



## Chapter 12: Peculiar patterns

“Boy! Am I glad to see you!” exclaimed Charlie as he stood up and brushed the dust off of his legs. “That was way too close for me!” He started to move towards Hector whose head was framed by the square ventilation shaft. The covering had hundreds of tiny square holes making Hector look like a modern piece of art. “Wait a minute... how did you know I was in here? And, how did you get over here?” Charlie asked.

Hector’s tongue flicked in and out, just passing Charlie to the side. He heard the same “whoosh” sound he heard before Elektra had disappeared. “I heard you scream,” Hector said. “I figured you might be in trouble with Elektra. I never liked her and she didn’t taste particularly well,” Hector said with a small burp.

Charlie climbed through one of the holes and came out face to face with Hector. “But, wait, how did you get over here?”

Hector, who had been leaning up against the wall, dropped down onto all fours on the floor and started to turn away. “I walked,” he said rather bored.

“Wait, wait!” Charlie shouted. “I mean, I know you walked but, like, isn’t your home, um, hood, normally locked?”

Hector kept walking. “During the day it is. Not at night. I have an agreement with the Professor to keep the cage unlocked at night just in case of a fire. Junior used to light my tail. I’ve had a fire phobia ever since.”

“But where would you go if there was a fire? I mean, you could hardly open one of the front doors. Believe me, we’ve been trying.”

“I know.”

“What do you mean you know?” Charlie was by this time racing down the wall and across the floor trying to keep up with the slow, lumbering, but much larger steps, of Hector.

“I know. I saw your shadows. Could hear your whispering through the vent. Must be Rock and Jewel right?”

“Yeah. They’re trying to figure out what is going on at Fiercedale. So many strange things have been happening.”

“Tell me about it,” Hector said wryly.

“Has anything else happened since we left?” Charlie asked.

“Just an ant getting attacked by a spider and a couple of kids trying to sneak *into* school.”

“But they can’t find a way in. Everything’s locked up tight. That’s why I came through the vent,” Charlie paused. “How would you get out if there was a fire?”

Hector stopped in front of the supply closet. He shoveled his nose in between the door and its frame and moved his head so that the door opened wide. “People never notice much do they? Jewel and Rock spent a good ten minutes in here today.” Hector reached up with his claw at a patch in the wall. With a swift movement, the board covering it fell down and Hector popped off another covering inside the hole. Charlie was now staring straight outside. It was Hector’s own secret escape route and it was just the right size for Jewel and Rock. Hector looked at Charlie, turned and walked out of the closet without another word.

Charlie was dumbstruck. “Wow. I can’t believe... how come you never leave then Hector? I mean why stay? You can escape whenever you want.”

Hector settled back down on his hot rock. “Why would I want to escape? Where would I go? I’ve got everything I need right here—a hot rock, free food and a great friend. Plus, I don’t have to worry about Junior any more.”

“Who’s Junior?”

"The boy that first owned me."

"Oh," Charlie had a feeling there was a lot to know about Junior, but he didn't think it would be polite to ask. Instead he nodded towards the opening, "Do you mind if we borrow this for tonight?"

"It's all yours," Hector said.

"Thanks," said Charlie. "And, thanks for saving me from Elektra. I really thought..."

"Don't mention it," Hector interrupted him. "As I said, I never liked her." He then closed his eyes to sleep.

Charlie climbed up the wall to the opening and then climbed through. At the outer edge he started screaming for Jewel and Rock who were just a few yards away. They were both looking through the window with worried looks on their faces.

"Jewel! Rock! I'm over here!" Charlie shouted.

Jewel heard him first and then honed in on the sound of his voice to see him standing on the edge of the small opening. "Charlie! Oh my gosh! You're okay!" She ran over to him and dropped down onto her knees to have a better look at him. "We saw Hector move over to the vent and then go back to his hot rock. We thought that maybe he had... eaten you."

Charlie let out a small laugh. "Actually, Hector saved me from a spider and then opened up his escape route for us." Charlie motioned with his hand at the hole in the wall.

Jewel leaned over and peered through the opening. "Oh my gosh!" she said again. "It's perfect. How did Hector know about this?"

"I think it was built for Hector in case of a fire. That's why his enclosure was unlocked. I think the Professor leaves it open every night."

"Wow! said Rock having a look himself. "Let's go!"

The three of them crawled through the opening which was just wide enough for them to fit through.

Inside the closet Charlie sat on Rock's shoulder and the three of them discussed what to do next.

"We only have about an hour left before we're going to have to make our way home. We came here to take a look at Professor Fahid's blackboards and I think that's exactly where we should go first. If we have any time left when we get back, we'll talk to XL and Gunther," Jewel reasoned.

"You're right," said Rock. "Let's go. We have to be quick but we should still be careful. Who knows if anybody else is in the building."

The three of them left the closet, whispered a "thank-you" to Hector, looked over at XL and Gunther, who were thankfully sleeping, and made their way out of the science room.

Jewel led the way. At the door, she peered out, saw that the coast was clear and then the three of them hurried down the corridor. They each thought the halls were creepy. No one even dared to speak. They had vowed silence until they got into Professor Fahid's room.

At the end of the hall, they came to the corridor leading to Professor Fahid's room, the second door on the right. They were just about to move out into the hallway when they heard a door creak open. In a panic, they retreated quickly into the first door behind them.

It was the gymnasium door.

They scurried in and stood with their backs up against the wall facing the gym, each one breathing heavy with fear. The room was dark and they could not see anything at all.

Rock lifted his flashlight and started to scan their surroundings. What they saw puzzled them. In the middle of the floor, the flashlight reflected off of a large blue hopping ball and in front of that ball was another large ball, this one a maroon colored kickball. Laying right next to it was a jump rope which seemed to be laid out in a rectangle.

