground.

To Charlie's utter surprise, his Uncle motioned to him to enter the hole.

Charlie, really, would have followed his Uncle Jaxx to the ends of the earth—provided, that is, that the ends of the earth did not involve bathing in slug slime. There had to be at least seventy three different products out on the ant market purporting to rid one of slug smell but as far as Charlie knew not a single one of them actually worked. If he went into that hole, he'd be smelling like a swamp for at least a week.

But his Uncle Jaxx had yet to fail him—and he had promised this would be the greatest gift EVER. That was HUGE. Slime or no slime, Charlie could see no way out—he'd have to go in.

Charlie moved into the hole and before he knew what was happening, he was being hurtled down a tunnel that twisted and turned so many times that Charlie actually momentarily forgot about the slug slime. Instead, he had to concentrate on not losing his dinner.

Suddenly, without any warning, Charlie was spat out of the tunnel and into a nice large puddle of what appeared to be more slug juice. That slug must have been sitting on the hole for days.

Three seconds later, his Uncle Jaxx landed just two millimeters next to him.

Two seconds later Charlie barfed. It was all too much for him.

His Uncle however seemed to not notice Charlie's state of utter distress. He helped Charlie up with a great big grin on his face as if they were not standing knee deep in slug slime and the tuna roll that Charlie had eaten for dinner. Holding his finger to his lips, he motioned for Charlie to follow him.

Charlie begrudgingly stomped his way forward into the dark tunnel. He had no idea what was up ahead but what could be worse than swimming in slug stink?

Although the tunnel was far too dark for Charlie to see anything, his ears did begin to pick up the sound of music. Or, at least, he thought it sounded like music, except it was more like a toddler banging on the top of a metal trash can.

After about five minutes, Charlie could make out a faint light in the opening ahead of them. He was not prepared for the scene he encountered.

Stepping into a large cavern, sitting around a fire were one pair each of grasshoppers, earthworms, beetles, mites, flies, and centipedes. Each pair consisted of an older seemingly "mentor" for this odd event and a younger petrified "candidate," although from what Charlie could gather, he seemed to be the youngest insect present by several years (although he wasn't particularly skilled in guessing the age of flies).

A rather large dung beetle greeted Charlie and his Uncle Jaxx and escorted them silently to a place around the fire. Just as they were being seated a pair of roly-polies rolled onto the scene, nearly flattening the tree mites.

While the dung beetle shuffled off to deal with the roly-polies, Charlie noticed the rather gloomy looking preying-mantis playing what appeared to be the first xylophone ever invented. No wonder it sounded so incredibly awful.

Then another awful smell hit him. It was what Charlie's friend Jessop would have labeled "vim," very vim. Charlie would have thought it was a by-product of the slime suit and dirt he wore, but was slightly more dismayed that it was actually coming from an incense stick.

Between the smell and the music, Charlie began to feel nauseous again. He wanted nothing more than to go home, but instead he waited for what seemed like hours and yet nothing very much happened. The younger tree mite and earthworm each fainted twice, which was sadly a relief to Charlie: at least someone was suffering worse than he was.

Finally, after, well who knows how long, the dung beetle tapped his front legs on the ground and all the elders of the pairs stood up and beckoned for their young ones to do the same. Charlie found that he could barely stand, his legs were so cramped from sitting so long. He also wondered if the slug slime was having a weakening effect on his nervous system as odd tingling sensations were flicking across his body. He had to concentrate to keep from visibly twitching.

Once everybody was standing a giant dung beetle, with a mask carved from a walnut shell, entered the room and held up a miniature acorn chalice for all eyes to see. Whatever brewed inside was sending off a light green haze into the air.

The dung beetle offered it first to the grasshopper, who solemnly gave it to the younger one, who took a whalping gulp and promptly spewed the entire sip (mostly via his nose) all over the floor. The younger grasshopper was left choking and gasping for air while the older grasshopper looked utterly disappointed.

