



Chapter 4: Hector havoc

The three of them snoozed for quite some time, occasionally being roused by a bell or the clatter of kids rushing in, about and out of the room. When any of them were up at the same time they would banter about possible ways to escape the jar, but so far they still weren't having any jar-shattering brainstorm in that department.

As the day passed, Charlie discovered that his two new roommates were both likable fellas. XL was just about the same age as Charlie and was keen on long distance burrowing, squirm dancing and rap music. Gunther was very hard to listen to for any length of time, still generally kept to himself, and tended to have an air of superiority when he did speak ("Iiii doooo noooooott have antennae, Iiiiiii have tentacleeeess."). But underneath it all, he was still just a worried bug, like the rest of them.

A few hours after mid-day, according to Charlie's Chronopaw, the last of Professor Pethers' classes cleared out of the room. Shortly afterwards, Rockville entered, dropping his overloaded backpack on the first granite workspace, and shoved a neon green Sproket ball into his mouth.

"Ugh," squinted Professor Pethers. "I really can't fathom how you kids eat those things."

Rockville smiled. Green Sprokets were his favorite candy, the purple glazed ones weren't bad either, but the neon green ones really made your tongue wince and had a pasty, gelatinous inside that crackled when you rolled it across your tongue. The insides of the purple balls had more of a gummy center that turned your entire mouth bright red and whistled when you tried to blow bubbles. He had a couple of those in his bag as well.

"Ready to help me take on Hector?" Professor Pethers asked as he clapped his hands and rubbed them together in anticipation.

Hector was the school's mascot—a living, breathing, spitting, tongue-flicking reptile. The Fiercedale

Middle School mascot costume was a pale green lizard with a long spiked tail, short arms and legs and a short flat snout—sort of a miniature alligator. Eventually, a group of kids figured out that the Fiercedale mascot was actually a Nile Monitor. To their, and Fiercedale's, immense pride the Nile Monitor was described in various texts as the "fiercest" reptile in its region with multiple rows of razor sharp teeth coupled with an enormous appetite for field mice.

Then, some kid with gobs of money (but apparently little common sense) persuaded his parents into giving him a Nile Monitor for his birthday. Hector arrived at the house a cute one foot in length and quite an attraction for all the neighborhood kids. But, being fed four live mice on a daily basis, cute little Hector became BIG little Hector, and before long he was escaping from his tank on a regular basis. The Mrs. of the house lost her patience with Hector rather quickly as, during his escapes, he started to 'mark' his territory on various pieces of furniture around the house. The final straw came when she was awakened in the middle of the night to discover Hector making his way stealthily across her newly-manicured toes. The pet store would not issue a refund on Hector, he had been a special order (imagine them not regularly stocking a mammal eating reptile that grew to four feet in length!). Finally, alongside a large donation to the then being built outdoor sports arena, the school agreed to house Hector in a large glass-walled enclosure in Professor Pethers' science lab, know to the students as Hector's Hood, aka "the hood."

Rockville had had to have written consent granting him permission to help clean the hood. One kid from every grade got permission to help with Hector—everyone else was strictly forbidden to go within three feet of the enclosure. In fact, the hood had a large yellow line drawn three feet away all the way around it. It was instant detention if you crossed the line without permission—Jeremy Smyth had received detention this way five times last term.

Professor Pethers seemed to love Hector. He had an uncanny way of seeming to know just what Hector needed and wanted every day. Meanwhile, the week Professor Pethers was out with the stomach flu and a substitute teacher was in charge of Hector, Hector disrupted every single class with his pacing and hissing. Hector seemed to be playing games by making loud noises every time the teacher tried to give instructions or assign homework. The kids in the class thought it was hilarious—no one got homework for a week. But as soon as Professor Pethers was back, Hector returned to his old self again, lounging with contentment on his Rock. Professor Pethers seemed to have a way with animals.

Which was good because Hector was now a full three feet and seven inches, without measuring his tail.

Professor Pethers took out his ring of keys and unlocked Hector's Hood. He then smiled brightly at

Hector who just barely glanced up from his siesta on his hot rock. Professor Pethers entered the hood, gave Hector a few strokes on his tail and attached the leash to Hector's collar. Almost on cue, Hector lifted his body off the rock and slithered down towards Rockville who was standing just outside the enclosure.

Once out, Professor Pethers handed the leash to Rockville who led Hector over to Professor Pethers desk where Hector dutifully crawled into the chair space. Rockville grabbed a hand full of sunflower seeds out of the drawer, placed them on the floor and let Hector munch away. Rockville attached the handle end of the leash to the hook by the door and walked back to help scrub the hood.

Professor Pethers was shaking an empty plastic jug and peering, disappointed, inside. "Rockville, we're out of bleaching scrub. I'm going to have to go to the janitor's room to get some more. Do you mind waiting here with Hector while I run out and get it?"

