



Chapter 11: Break-outs and break-throughs

Rock's mom bent over and gave Rock a kiss on the forehead, "Goodnight sweetie."

"Goodnight mom," Rock faked a yawn. "See you in the morning."

Mrs. Turner smiled, walked out and closed the door behind her. Rock listened to her footsteps go down the stairs and then heard the T.V turn on. With the noise of the television now asking the noises he might make, he jumped out of bed, threw an extra pillow and his basketball under the covers to look like him and then placed his teddy bear next to his basketball head.

He was about to get Charlie from his matchbox bed on the nightstand when he noticed his pajamas. He'd forgotten all about his pajamas. He couldn't possibly go looking for ghosts in his stars and planets space superhero jammies, let alone have Jewel see him in them. He didn't want to open drawers, that would make too much noise, so he raced over to his hamper and pulled out his clothes from the day. He put them up to his nose and inhaled. "Fine," he thought to himself and made the quick change.

He went over to the nightstand and put his finger out for Charlie, "Ready buddy?" he whispered.

"Sure, let's go!" Charlie replied trying to sound enthusiastic.

With Charlie on his shoulder, Rock headed towards the window that had been left open. He picked up his flashlight and waited for Jewel's signal. Five long minutes passed before two fast lights flashed from Jewel's window. Rock glanced quickly at Jewel's living room window, saw the shadow of her parents sitting by the T.V. and so flashed back two lights for Jewel, giving her the go-ahead to break-out.

She dropped a rope down the side of her house and used a combination of the gutter, an air vent, a shutter and finally the branches of a tree to make her way to the ground. She then disappeared around back and slowly re-appeared wheeling her bicycle towards Rock's house.

Jewel crossed the street and then waited by the side of Rock's house. She went to the downstairs back window to check on Rock's parents and then signaled for him to go ahead and come down. "Hold on Charlie," he said and then put his legs out over the ledge of his window. His feet felt for the lattice work on the side of his house, which marked the beginning of the wisteria trellis that ran out to the side of the house.

As his foot hit the lattice work, it set one of the rivets flying and the lattice work crackled under his weight. Rock froze. He looked quickly at Jewel who looked in the window only to see Rock's parents frozen, their heads slightly bent towards the direction of the noise. But Rock was slipping so he tried to adjust his weight. It only made things worse. Right then, the lattice moved and Rock found himself clinging to the window ledge to keep from falling. Mrs. Turner got up.

"Oh my gosh! She's up! I think she's coming up!" Jewel yelled in a whisper.

And then it got worse.

Mr. Turner got up too and by his hand gestures Jewel could tell that he was going to come check outside.

"Oh Jitherburrs!" (Jewel's new favorite way of cursing while not cursing was to use Ms. Jitherburrs name.) "Your dad's coming out and your mom's headed for the stairs!"

Rock, who was struggling just to keep hanging onto the window ledge and not falling fifteen feet, started to try to climb back into his window. "Go to the front Jules and hide!" His feet slipped repetitively on the siding of his house but he was able to move up just by using the strength in his arms. He pulled his body up into the window and then managed to roll softly in on the other side.

Once in, Rock ran to his bed, threw the basketball and pillow on the ground, and jumped under the covers sneakers and all. The basketball was still rolling when his mom opened the door. Luckily, the bed blocked the basketball from her view.

"Rock?" she whispered.

"What mom?" Rock said in his best half asleep voice. He slightly turned in her direction, but not fully – he didn't want the covers to shift and expose his clothes.

"Did you hear something honey? Or were you out of bed?"

“No mom,” he (fake) yawned and rolled back over as if he was really snuggling in for a sleep.

“O.K.,” Mrs. Turner hesitated. She looked at the open window. “Then do you mind if I just shut the window?”

“Mooomm,” Rock groaned. “I always sleep with the window open. I’m fine.” And then, just because he knew she would let him keep the window open if he said it, he added dreamily, “I love the stars.”

Mrs. Turner smiled. “O.K. Sleep tight. I love you.”

“Love you too, mom.”

Rock heard the door shut behind him. He sighed a huge sigh of relief. “Boy, that was close,” he whispered to Charlie.

