



Chapter 3: The Outerling

Charlie stood frozen solid, gazing out across the classroom, his mouth open in disbelief.

XL took one look at him and cried, "Jimminy crickets, Charlie. If you are goin' to faint every time that pasti-boy blinks, we are never goin' to git out o' here."

Charlie didn't know what to say. His head was still reeling. It wasn't that he was going to faint from fear. Instead his head was spinning because *he had understood everything that boy Rockville had just said to them*. A million questions were racing through his mind: "How could that be? How could an ant understand a provider? Should he believe what the boy had said? Did he hear him right? When was he going to be back? Did XL and Gunther understand the boy? Should he tell XL and Gunther? Charlie had never heard of anyone being able to understand providers.

"Hey Charlie... Charlie... hey, buddy snap out of it. Don't you be pullin' no Gunther on me," XL stood looking nervously at Charlie.

"Heyyyy, thaaat's nooot faiiir," Gunther droned. But before he could protest any more, Charlie spoke.

"Guys, did you... did you just hear what I heard?"

"What all dat mumbo jumbo comin' from dat kid and da bells ringin' and doors slammin'?" XL asked.

"Yeah, that," Charlie said, "What exactly did that mumbo-jumbo sound like to you?"

"Sounded like he was goin' eat you first," joked XL. "Mmm, mmm, smackin' his lips, he was."

Charlie stood silently a little longer. XL started to look at him a little cockeyed; he had expected Charlie to respond to his joke, perhaps say something like, "Nah, he wanted to pickle your non-existent brain first." Instead, Charlie just remained silent, still staring dazed and confused out over the empty classroom.

“Hey Charlie,” XL prodded, trying to get his new friend to speak. “Wha’ sup? Wha’ did it sound like to you?”

Charlie turned and looked at his friends. “It sounded like words. That boy, his name is ‘Rockville’ and he just told us that he was going to be back in a little while to check on us.”

XL and Gunther gasped and looked at Charlie with utter shock on their faces.

“Youuu understoooood himmmm?!!!” cried Gunther.

“Oh my mucus!” shrieked XL “You’re an Outerling?”

“An Outerling??? What the heck is that?” shrieked Charlie.

“Crickets, I can’t believe it. I’ve never met a real Outerling. You smokin’ ‘sect! You hotboy! That’s unreal! Did yo reallah understand wha’ he said?” exclaimed XL.

“What the heck is an Outerling??!” Charlie repeated.

“Ohhh, it’s quite rarrre,” began Gunther. “I’ve nevvvver met anyonnnne whooo was an Outerling eitherrr.”

“What is an Outerling?!” shouted Charlie who was reaching the end of his nerves, wondering if being an Outerling meant he had some rare kind of disease that was eventually going to kill him by a fate worse than being in the jar.

“Whoa, calm down my rarified ‘sect, be cool,” coached XL. “It’s juicce. I’ve had tons of worm friends pretend that they were one just so that they could meet a few inchez [worm slang for an attractive worm]. It worked really well too...”

Charlie interrupted him. “I don’t want to pick up inchez XL! I just want to know what an ‘Outerling’ is and if I can be cured.”

“Cured? Cured, Charlie? Haven’t yo been listenin’ to a word I said? Yo don’t want to cure it! It’s a gift! Daggit Charlie! You were there! If you be an Outerling, it mean you done when’ thro dah ceremony. You

got tah know –it means you can understand providahs and, theoretically at least, they can understand you, ‘sect.”

A strange sense of understanding started to dawn on Charlie, like he was about to put the pieces of a huge puzzle together. But he was too disorientated to pay too much attention to it. “What do you mean, ‘theoretically at least’?” asked Charlie.

“Well, so I’ve heard. As I be sayin’, I’ve never known anyone who was a real-deal, genuine Outerling. I’ve only heard stories ‘bout dem, dem being outlawed an’ all, an o’ course killed on capture.”

“Oh,” said Charlie. He was still in a state of shock to really take in the importance of what XL had just said. Instead, he was now trying to recall if he had understood anything else the Providers had said since he’d been captured.

Gunther and XL were wondering the same thing. “Did yo jus’ understand that jar boy an’ every body else?” asked XL.

“I can’t remember,” said Charlie. But just then, as if on cue, a new stream of boys and girls started to enter the classroom, chatting away while they took their seats... and Charlie could understand them all. He could understand absolutely everything every one in the classroom was saying whenever he focused his attention on them.

Charlie didn’t move from his spot. It was all too fascinating. Everything. He could understand *everything*.

“Sooooo?” Gunther finally broke the silence, now slightly more interested in his jar mate.

“Everyone. I can understand everyone,” Charlie said softly.

“Yahooo!,” shouted XL. “Dat be our ticket! We’re saved! We’re saved!”

“What do you mean ‘we’re saved’?” asked Charlie.

“We’re saved! All you have to do is speak to, wha’ did you say his name was? Rockville? All yo have tah do is speak to Rockville-boy, tell him dat we understand ‘im and den he’ll set us free!” cried XL.