"Nah, no problem Professor. Take your time," replied Rockville.

Professor Pethers headed out of the room with the empty bleach jug in hand and Rockville checked on Hector's sunflower seed supply. He scattered a few more on the floor, which Hector sniffed, and then headed back to check on his insects. He scanned the room for the stepladder so that he could really get a good look without having to take the jar down from the shelf. He couldn't seem to find it anywhere. Finally after several moments of searching he spotted it in the back corner with a few books stacked on top: *Zen and the Art of Pumpkin Growing*, *561 Ways to Prepare Pumpkin*, *Ancient Druid Horticultural Techniques*, and *The Tale of Five Pumpkins*.

In the meantime, Charlie, XL and Gunther watched all the events in the room with angst-filled anticipation. You can imagine that the discovery of a four foot Nile monitor named Hector in the room did not go over too well with any of them. Hence, they hardly took their eyes off of him while Rockville was managing with the pumpkin books.

Which turned out to be a good thing, otherwise they would have missed another strange but important event.

Just as Rockville turned away from checking on Hector, Charlie and the others noticed the door handle turn. The door opened a crack and once again, the black hooded figure peered into the room. Noticing Rockville, it quickly pulled back so that the Charlie, XL and Gunther could no longer see its head but in doing so, accidentally knocked Hector's leash off the hook by the door.

Hector was now loose.

Professor Pethers was still not back.

The top of Rockville's head came into view just under the edge of the shelf. Charlie, Gunther and XL could hear Rockville put down the step-stool but all their eyes were still on Hector. Rockville stepped up onto the stepladder and began to stand up but the ladder wobbled. Rockville looked down to see that one of the rubber casings was missing from the back right leg. He looked around to see if he could find it—nothing in sight. He got off the ladder and traced his steps back to the windowsill, all the time searching the ground but having no luck.

In the meantime, Hector began to move out from underneath the desk. He moved methodically and slowly, although it was apparent from the bulk of muscles on all four of his legs that if he wanted, Hector could move very fast.

And right now he was just moving steadily closer and closer towards... Rockville.

Charlie, Gunther and XL were panicked. Rockville was making his way back towards the stepladder but his head was looking straight down towards the ground. If only he'd look up, he'd be sure to see the scaly spiked monster headed straight towards them all.

Hector was making his way down the center aisle of the room his tongue spitting out every few seconds, his eyes set in a squint.

Charlie, XL and Gunther all started screaming.

And screaming. Hector was barely three feet away now and Rockville gave up on his search for the rubber casing. He'd just had started climbing up the step ladder again with his back to Hector.

At two feet away, Rockville's hands could be seen on the edge of the shelf. Gunther had lost it entirely and stood motionless, jaw dropped, eyes fixated on the approaching doom. XL had stopped screaming as well and had begun to burrow in the dirt, too afraid to watch the whole scene. Only Charlie was now screaming at the top of his lungs and hitting the jar with his two front legs as he stood up on his back two.

Now Hector was not even a foot away.

Rockville's face appeared over the shelf and looked right into the jar.

Charlie pounded frantically on the glass, yelling "Turn around! Turn around! Hector's loose!"

A puzzled expression came over Rockville's face. He tilted his head just a bit to get a better look at the jar – the ant in his jar was behaving very strangely. It seemed as if the ant was actually hitting the side of the jar with his legs. And, even more bizarrely he was getting the faintest impression of someone speaking to him. It sounded like: "Urn a hound, urn a hound, heck or loose."

Rockville leaned closer to the jar. The ant was really banging his legs on the jar now and Rockville was positive that it was not normal ant behavior. Could it be? Was that sound coming from inside the jar? From the ant???

Hector lifted his two front feet on to the bottom step of the stepladder where Rockville was standing. With all he had left in him, Charlie let out a final scream: "Turn around!!! It's 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. Xl loves rap music and squirm dancing. What's your favorite type of music? What's your favorite song? Can you squirm dance to that song?
2. What's your favorite candy? Would you try a green Sprocket or a purple one if you had the choice?
3. Do you have a pet? If not, what type of pet do you think would be nice? Why? If so, what do you love about your pet? Is anything hard about having a pet?
4. Rockville had to gain permission to help clean Hector's hood. Name three things that you need permission to do? Why is that? What things do adults need permission to do?
5. Google a picture of a Nile Monitor. Do you want to own one as a pet? Why or why not? What would you name it if you had one?
6. Hector had been taking a "siesta." What is a seista? Which cultures take siestas and why?
7. Charlie, Gunther and XL were watching Hector with "angst" filled anticipation. What is "angst?" Use it in a sentence. Have you ever felt it?
8. How do you think Charlie, XL and Gunther felt when they saw Hector? How would you feel about taking a class with a Nile monitor in the room?
9. Does your school have a mascot? What is it?