



## Chapter 8: The pickle juice thickens

As soon as the words had left his mouth, Charlie could not believe that he had said them. He was mortified. His face turned the brightest shade of red. He sat up in a panic.

“I mean, uh... I love water! Yes, I love water... and I love that you brought it to me Jewel,” Charlie sputtered out, trying to save himself.

Jewel and Rock looked at each other and giggled.

Charlie continued, his front legs scratching his head and moving to his words. “Uh, I mean, I would have loved if you had brought it to me as well, Rock. It was just that Jewel here did and I needed a drink so badly. So what I meant to say was that I love water. Oh yes, indeed, water is top notch for me, a real source of delight. I don’t love Jewel, oh no not at all, I love *water*.”

He was rambling, but he couldn’t stop himself. It was just that, actually, he really was in love with Jewel. She was so pretty with the most beautiful blue eyes he had ever seen and she didn’t seem to be afraid of anything. She was COOL.

Charlie looked at Jewel whose face was a bit puzzled. Then he realized that he had possibly just insulted her.

“Oh my gosh,” he waved his front leg at her. “It’s not that I don’t love you, it’s just that I don’t love you, love you. As I said, I love that you brought me water, and I love water and I love that... I mean how could I love you when we’ve hardly even met?... Did I tell you my name was Charlie?”

Rock and Jewel chuckled. “Yeah. We know. Are you okay? Is there something else we can get you?”

“Oh, no. Not right now thank you. That water, which I do love, is all that I need for the moment.”

“Where were you?” asked Rock. “We were looking all over for you! We thought for sure you had been

run over by that broom.”

“Yes, well, I very nearly did get run over. Thank apples for that bird or I’d surely be dead by now.”

“We thought that bird was going to eat you!”

“Actually, it was a very strange thing. I had fallen to the ground and then Rock’s shoe came down on top of me—luckily, you’ve got some big grooves on the bottom of those things—but then I was overwhelmed by some sort of fume and passed out. I really think it was the bird that woke me up.”

“Wow! So that’s why the bird was cawing so much! I can’t believe it!” Jewel said.

“Caw? So you guys can’t speak to or understand birds? Only me?”

“Yep. You are the only animal I know that understands me,” Rock informed Charlie.

“Well I’ve never actually spoken with Providers before. You guys are the first.”

“Providers? What are those?”

“Oh, well you know. You guys. People.”

“Oh ok, but if you’ve never spoken to any of us before, than how did you learn to speak to us? How did you know that we’d understand you?” Rock asked.

Charlie shook his head. “I didn’t. I didn’t even know that any insects could talk to humans let alone that I could, until today, when you introduced yourself to us.”

Charlie suddenly remembered his friends as he said this and particularly remembered how he had last seen XL wiggling and banging his head against the jar. He wondered if XL was all right.

“Uh, do you think we could check on my friends? I’m a little worried about my friend XL. He’s the worm.”

Rock and Jewel immediately understood. “Yeah, sure. Can you crawl up onto my finger?” Jewel asked.

Charlie suddenly felt very embarrassed again. Climb up on Jewel's finger?! Wow. He tried to play it cool. "Oh yeah, sure. No problem. I can do that," he said as he climbed on.

"OK. Hang on, Charlie. I'm taking you up."

Almost like magic, Charlie felt himself glide up through the air towards the jar. When he cleared the shelf, he noticed XL lying motionless on the ground with Gunther staring at him from his twig.

"Boy, that worm—what did you say his name was? XL? He doesn't look too good. Do worms usually wiggle like that?" Rock asked.

"Not that I know of," said Charlie. "Although, XL's my first worm friend, so I really don't know for sure. Ants and worms don't usually hang out."

"Oh," said Rock as he put the jar on the counter and unscrewed the lid. All three of them peered over the edge to get a bird's eye view of XL and Gunther.

"Chaaarlieeeee!" Gunther exclaimed. "I'mmmmm sooooo glaaaad toooo seeeee youuuuu! XLLLLLLLLL waaaassss actingggg veeery strange....."

"Yeah, Gunther I know. I saw him," Charlie cut off Gunther. "Jewel, I need to get down and see my friend. Just put me on the jar lip and I'll trek the rest of the way."

"Is he alright?" Jewel asked as she dropped Charlie off.

"I don't know." Charlie replied.

"Well if it wasn't for XL, I think we might have missed you, so I hope he's OK." Jewel said.

Charlie was half way down the inside of the jar. "Yeah, me too."

All eyes waited patiently as Charlie trekked the rest of the distance. He hurried over to XL who was lying crooked on the ground face up. Charlie peered closely at his friend, looking for signs of life. *What were the signs of life for a worm?* Charlie thought. Normally he might listen for a heart beat but the thought of putting his ear up to XL's mucus-y body sort of grossed him out. He decided to start at XL's head and see if he could feel any breath coming out of his mouth.