“Or smash us. How do you know he’ll set us free? If I talk to him –and that’s assuming I can talk to him

—there’s no real reason for us to believe that he’s going to save us just because he can understand me. I mean, he might freak out—think he’s going crazy and squash us out of fear,” Charlie said.

“But... but,” stumbled XL. “It’s a gift, an honor. It’s got to be able to help us somehow.” And with that, XL slumped down on the ground looking like the most pathetic worm Charlie or Gunther had ever seen.

“Look, I’m not saying that we can’t or that I won’t try. But I think we’re really going to have to think about exactly what it is we want to say and when and even *how* for that matter. Do either of you even know *how* I am supposed to be able to speak to the boy?”

“Uh, no,” moped XL. “In all dah legends I’ve heard, it’s just like yo speak and dey get it. Just like dat boy spoke and yo got it. But, I really can’t be sure. I thought it be all pretty much a myth—you know, like Robin Hood or Bigfoot, altho’ I di think I done saw dat Bigfoot once.”

In the distance, a bell rang again and the children seemed to quiet down a bit. Then the man at the front of the classroom started to speak. Charlie raised his hand signaling the others to stop talking while he listened in for awhile.

“Good morning everyone,” Professor Pethers began. “Let me remind you that today we will be heading outside to the field to find insects. You will be collecting them in glass jars, which can be found on the side table and if you find anything you don’t know the name of just come see me when we get back into class. Now, I want everybody to go ahead and get their supplies and then line up at the door so we can get going.”

The room burst again with activity and Gunther and XL could not maintain their silence any longer.

“Wha’ did he say?”

“Whaaaaat’s going onnnnn?”

“Everyone is going out to collect more of us using glass jars,” Charlie said turning to face them.

“When will they be back?” asked XL.

“Uh, I’m not quite sure,” Charlie sighed.

“Well, it doesn’t matter – you can understand dem hot pants! That’s ‘mazin’ ‘sect!”

The whole of the classroom emptied out and the three of them were left alone to ponder their course of action. Charlie’s being an Outerling seemed to be a useful gift – they just were not quite sure how it was going to save them yet.

XL was sure it was the key. He kept throwing out hair-brained ideas like having Charlie sing and dance the Macarena as soon as Rockville approached the jar and then telling the boy that he had to let them go because they were going to miss performing at Mrs. Mudville’s birthday party for her 273 ant-fants who were all turning 2 months today. Or that Charlie could pretend that he was the “ant of doom” and that if Rockville didn’t do exactly what he said, Rock would meet a very untimely demise. This would be accompanied, of course, by XL and Gunther walking around erect on their tails as if they had been turned into zombies by Charlie.

Gunther wasn’t much more of a help. He added very little to the conversation and when he did, XL usually ended up interrupting him because it took Gunther so long to actually say anything.

The problem was, Charlie too had yet to come up with a solid idea on how to get out with or without using his newly found talent. The truth was, although he could certainly hear the providers, he was still very uncertain of his ability to communicate with them.

The class returned with their jars and Charlie, XL and Gunther watched as the students ran around grabbing more dirt and water according to the instructions of Professor Pethers. Another bell rang and the classroom cleared out once again, leaving behind only Professor Pethers with a stack of papers in his hands.

Professor Pethers put the papers down on his desk and looked up at the line of jars sitting on the back shelf. Charlie, Gunther and XL all froze from fear – which was rather silly as having already been captured, it was not like they were going to escape being seen by being still. Apparently interested in what he saw, Professor Pethers flicked some sunflower seeds into his mouth (he was always eating them and had a steady supply in his top left hand desk drawer during the spring; in the fall it was pumpkin seeds) and headed to the back of the room to inspect the jars.

“He’s coming this way! He’s coming this way!” shouted XL in a panic.

“I can see that,” said Charlie, after all they were all looking out of the same jar.

“Okay, Okay,” XL went on. “Nobody panic. Just look natural and don’t do anything to draw attention to us.”

Charlie and Gunther simultaneously stared at XL in disbelief that he was actually telling them not to panic.

Professor Pethers was now only a few feet away peering into various jars. Occasionally Charlie could hear him mumble things under his breath like “My, my aren’t you lovely” or “Very nice, very nice indeed” which made Charlie slightly worried that the man was sizing them up for his dinner or another display box.

The three of them watched as Professor Pethers got nearer and nearer. Three jars away, two jars away, one jar...

Suddenly Charlie, Gunther and XL found themselves face to face with Professor Pethers and, strangely enough, all three of them felt oddly reassured by his stare. His blue eyes twinkling and the slight smile on his face made them all feel, well, rather *at ease*. Charlie tilted his head to the side in wonder.

Right then Professor Pethers spoke, “There’s something I like about you little fella. Glad you’re in Mr. Turner’s jar – good choice my friends.” He winked and then shifted his attention to the next jars.