Charlie was now quite dazed from the recent sequence of events—between the near fall, the roll in through the window and the sheets rubbing up against him in bed, he had had enough of an adventure and he hadn’t even left the house.

“Maybe we’re not meant to look for ghosts today,” Charlie whispered back.

“Nah, if we weren’t meant to look we’d have been caught.” Rock waited several minutes and then tiptoed back over to the window to look for Jewel. No sign of her. He flashed two quick spots of light from his flashlight onto the ground. He waited. After ten of the longest seconds Rock could remember, the hedge of the front of the house moved and out came Jewel with a host of leaves stuck in her hair. She flashed two lights back up to Rock.

Rock surveyed the latticework. It was too unstable now to put his feet on. He’d have to jump onto the trellis directly and just hope that it would support him and that he’d be able to balance himself. He swung his legs through the window again.

“Uh, Rock?” Charlie didn’t want a repeat ride like the one he just had. “Uh, perhaps I should find my own way down?”

But it was too late. Rock made the jump to the trellis right as Charlie made his suggestion. The trellis

jiggled from the jump and Rock had to move his arms in little circles to maintain his balance. After a few moments, however, Rock managed to steady himself and then made his way down the trellis post, jumping the last five feet to the ground.

Jewel and Rock snuck around to the back to retrieve Rock's bike. Then the three of them set off. The moment they started pedaling, Charlie forgot all about his ghost worries and the rocky start. His Uncle Jaxx had been right—bike riding was awesome.

Rock turned to Jewel, "What happened to you? Did my dad come out?"

"Yeah I heard him opening the back doors, so I hid in the bushes out front. I think he was just following your mom's orders though because he didn't stay long—he just had a quick look. It's so weird—your dad is like this mega rock-star and you'd think he'd be super paranoid about people on his property. But instead it's *my* mom who's the freak about security." Jewel complained.

"Yeah, but your mom sees what could happen everyday. Plus, don't forget, no one around here really knows who my dad is."

"Some people must know. I mean I really can't figure out how all the Sage Lupin fans in this world haven't tracked your house down. How does your dad prevent that?"

"Don't know," Rock suddenly realized that it was a bit strange. They hardly ever turned on the alarm in their house, as far as he knew, and they didn't have any big six foot seven body guards around either. Not even one five foot five body guard. How did his dad do it? He couldn't think about it right now though. He had too many other things on his mind. "Did you bring any castor oil?"

"Nope. I looked all over our house but, I mean really, who has castor oil in their houses anymore? Did you?"

"I didn't even look. I didn't want my mom to get suspicious but come to think of it, I can't imagine why we'd have it. My parents like to talk to ghosts, they don't seem to want to ward them off."

"What do you mean?"

"At dinner tonight, both my mom and dad told me they have talked with ghosts."

Jewel stared at Rock in disbelief. “So the Indus rumors are true? Do they really ask the spirits about the release of their albums?”

“I don’t know actually. I didn’t have a chance to get the details. My mom says Neptune is in my house and that means she thinks I’m up to no good today. I didn’t want to seem too focused on ghosts or she’d know something was up.”

Charlie interrupted them. “Hey guys, did I hear correctly though that we have no castor oil or caterpillar cocoons with us?”

“Yep. Nada on both accounts.”

“Are you guys still absolutely sure you want to go looking for ghosts then?” Charlie asked.

Jewel was quiet a moment and then said, “I’m not sure we really are looking for a ghost. I mean I know the castor oil was missing and strange stuff is showing up on Professor Fahid’s blackboards but what about Sloppy Joe smelling like pickles and the mysterious person who stole Taloula’s ladybug? Why would a ghost want a ladybug and why would a ghost need to wear a hood? Why not just get it at night when no one’s around?”

These were all good questions and they made everyone think for a moment. Rock spoke up first, “Maybe they’re not all related. I have a pretty strong feeling that there is a ghost. Maybe the hooded person knows about the ghost and is trying to hide from it or something.”

“A hood wouldn’t keep a ghost from seeing someone though. It just doesn’t all make sense to me.” Jewel reasoned.