“XL, XL are you alright?” Charlie asked tentatively. He leaned his ear over XL’s mouth to see if he could hear or feel any breathing. Nothing. In a panic, Charlie turned to face his friend. Forgetting the mucus issue, Charlie grabbed the sides of XL’s face and shook XL’s face up and down. “XL!!! XL!!! Wake up buddy!!!” he shouted. Still nothing. Charlie stopped shaking his friend. He got up as close as he could to XL’s face and gushed, “Oh please XL. Come on, make it through. Please? You’ve just got to be okay!”

Suddenly, Charlie saw XL’s eyelids start to flutter.

XL’s eyes rolled forward as his eyelids opened to focus on Charlie. “Your breath stinks! Git away from me ‘sect! OH pee-yew!” XL scrunched up his nose.

Charlie let go of his friend’s head, to cover his mouth, his face full of embarrassment, just before he realized that both Rock and Jewel (thank goodness!) couldn’t understand a word XL had said. He looked back up at XL.

“Gotcha!” XL laughed, a huge smile spreading across his face. “‘Sect, you looked so bummed! But really Charlie, what did you eat for lunch? Smells like dog poo.”

Charlie was at a loss for words. On the one hand he wanted to hug XL, happy that he was alive, on the other hand he wanted to hit him for taking such a cheap shot.

“Is he okay?!” Rock and Jewel said at the same time, seeing XL move.

Charlie regained his composure. “Yeah,” he chuckled. “He’s fine.”

“What did he say?” asked Jewel.

Charlie paused. What should he say? He certainly didn’t want to tell everyone about his breath. “Uh, nothing much, really. He, uh, is just, uh, recovering. You know, getting his muscus back in shape.”

XL stopped laughing. “Dude, that’s not funny. Don’t tell her, I mean them, that.”

Charlie glanced at XL. He had caught the slip up. A smile spread slowly across his face. He whispered to his friend sympathetically “Oh, okay. Fine. I’ll just tell them that you have terrible gas, which is why you were wiggling around like that, and it finally made you pass out.”

Charlie turned his head up towards Rock and Jewel and yelled. "You see, XL here..."

"Noooo!" XL power jumped Charlie from the side, knocking him over mid-sentence.

Rock and Jewel looked on in horror as the worm that had looked so crazy moments ago now made a full-on attack at Charlie. "Oh my gosh," Jewel gasped. "Rock, that worm is attacking Charlie! Quick! We need to do something!"

Charlie, however, started laughing hysterically. XL was still all over him trying to stop him from speaking, but Charlie's laughter was contagious. It made XL calm down enough so that the two of them could speak.

"Okay, okay, let's just call it a truce! Yo' breath really ain't that bad! I was jus jokin' wit yo. Please don' tell dem I had gas! It was Gunther! Not me!"

"Oh my gosh!? Really? I was just joking around. Did Gunther really?"

"Heyyyyy, liiiii cooouuuldn'tttt heellppp itttt!" moaned Gunther.

"Yeah, he did. Jewel and Rock lookin' at us scared da leafs righ' out o' him. It be bad, I'm tellin' yo."

"Hey, yooouuu were scarrred tooooo," Gunther tried to defend himself.

XL looked sheepishly down at the ground, "Yea, I was. But not *dat* scared. We almost done suffocated in here!" XL perked up again.

Charlie and XL started giggling. The jar was so full of joy just to know that everyone was safe and they were all back together again that even Gunther let out a chuckle.

"Hey! What's happening down there?!" Rock and Jewel were still peering down at everyone and wondering if Charlie was safe from the rabid worm who was no longer tackling him.

Charlie looked up at his other new friends. "I'm okay! And so is everyone else! We just got a little excited about seeing each other again, that's all. No need to worry!"

“Are you sure? No offense to the worm, and all, but he does act sort of strange,” Jewel said.

“No, no, he’s fine,” Charlie replied.

“What did she say?” XL asked. Charlie realized that he was going to have to be a bit of an interpreter.

“Uh, she just wanted to know if you were okay. They saw you wiggling around before and well, you know, they were a bit worried that you might have hurt yourself.”

“No, no, I be fine. But it worked didn’t it? Dey found you ‘cause of me, righ’???”

“Yeah, XL. You saved the day. They said you are a real hero.” Charlie embellished a bit to make his friend feel good.

XL straightened himself up a bit as a big grin covered his face. “A hero? Really? Did dey really say dat?”

Charlie could see XL looking starry eyed at Jewel. “Yeah they did,” Charlie lied. “That’s exactly what they said.”

