



Chapter 6: Bird versus reptile

Rock and Jewel dashed into the supply closet in the back of the room. As they closed the door, leaving a small opening to peer out, the door to the science room opened and in stepped Janitor Jinkin.

He was a tall, disheveled man, who scared most of the kids in the school. He was always muttering jibberish underneath his breath and he never smiled. In fact, he had a way of shifting his gaze and shaking his head from time to time that just made him seem plain mad at the world and just plain mad... as in living in a different world mad.

On Janitor Jinkin's left shoulder sat an old parrot that had bald patches and cracked dry claws with long, untrimmed nails. It screeched at inappropriate moments, repeated Jinkin's jibberish (loudly) and followed you with his eyes whenever you passed him in the hall. Jinkin called his parrot "Scraggs" but no one actually knew the parrot's name because no one had ever gotten up the courage to ask.

Janitor Jinkin and Scraggs entered the science room and immediately opened the drawer of Professor Pethers' desk with the sunflower seeds. Jewel and Rock gasped. Jewel's books and Rock's backpack were right there on top of the desk.

Janitor Jinkin did indeed look straight at the books and backpack but if he noticed anything strange about them being there he did not show it. Instead, he used Jewel's pile of books as a perch for Scraggs and Rock's overfilled backpack as a plate for the seeds. Scraggs stepped off of Jinkin's shoulder onto the books, cawed, shook his feathers and began picking apart the seeds.

Jinkin went about his business cleaning the science room—emptying out the bins, cleansing the counter tops and wiping down the chalkboards. While he washed the blackboards, Rock and Jewel texted quickly back and forth, trying to stay as quiet as possible.

DID YOU SEE WHERE HE FELL? CAN YOU SEE HIM? Jewel texted as they peered through the crack in the door.

NO. I CAN'T MAKE HIM OUT. CAN YOU?

NOPE, ME NEITHER. IT JUST LOOKS LIKE A LOT OF DUST AND DIRT ON THE FLOOR OVER THERE. I DON'T SEE ANYTHING MOVING. I HOPE YOU DIDN'T STEP ON HIM.

ME TOO! the two of them immediately looked down at Rock's sneakers. The thought was almost too horrible to bear.

YOU LOOK FOR ME JULES —YOU'LL HAVE A BETTER VIEW. I CAN'T DO IT.

OH, NO. DON'T MAKE ME DO IT. YOU LOOK. IT'S YOUR SNEAKER... AND YOUR ANT.

AW COME ON JULES... PLEASE?

Jewel folded her arms across her chest and cocked her head to one side.

FINE THEN, Rock texted back. HOW ABOUT WE BOTH LOOK 2GETHER? ON 3, O.K.?

SURE. Jewel smiled. They both looked down towards the shoe.

Rock counted down with his fingers: One... two... three... On three, Rock folded his leg up so that the bottom of his sneaker was now facing them. What they saw was horrible. Right in the center of Rock's shoe was a smooshed grape that looked like the booger of Jolly the Green Giant. They both scrunched up their faces in disgust.

As far as either of them could see, no ant appeared to be crushed in his shoe. Rock quickly switched legs and the two of them scanned the other shoe as well. Nothing, except a few pebbles and pieces of mud wedged in between the ridges of the sole.

WELL, THAT'S GOOD, Rock texted.

THAT'S NOT, Jewel replied. She was peering out the crack again and was pointing towards the science door. Jinkin had just picked up his broom. A big, wide, long, industrial, cloth broom guaranteed to move anything in its path.

Rock started texting at hyper-speed: WHAT IF CHARLIE —HE SAID HIS NAME WAS CHARLIE, RIGHT?

YEAH.

WHAT IF CHARLIE IS HURT AND CAN'T GET OUT OF THE WAY? WHAT IF HE IS UNCONSCIOUS? OR WHAT IF JINKIN SEES HIM? HE'LL KILL HIM FOR SURE!

I KNOW, I KNOW! Texted Jewel

Just then things got worse.

Hector started to hiss which caused Scraggs to caw. Hector's hisses got louder and more frequent until suddenly Scraggs ruffled up his feathers, screeched and took flight. He swooped in low, up and down the rows of workstations.

Rock and Jewel stared out in horror. The bird had landed on the lab desk directly opposite the stepladder, which they hadn't had the time to put away, and was now staring down at the floor where Charlie had fallen.

OH MY GOSH! HE'S GOING TO EAT CHARLIE! OH MY GOSH! BIRDS EAT BUGS, RIGHT? THEY EAT ANTS DON'T THEY? Jewels fingers flew over her phone.

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT PARROTS EAT. BUT THAT BIRD IS CERTAINLY INTERESTED IN SOMETHING OVER THERE. I JUST CAN'T BELIEVE THIS. FIRST THE BROOM, NOW THE BIRD. HE'S DOOMED ONE WAY OR THE OTHER.