“Well, that’s why we’re going where we’re going—to see if we can make some sense out of it. Where do you think we should try to get in?” The two of them were approaching the school parking lot and Rock began to realize that they needed a plan of action.

“We definitely should hide our bikes around back. I think we should try the gym door and then just any door that faces out back, or at least not too close to the front. Maybe a window might be open. We should check the science room and the social sciences room and the art room—those are most likely to be aired out during the day,” Jewel thought out loud as they went along.

Between these thoughts and her questions about the ghost, Rock remembered how smart Jewel was. In fact, he had a feeling she might be the smartest person in their class, although nobody would ever have guessed. Public perception would have been that Earnest Wheetlebaum was the front-runner in smarts. He carried seventeen writing instruments in his pocket, chatted about subatomic particles in the hallway and wrote an article about the possibilities of cyberspace athletics in the school paper last year.

Rock would sometimes hear Jewel explaining Earnest Wheetlebaum's ramblings to other people when they accused him of being "nuts." She was known to write computer programs in her spare time, and he also knew that she was the anonymous writer who had written a rebuttal to Earnest's article which explained on a molecular level why cyberspace athletics was not a viable option any time in the near future. Rock also knew that Jewel's father was *the* leading rocket scientist in the country. A real bona fide rocket scientist. He had single handedly pioneered the first astrophotographical trip to Neptune.

They turned the corner into the school parking lot and hurried to the back of the school where they hid their bicycles and snuck around back to the gymnasium door. It was locked as were the several other exit doors to the classrooms. Rock and Jewel checked all the windows, but no luck. Every thing had been shut up tight.

"This is so beat," Rock said. "We've got to figure out a way to get in."

"It would have been so much easier if they had keypad entry into the school. I could've hacked our way in for sure." Jewel said.

"I could get in," Charlie piped up. "I could crawl into one of the ventilation shafts of the science room and, I don't know, maybe Hector might know how to get in, or where the janitor keeps his keys."

Rock and Jewel felt hopeful again—they hadn't thought about Charlie being able to help them. "That's true, you definitely could crawl through the ventilation shaft but... once you're in, I don't know what good that will do us. Keys will be too heavy to carry..." Jewel paused to try to formulate a plan.

A vision of himself dressed in a red cape and a dark blue eye mask as he used his "Super-sleuth" strength to throw open a window for Rock and Jewel flashed through Charlie's mind. "One of us in is better than none at all and at the very least I can check on my friends and see if they've seen anything. I can also run what Spencer said by Hector, you know, see if he's seen any ghosts at night." Charlie was now filled with the desire to try out his Super-Sleuth image—his vision had ended in Jewel kissing him for saving the day.

“Alright, we’ve come this far so we might as well…” Jewel gave in.

“Plus, while you wait for Charlie, I’ll go over to the gym door and see if I can pick the lock with my knife. I know we tried before, but there’s no harm in trying again.” Rock offered.

“Okay. Charlie, you go in and see what you can do, check on your friends, and talk to Hector. I’ll stay and watch while Rock tries the gym door again. If anything goes wrong, and we can’t get back together, we’ll come get you first thing in the morning. Hang out behind Rock’s jar with your friends. Worst-worst case scenario, we’d get you during science class at 11.”

“Got it. Hopefully, I’ll see you in about twenty minutes though.” Charlie crawled off Rock’s finger onto the ventilation shaft covering and waved goodbye to his friends. He then made his way into the dark corridor of the shaft. And it was very dark. And very dirty. Charlie didn’t like it one bit. It was creepier than he had expected.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he could see the opening at the other end leading into the science room. It was only about a foot and a half away but the route there was paved with a good quarter inch of dust, which for an ant is like a walking through waist-deep snow.

He started to make his way across the shaft when suddenly his ant senses went on high alert. He wasn’t quite sure why, but it was like he just *felt* something was wrong. He looked around him very carefully. He couldn’t see anything but still he felt odd. He inched his way along. He was about half way though the shaft and could see the vague shapes of the science lab coming into view. He started to feel more at ease. He moved a little faster. And that’s precisely when he hit it.