“Say, wha’ happen to yo anyway? We heard you introduce yo-self, then dere was all dat commotion and den we saw you fall. We were ‘fraid dat someone might’ have stepped on yo’ es-pecially when we done heard dat bird yellin’ at yo, but we couldn’t see no-thin’ from up dere,” XL said.

“Actually, I did sort of get stepped on, but lucky for me I went in-between the grooves of Rock’s sneakers. Then the next thing I knew, this giant old parrot was screaming at me to move and a death broom was headed my way. Thanks to the bird I managed to escape.”

“I can’t believe that bird saved your life. We totally thought he was going to eat you,” Jewel said.

XL wanted to know what Jewel said and Charlie told him what she said about the bird.

“Well, he be a little grumpy,” replied XL, disappointed that everything wasn’t about him being a hero, “but he seems to be pretty good friends wit Hectah ovah dere. Dey be havin’ a little chat bout some books being knocked over in dah library.”

Charlie told Rock and Jewel what XL said. Jewel had a puzzled look on her face.

“What’s up Jewel?” said Rock.

“Well, that’s weird. I was just in the library for detention and everything seemed fine. Did the bird say which books?”

Charlie asked XL. He was now the go between for his two sets of friends.

“Dah bird said it was all dah mit-ol-gee and ho, ho-rito-cuper-al books—whatevah dose be—and dat dah janitah be pretty bummed bout it ‘cause he already be havin’ so much work to do for some meetin’ tomorrow nigh’,” XL filled in.

“They’re having the annual all-school conference here tomorrow. I can’t believe Hector and the bird were having a conversation! So that’s what all the hissing was about!” Rock said. He glanced over at Hector who managed to hiss on cue.

“Hector says he was trying to steady the stepladder for you,” Charlie said to Rock.

“What?” Rock asked in shock, not sure what Charlie was talking about.

“Before—when we were screaming to turn around because Hector was behind you, you know when the professor was out getting bleaching scrub—hey! That’s what made me pass out!” Charlie suddenly put the pieces of his fainting together. Then he continued. “It seems as if we all had Hector wrong—he could see from the desk upfront that the rubber tip was missing to the leg and he didn’t want you to fall.”

“That’s why he had his front legs on the ladder? Well, I’ll be.” Rock was amazed. Talking ants, heroic parrots and protective lizards, it was all a little much for him.

“Sorry to have misjudged you, Hector,” Charlie said, trying to smooth things over. “It’s just that, well, none of us have really ever met a, a, whatever you are, before.”

“Nile Monitor,” Hector casually informed Charlie and then closed his eyes again as though he wasn’t all that interested in the conversation.

Everyone was silent for a second just taking it all in. Then Jewel started to think out loud. “You know, I think that’s weird about the books being knocked over because, you know, when I had to go to the cafeteria to get supplies for the Unified Arts room, I found Mildred sitting on one of those big bags of

flour crying. When I asked her what was wrong, she just blubbered something about some missing pots and all the pickle juice and sugar disappearing.”

“Pickle juice?” Charlie and Rock asked together.

“Yep, that’s what she said, ‘pickle juice’.”

“Who’s Mildred?” Charlie asked.

“She’s the head cook in the cafeteria. I just thought she was having a tough moment when I saw her. But, come to think of it, she did seem unusually distressed – she doesn’t usually use the food as a seat.”

“So did Professor Fahid!” Rock exclaimed, coming back to life.

“What do you mean?” asked Jewel.

“When I was cleaning out Hector’s cage, Professor Fahid came in with his hair on fire about something ‘happening again’ on the blackboard that he wanted Professor Pethers to see.”

Charlie was not only listening to all this but simultaneously interpreting to XL and Gunther. Frankly, he was amazed at how cool his being an Outerling was.

“Some weird stuff is definitely going on around here,” murmured Jewel.

“Don’t forget the hooded figure that crept in here at lunch time and then knocked my leash off the doorknob,” hissed Hector. He hadn’t even lifted his head or opened his eyes to speak.

“What? Oh, yeah,” Charlie started to remember that the triplets’ ladybug had been taken. He had almost forgotten.

“Can Hector understand us?” Jewel asked, putting together that Hector had just added something to their conversation.

Charlie eyed Hector. His being an Outerling had been coming so easily to him that he had failed to notice that he hadn’t interpreted Jewel’s last line to his friends before Hector spoke.

Hector didn't reply.

"Well?" Charlie questioned him.

"I can understand them."

"But why can't they understand you like they do me?" Charlie was a bit confused.

"My being an Outerling takes a different form. I can understand all of them. Only a few can understand me." Hector slowly replied.

"Oh." Charlie wanted more information but he had too many other things racing through his mind to spend much time thinking about it. He relayed what Hector had said about understanding them and then told them about the ladybug incident.