Charlie’s mouth fell open once again. He was gobsmacked. *Did that man just speak to him? Did he know that Charlie could understand him? The man certainly had seemed like he knew Charlie could understand. Why else would he have spoken like that? Why else would he have winked?*

Gunther and XL noticed the shock on Charlie’s face, “What did he say? What did he say?” they asked, fearing the worst.

“He said we are in a good jar,” Charlie said.

“Whaaaat do youuuuu mean, ‘a goooood jar’?” Gunther droned.

“He said he was glad we were in ‘Mr. Turner’s’ jar – that must be Rockville – said it was a good ‘choice’,” Charlie informed them.

“As if we done had a choice! But at least he didn’t say he was lookin’ forward to dippin’ us in mud and den hangin’ us out for the birds. I actually sort of liked dat man,” XL confessed.

“Yeah. Me too,” replied Charlie and with that all three of them fell into silence.

The time passed slowly and for at least an hour nothing at all happened in the room. Gunther and XL started to doze off. But Charlie didn’t want to sleep—not just yet.

As the other two dozed, he sat thinking to himself about his new found talent and wondered what it really meant and why he, of all ants, had it. Then that dawning sense of understanding hit him like a ton of bricks. What had XL said about being an Outerling? That he’d been at the ceremony? That it was a gift?

Charlie bolted upright. Of course, the ceremony! With Uncle Jaxx! With all the secrecy and the slug slime and that terrible vim smell. His Uncle had made him an Outerling! “This will be the greatest gift that I have ever given you.” Charlie was both excited and petrified. His uncle had told him never to tell anyone—and now these two strangers knew that he was one. XL himself had said that Outerling’s were outlawed—killed upon discovery. Just what had his uncle done to him? And yet, Charlie did have the sneaky suspicion that his uncle had been right—that being an Outerling could be the greatest gift he ever received. Although, he was just not yet sure how.

He went over scenarios in his mind. *Hello Rockville. I’m Charlie the Ant. Very nice to meet you. No. No. You’re not going out of your mind. No. No. I am not an alien sent from outer space.* He then imagined the headlines in Provider’s papers “Boy Admitted to Psychiatric Ward: Believes He Can Talk to Ants.” A footnote of the article would read: “The alleged talking ant was squashed in the chaos trying to calm the deranged boy.” The *Antrophony Times* might include a blurb on the tenth page like: “Providers reported this week that a young boy claimed to speak with an ant. The ant in question was immediately executed and his identity remains unknown”.

Charlie yawned, it was all just too much and he was getting tired. He yawned, stretched all his legs and rolled over to shut his eyes. But just before he dozed off, he saw a very strange thing.

The door of the science room opened and a hooded head peered into the room. Charlie could not see the face but the hooded figure stepped quietly into the room and shut the door behind him (her?) very softly.

At first Charlie, didn’t think this was strange at all. How did he know what providers wore or how they

behaved in this place? What the dark-clothed provider did next caught Charlie's attention.

On tiptoe, the figure made its way to the back of the room and started to look at the various jars on his shelf. After searching for a few seconds the hooded figure reached out and pulled one down. Charlie squinted to see which jar was being lifted. The hands on the jar blocked most of his view but Charlie was able to make out a bright red bug perched on the twig inside—Taloula's ladybug. Very quickly, the provider placed the jar on the inside of his coat and then disappeared out the door.

"That was strange," thought Charlie. He rolled the scene over in his head again to try and make sense of it but he was definitely getting too tired. It hurt his brain too much to think about it. So, he shut his eyes, took a few deep breaths, and drifted off into a deep and much needed sleep.

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. Being an Outerling is an unusual talent. Do you have an unusual talent? What is it? Name three talents that you have.
2. XL uses the word "juicee" to talk about Charlie being an Outerling. What do you think the word "juicee" means? How would you use it?
3. XL says that being an Outerling is an honor. What is an honor? Have you ever been honored? Has someone in your family been honored? Who do you honor? How can you honor someone special to you?
4. Have you ever danced the Macarena? If not, dance it now. If so, dance it now.
5. Sunflower seeds are one of Professor Pethers' favorite snacks. What is your favorite snack? Is it healthy? If not, what is a healthy snack you like?
6. What does it mean to panic? What does a person look like and behave like when they are panicking? Have you ever panicked about something? Tell the story.
7. Gunther talks really slowly and XL uses different words and phrases than Charlie. That can make it hard to understand them. Have you ever spoken with someone who had an accent that made it hard to understand them? What did that feel like? What did you do to help the situation?
8. Professor Pethers said being in Rockville's jar was a good "choice." But it wasn't a choice was it? Name something that you chose to do today. Name something that happened to you (that you didn't chose) today. What things in your day were your choice versus what could you not control?
9. Charlie was worried Rock might think Charlie was an alien from outer space if he started speaking to Rock. Do you believe in aliens? What would you say to an alien if you met one? What three questions would you like to ask an alien?
10. What do you think the dark-clothed provider was doing? Why do you think the hooded person took the jar with the ladybug? Come up with a story about what was happening.