In a quick instant, Charlie knew exactly what had happened. Unfortunately, he didn’t know exactly what to do. He only remembered that he wasn’t supposed to move. That he had to keep as still as possible because of the slim chance he had not woken her yet. He scanned above and to the sides rapidly without moving his head. Nothing, only the vague shapes of those who had been here before him. He kept still as he racked his brain, “Now what did Jessop tell me about getting caught in a spider’s web?”

He closed his eyes. His head was spinning with fear. He knew that whatever he was supposed to do, he had to think of it fast because once the spider found out he was here, he’d have little chance of getting away.

“Think Charlie, think,” Charlie squeezed his eyes shut tight. “Don’t move and... what? What! What was it that Jessop had told him army ants were trained to do?”

He was panicked. Even if the spider was out for the evening, his friends would never find him in here. It was too dark for them to see in and they’d never be able to rescue him through the small holes in the shaft cover. He needed to get out on his own.

But this thought triggered something in Charlie, “Friends... friends... why am I thinking about... oh my gosh that’s it! Friends! Jessop had told me that ants in the army stayed motionless when caught in a web and *waited for their friends* to help get them out by using twigs to break down the surrounding web! Oh chili peppers! I’m doomed!”

Charlie’s heart began to race. And then he felt it: the vibration. It came from his left. He looked up to see eight ghastly eyes glaring at him. She was there, less than a foot away.

She inhaled deeply. Charlie could hear it. “My you smell deeelicious!” she gloated and took one step closer to Charlie. Charlie could see her huge fangs dripping with venom. They looked particularly large against her frail body. She obviously had not eaten in a while. There would be no talking this spider out of an ant meal.

The spider moved another leg towards him. “Welcome to my home!” she purred. “I’m Elektra and I’ll be so happy to have you for dinner tonight!”

If ants could sweat, Charlie would have been in a full-blown downpour. He looked around him as much as he could but unfortunately most of his body was stuck to the web. He didn’t see anything or anyone that might help him out of this mess.

She was slowly and deliberately making her way towards him. His left arm was stretched out to the side and he struggled to get it loose but he couldn’t, no matter how hard he tried. Frustrated, he noticed the time on his Chronopaw watch—9:19 p.m.—that would be his official time of death that would never be reported in the *Antrophony Times*.

“My watch!” Charlie suddenly remembered. “It wasn’t just Jessop who told me how to escape spider webs. It was my Uncle Jaxx when he gave me this watch! ‘Charlie, I got you the deluxe model which automatically keeps track of the day, year and harvest cycles. Plus, most ants don’t know this but the dial here on the side doubles as a web cutter. If you ever get caught in a web, maneuver the watch so that a

piece of the web runs down between the dial and the watch and then just pull your arm down—it will slice through the web like butter.”

Charlie had almost completely forgotten. He looked at his watch again and tried to wiggle his arm closer to one of the web strings. It was his only chance.

Elektra giggled as she saw him struggle, “You all try to escape but really, darling, it is of no use. Save your energy. You are mine, my darling, all deliciously mine.”

Luckily for Charlie, her approach was slow as if she was savoring the experience. He needed time. If he could just move his arm a hair more... there! He felt the web string fall into place under his watch between the face and the dial. He held his breath, *Here goes nothing!* he thought and pulled his arm down as hard as he could.

And what do you know... it *did* slice like a warm knife through butter! Before Charlie even knew what had happened, he had sliced a line down the web to his back feet. The weight of his body caused the web to break through to the other side—it was like Charlie was riding a door that suddenly opened. It was great except that his body was still stuck to the web. His one arm had mobility and he flailed it about him trying to strike wherever he could with the dial edge. It sliced through a couple of random web lines which, given his body weight, caused the web piece to which he was stuck to start to tear apart from the rest of the web. Instinctively, he started to scream as he sliced away.

Before he could even blink an eye, Charlie felt himself falling to the ground which sent a cloud of dust up around him that filled his lungs. Coughing, he rolled over onto all six legs. The web was still stuck to his right side legs and he tried to free himself from it by shaking and pulling at it. But it was sticky and knotted and it began to stick to his free legs, tangling him up once again.