"I was sort of dozing off when the room was empty and saw this tall figure come in through the door, dressed in a black, hooded sweatshirt. Whoever it was—I couldn't see, but it wasn't a kid—climbed up and took the ladybug out of that jar up there and then hurried away," Charlie said.

"Taloula's ladybug is gone? Whoa, tears are gonna fall tomorrow when the three of them find out. They worshipped that ladybug!" Jewel said looking up at the now-empty jar.

"But why would anyone want that ladybug?" Rock asked.

"Why would anyone steal all the pickle juice?" Charlie made a face. He hated pickles.

"Do you think there's a connection between that and the books being knocked off the shelves and Professor Fahid being so upset?" Jewel wondered out loud.

"Well, it would help if we actually knew why the Professor was in such a tizzy. Should we try and sneak down to his classroom and see if it's still there?"

Jewel and Rock looked at the clock. It was really getting late and they both knew that their parents would be getting worried about them. Plus, they also realized that they were now in danger of getting locked inside the school.

“First we’ve got to concentrate on getting out of here first, without getting caught,” Jewel sighed.

“Yeah, you’re right. My parents are going to be pretty worried about me if I don’t get home soon,” Rock sighed. “We’d better get going and maybe tomorrow we can get into Professor Fahid’s room before the homeroom bell rings.”

“I think that’s the best we can do,” Jewel agreed. “What about Charlie and his friends?”

Rock studied the bugs in his jar. “Right. Charlie, why don’t you come home with me tonight? There are a ton of things I want to ask you and your friends should be pretty safe here overnight. Stealing insects is highly unusual and to bring you all home, I’d need to take the jar but I can’t risk someone noticing that it’s gone.”

Charlie could tell that his friends were scared but in the end they agreed, hoping this meant Charlie could work on freeing them.

“Is there anything your friends need before we go?” Rock said.

Charlie relayed this to his friends but they both said they were fine. Gunther had plenty of leaf to chomp on, despite his lingering gastrointestinal issues, and XL said his bed of dirt was just perfect.

“Okay, then, Charlie are you ready to go? You can sit on my shoulder, that way you don’t have to yell to talk with me and my hands will be free to ride my bike,” said Rock.

“Bike? Wha-hoo! You bet I’m ready!” Charlie blurted out. He remembered how his Uncle Jaxx had told him stories about how he used to hitch rides on the underside of a yellow bike and how much fun it had sounded. This was one adventure for which Charlie was ready. He turned to Gunther and XL. “Okay guys. I’ve got to go. I’ll see you tomorrow and don’t worry things are going to be just fine. I’ll talk to Rock and Jewel tonight about getting you guys out soon.”

“Thanks pal. We be fine.” XL tried to put on his bravest face. “We be seein’ yo in dah mornin’ ‘sect.”

Charlie smiled at his friends, said goodbye and then hiked his way back up the jar and all the way up Rock’s arm to his shoulder. There he found a crease in Rock’s jacket that suited him just fine. He nestled in while Jewel put the jar back up on the shelf.

All three of them headed towards the front of the classroom and gathered up the books from the Professor's desk. "Later guys!" Rock whispered towards XL and Gunther and then very slowly he turned the door handle to peak down the hall.

**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 became embarrassed when he accidentally told Jewel he loved her. Why do you think he was embarrassed? Do you think he should have been? Would you have been? How do you think Jewel felt when she heard Charlie say that he loved her?
2. Charlie says that ants and worms don't usually hang out— after all, they are completely different types of bugs. But variety is nice. Name a person with whom you spend time that is like you and another person who is not like you. Would you want to hang out with people that were only just like you? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever seen someone faint? What was that like? How did you feel? What did everyone do?
4. XL pretends that Charlie has really smelly breath. What do you do to make sure you don't have bad breath? What if you do? Do you want someone to tell you?
5. XL and Charlie like to joke around with each other and play pranks. Do you have a friend like that? Have you ever played a good prank on someone? Tell the story. Has anyone played a good prank on you? Tell that story too!
6. Charlie calls XL a hero. What does being a "hero" mean? Who is one to you? Who do a lot of people think is a hero/heroine? Why?
7. Rock misjudged Hector as being dangerous because Hector looked scary and he had been told that Hector was dangerous. Do you think people ever misjudge other people based on their appearance? How about based on false information? What can you do to avoid misjudging other people?
8. Do you like pickles? How about pickle juice? Poll all the people in your family and find out who likes them/it and who doesn't.
9. Rock uses the expression "with his hair on fire" to describe how Professor Fahid entered the science room. What do you think he meant by that? Can you act like your hair is on fire? What other sayings would express the same thing? Can you make one up?
10. Can you ride a two wheeled bike? If so, do you remember the first time you did it? What did that feel like? Was someone there with you? If so, who? Why do you think you can remember that moment and yet you might not remember what you had for lunch three days ago?