Jinkin finished sweeping the aisle between the windows and first row of lab desks and now turned to start up the next row. He'd have that row and another before he swept the aisle where Charlie might be.

Hector continued to hiss.

Suddenly, the bird jumped off the desk and landed on the floor in front of the stepladder. It appeared to be focused on something and of course, Jewel and Rock had a dreadful feeling that they knew exactly what the bird saw.

Jinkin was about to turn the final corner. He rudely muttered to Scraggs to move. Scraggs simply shifted the weight on his cragged feet and kept staring down. Rock and Jewel were sure that Charlie's final moments, if he was indeed still even alive, had now arrived.

The janitor barked at Scraggs once more, now standing behind him, waiting to sweep the final aisle.

Just then Scraggs let out an enormous, ear-piercing scream.

It scared Jewel and Rock, making them jump inside the closet.

It made Jinkin look curiously down at his parrot.

It made Hector settle back down onto his rock.

And it also made Charlie wake up.

Charlie could not believe his eyes as he desperately tried to focus. He saw shades of red, green and black all blending together to make something that looked strangely like an enormous bird. He tried to focus some more. Leaping bull frogs! It was a bird! A gigantic bird close enough to devour him in one easy peck! Even more bizarre than that, Charlie was convinced in his dazed stupor that the bird had just yelled at him to "Get up and move, ant!"

Just my luck, he thought in his bewilderment, Now that I've survived a fall big enough to kill a bird, I'm going to be tortured and chased by one in some evil cat and mouse game.

"Oh, just go ahead and eat me already!" Charlie muttered under his breath.

Then suddenly Charlie heard another "Move already!" but the bird hadn't moved his beak at all.

He stared at the bird perplexed, not quite sure what was going on. "How did that bird just speak again without...?"

Suddenly the bird's body began to move and Charlie instantly regretted telling him to go ahead and eat him. But instead of coming towards him, the bird spread his wings wide and flew ungracefully into the air.

For a split second, Charlie was relieved. He was not going to be eaten just yet. But then what he saw in front of him terrified him even more. The bird's departure now revealed to him that there, not more than five feet away was a gigantic dirty wide-cloth broom headed straight his way. He was doomed.

Charlie jumped up. As fast as ant-ly possible, he ran for cover under the ledge of the cabinet.

Janitor Jinkin bent down, grumbled and moved the stepladder Rock and Jewel had left out so that he had a clear path to sweep. It gave Charlie just enough time to get started before Jinkin was pushing the broom forward again. Charlie peered to his right. Despite the small delay caused by the stepladder, the broom was already so close. He moved his legs, all six of them, as fast as he could and started to feel the air coming off the broom, it was that close. There was no way he was going to make it. He still had about a foot to go and the broom was just about on him. He felt the soft fabric of the broom head brush against his right legs. This was it. It was over.

But just then something miraculous occurred. He felt the broom rise up. He kept running but peered to his side to see the broom slowly rise up and sail back about a foot and land on the ground again. Jinkin was being thorough.

This gave Charlie just the break that he needed. He hit the wall running, high-tailed it up the side and then made for the anti-gravity dash on the bottom side of the cabinet.

Whoosh! He felt the air of the broom underneath him and dropped his gaze down just in time to see the broom passing below him—a mere inch away. The force of it ripped his back two legs from the cabinet and Charlie momentarily found himself doing a reverse hand-stand on the bottom of the cabinet: his front legs gripping on for dear life while his hind legs dangled down below him.

Then the air current and the broom passed. Charlie let out a sigh of relief as he used the last of his strength to pull his legs back to the cabinet. He had made it.

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. Do you know the janitor(s) at your school? What is(are) his/her name(s)? Can you name some of the different tasks a janitor does at your school? Do you think he/she has an easy or hard job? Name one thing you could do to help your janitor(s).
2. Would you let a bird sit on your shoulder? Would you think that was fun or scary? Some parrots like Scraggs, repeat the things that humans say. If you could teach a parrot to say something, what would it be and why?
3. What is the grossest thing on which you have ever stepped? Did you do it in shoes or with your bare feet?
4. How fast is texting at "hyper-speed?" Who can type the fastest on their phone in your family? Do you have a phone? Do you text? Have a race: who can type the alphabet fastest? Who can type "My parents are the coolest people in the world!!!" the fastest?
5. Have you ever let out "an enormous, ear-piercing scream?" If so why? Have you ever heard someone "let out an enormous, ear-piercing scream?" Why did they scream? Do you want to practice letting out "an enormous, ear-piercing scream?" Don't do it, we were just wondering if you felt like it;
6. When Charlie saw Scraggs, he thought he was going to die in some evil "cat and mouse" game. Do you know what that means? What would that be like for Charlie?
7. Jinkin picking the broom up one last time to sweep gave Charlie the time he needed to make it to safety. Charlie thought it was "miraculous." Have you ever had something happen that was so great you thought it was close to a miracle? What was it? How did you feel?