The grand master dung beetle moved onto his next targets.

Apparently, whatever was in the chalice was, frankly, quite disgusting. The earthworm managed to keep his portion down, despite several involuntary contractions of his segmentations. The beetles' and mites' reactions were the same as the grasshopper.

Charlie's turn came next and whether anyone else managed to consume the concoction remains a mystery to him to this day.

The smell alone from the chalice was enough to make him gag. He had serious doubt upon smelling it if he would be able to keep it down. Surely something that foul smelling was not meant to be consumed. Judging from the others' reactions and the smell, one might have to be completely insane to try it.

He peered over the rim of the chalice now in his hands and met the gleaming eyes of his Uncle. His Uncle was so full of sheer happiness that Charlie had but once choice.

He swallowed hard.

It tasted like snake spit (or at least what Charlie imagined snake spit would taste like).

He waited for the gag reflex to come, but to his immense and total surprise it never happened. In fact, the liquid felt slightly soothing on his throat. If anything, he had the urge to giggle from the tickling sensation in the back of his larynx.

Charlie glanced up at his Uncle and the grand master dung beetle. His Uncle Jaxx broke out into a giant ear to ear grin while, for the first time that night, the dung beetle nodded his head in apparent approval.

The sight of the dung beetle making his way towards the fly was the last clear memory Charlie had. Suddenly everything went very blurry and he had the overwhelming need to sit down before he face

planted into the dirt. The tickling sensation in his throat had now turned into more of a fire ant dance on his vocal cords, his ears were throbbing and the left side of his brain felt like it was being jabbed with a needle. Never had he felt so miserable in all of his life.

The rest of the night remains a mystery to Charlie. He has no idea how he got out of the cave, (he has a vague recollection of being pulled by a spider, but given the likelihood of getting so close to a spider and surviving, Charlie is certain he dreamt the scenario) nor how he re-entered his bedroom..

Somehow, his Uncle must have given him a shower or bath because he was clean, even if he felt he had been run over by a garbage truck. Charlie groaned as he rolled out of bed to get ready for school. If *that* was his Uncle's idea of the greatest gift, Charlie was certain he'd be in hiding for his birthday and on Mars for Christmas.

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. Charlie remembered the smell of this event: *like nasty old sneakers worn by an 400 pound ogre with a bad case of foot fungus.* What smells do you hate? Do certain smells remind you of certain memories? Describe some of them.
2. Charlie's Uncle Jaxx is always up for fun and adventure. Who is like that in your life? If you can't think of someone, just name the last person that made you laugh or that made you try something you might not have done.
3. Charlie's Uncle Jaxx swore him to secrecy. Should you always keep a secret? When might you break a promise to keep a secret?
4. A slug was sitting on the entrance leading to the ceremony. What do slugs naturally eat? Why are they slimy? If you don't know, find out!
5. Charlie vomits after sliding down the entrance tunnel. Have you ever gotten sick like that? Was it from a food, an illness or motion (like riding in a car or a carnival ride)? Was it super gross?
6. In the ceremony are grasshoppers, earthworms, beetles, mites, flies, centipedes, roly-polies and a preying mantis. Do you know what all of them look like? (Google pictures if you don't!) Which is your favorite? Which gives you the creeps? How many other insects can you name?
7. Charlie describes the smell from the incense stick as "vim, very vim." What do you think the word vim means? How might you use it?
8. Most of the insects spit out the contents of the chalice. Have you ever tasted something that was so awful you had to spit it out? What was it?
9. Charlie sometimes thinks he dreamt the whole thing. Have you ever had a dream you weren't sure happened in real life or not? Have you ever had a dream where you knew you were dreaming in the dream? Did you dream last night? Do you remember what your dream was? Explain it (or at least try, dreams can be bizarre!).
10. Charlie's Uncle Jaxx said this experience would be the "greatest gift." What do you think it might be? Can you name a gift that you were given that was particularly awesome (because, let's face it, most gifts are awesome)?