He looked up and saw Elektra running down to the opening in her web. She had screamed “Nooooo!” when Charlie had initially broken through and now she was ranting about her home and her dinner and how she was going to make him pay.

Charlie forgot about the web still attached to him and turned his attention towards the vent opening. He was going to have to make a four-legged run for it (the web still stuck to his back right two legs). He hefted himself up and started to propel himself through the dust. He had a feeling that if he could make it out of the vent that she wouldn't follow him.

Elektra had just reached the opening in her web where Charlie had fallen through. She held her front legs up to her head and cried, “My web! My web! Oh just look at my web!”

She looked out at Charlie who was now about half way to the opening. The web dragging behind him was cluttered with dust and slowed him down considerably but he knew that he didn’t have time to stop. He limped his way forward.

“You!” Charlie heard Elektra shout. “You... will... pay for this!” She then shifted her weight and with a mighty scream she jumped from her web into the dust.

Elektra had eight legs. Charlie only had six and two of them were stuck to the web.

Charlie basically had a web parachute dragging behind him. Elektra had nothing weighing her down.

It was an unfair race from the start.

Charlie could see that the spider had covered half his distance in her initial jump. He knew he was in trouble, BIG trouble. With all eight of her legs moving freely, she’d be on him in no time.

Charlie was so close to the opening now – merely inches away. If only he had another ten seconds. But time was not on his side. In fact, it had run out. With a great burst of energy, Elektra sprung herself at Charlie and knocked him flat to the ground. Quickly Charlie rolled over to try to shield himself with his front legs. He found himself right beneath her dripping fangs with each of her front legs on either side of his head: her face only an inch away from his.

“Ha! You! You! You are mine, darling,” she purred again at him. “I told you there is no escaping it.”

She bent her head down towards Charlie, opening her mouth wide. Instinctively, Charlie brought all of his legs up to protect himself. With great luck, the web still attached to his back legs flipped up towards his face and protected him from her attack. For a few seconds they were a tangled mess rolling on the dusty floor.

But spiders make webs and the web only stopped Elektra briefly before she managed to get a grip on the knotted web blocking her from her meal. She grabbed it with her two front legs and tossed it to the side. It came off of Charlie’s legs like it had never been stuck there at all.

Elektra grabbed Charlie's front two legs with hers and pinned him to the ground. "That's enough! I'm tired of you. It's time for you to be mine!"

Charlie screamed, "Nooooo!" as Elektra's fangs moved closer towards his head. He was no match for her strength, he could not move at all. He knew that his life was nearing its end. To him, the vent started to get darker. So dark that he thought he might be blacking out. Her fangs were just about to graze his neck when Elektra seemed to pause for one second to look up.

And then, with a great whoosh! She was gone.

Charlie shook his head. It was still dark in the vent. But Elektra was most certainly gone. She had just simply vanished. He sat up and looked from side to side, trying to make out what had happened.

He turned his head towards the vent opening. He squinted to get a better look and a big smile spread across his face.

"Hector!"

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 wears stars and planets space superhero jammies. What about you? What are your favorite sleeping clothes? Do you sleep with a stuffed animal? If so, what kind and what is its name?
2. What is castor oil? For what is it actually used? Do you have it in your home?
3. Do you know the names of all the planets in our solar system? Neptune is mentioned a couple of times in the story. Where is Neptune in relation to the Earth and to the Sun?
4. Jewel thinks of a lot of good questions when she starts thinking about the ghost. She doesn't want to jump to conclusions. Have you ever jumped to a conclusion that wasn't right? If so, what happened? Have your parents or friends ever jumped to a conclusion that wasn't right about you? How did that feel?
5. Rock's classmate, Earnst Wheetlebaum, wrote an article on cyberspace athletics. What do you think athletics in cyberspace might be like? How would it work? What would be the challenges?
6. Have you ever run into a spider's web? What did it feel like? Did you know a spider web silk is five times stronger than steel? How can that be? If we could spin webs, for what might we use them?
7. Uncle Jaxx said that the Chronopaw watch would "slice through the web like butter." Is butter always easy to slice?
8. Some people are afraid of spiders. Are you? What would you do if one was crawling up your leg right now?