Jewel and Rock looked at each other puzzled. Neither one could figure it out. It was so strange because Coach Cranium always kept his gym impeccably organized.

Then Charlie's ant senses went on high alert.

"Rock," he whispered, "Scan your flashlight all the way around the room. I just have a feeling..."

Rock lifted his light and started to scan along the back wall facing them.

In an instant, they caught a glimpse of a shadow. It raced to move away from the light and Rock only caught up with it in time as it fumbled with the exit door and raced out. In the round spot of the flashlight, all three of them watched as a dark figure flew out the door.

“That was exactly the same figure that took Taloula’s ladybug!” Charlie exclaimed.

“Didn’t look like a ghost to me,” observed Jewel.

“No it didn’t. But whoever or whatever it was, it certainly didn’t want us to find them in here,” Rock said as he brought the beam of his flashlight back across the gym floor towards where they were standing. It moved across more balls and jump ropes before settling at Rock’s feet. Jewel had an idea.

“Rock, we’ve got to turn on the light.”

“What? Are you crazy? We could get caught.”

“By whom? The hooded figure? He definitely doesn’t want us to be seen. Turn on the light, just for a second, I have to see something.”

Rock slid his hand along the gym wall by the door until he found the panel of switches. He hesitated for a second, turning on the gym lights did not seem like a wise idea to him.

But Rock trusted Jewel. He knew that if she thought they should do something as bold as turning on the lights, it was for a good reason. He flicked on one of the switches.

A section of fluorescent lights overhead buzzed and slowly lit in a jerky sequence. Rock, Jewel and Charlie could not believe their eyes. They had no idea what to make of the scene before them.

There, strewn across the gym, were balls of every shape and size scattered around jump ropes that had been laid down on the floor in the shape of rectangles. There was an obvious pattern to the balls and ropes—four balls for every jump rope, two on each side. But even though the balls and rope had a specific configuration, neither Rock, Jewel or Charlie could figure out the meaning to it all. Someone or something had strategically placed the balls and ropes there, but why?

“What the heck?” Rock muttered.

“This is weird,” said Jewel. “Three vertical rows. Three groupings in every row. But of what? Balls and ropes? I don’t get it.”

“Sort of freaky isn’t it? I mean almost supernatural. If we hadn’t seen that hooded figure I’d think this was something mystical.”

“Maybe it is. It could be part of a ritual but,” Jewel paused. “I don’t know. I still don’t get how it all ties together.”

“I have this weird feeling that I’ve seen this before,” Charlie interjected.

“What? Where?” Both Jewel and Rock looked at Charlie in surprise.

“I don’t know. All I know is that I have this sense that it’s, well, familiar. I’ve seen this configuration before.”

“You’ve seen balls and jump ropes laid out like this before?” Rock asked.

“No, no. Not the balls and jump ropes but the pattern. The pattern seems familiar. I just can’t place it.” Charlie clarified.

All three of them turned back to look at the pattern. One of the lights flickered overhead and buzzed giving an eerie electricity to the room.

“The pickle juice, the castor oil, Taloula’s ladybug, the chemistry books, the hooded figure and now this. None of it makes sense. I just don’t see how they could possibly all be linked together,” Jewel reasoned.

“Maybe the blackboards in the math room will help us link it together,” Charlie offered.

Rock made a puzzled face and leaned his back up against the wall. “I hope so. But I can’t see how it’s likely. I mean unless it says something like, ‘To make a fertile breeding ground for ladybugs, take three cups pickle juice and two cups castor oil, mix well and pour over jump ropes and balls configured like a... a.. classroom from outer space. Let sit...’”

“That’s it! That’s where I’ve seen this pattern before!” Charlie yelled. Without thinking, he jumped from Rock’s shoulder onto the wall and raced upwards until he was about five feet above Rock and Jewel. He turned and looked back over his shoulder at the ropes and balls. “It’s your science room! Professor Pether’s room. This is exactly the pattern I saw when I was in the jar on the shelf. The balls are like the seats and the ropes are the work tables!”

“Oh my gosh. He’s right,” whispered Jewel as she took a step forward. She walked over to a big blue sparkly hoppity ball and a small beaten up tennis ball that looked like it had spent three summers outside in the rain. “This is where you and I sit.”

“I’m a beaten up tennis ball?” Rock asked. He was disappointed with his appearance.

“No. Actually, you’re the blue sparkly hoppity ball,” Jewel chuckled. “It looks like I’m the decrepit tennis ball.” Jewel stuck out her tongue and scrunched up her face to look like the ball.

“A blue sparkly hoppity ball?! I’m going to have to have a talk with the hooded one. I mean, I should really be a bright shiny hard lacrosse ball, don’t you think?”

Jewel looked around her, “Nope. Looks like Adam Rieter gets to be the lacrosse ball.”

“That’s so not fair. He’s only the high scorer because he’s the oldest kid on the team,” Rock stopped himself. “You know, I was only joking before about the balls actually being us, but I just noticed that the football is in Mike Dirk’s space and there’s a brand new tennis ball in Sheryl’s space. She has been seeded number one in junior national tennis this year and Mike is the first string quarterback. Maybe the balls do have significance.”

“Maybe. But if that’s so, whoever did this thinks you’re real cute and I’m really rough looking!”

“It might just be coincidence. The whole thing is bizarre. Who knows if this is really supposed to be the science room and, even if it is, what’s to make us think that it is made out to be when we have class? A hundred other kids have science at those seats just like us.”

“But not home room class,” Jewel reminded Rock.

“True,” Rock glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes had gone by. “Well, even if it is, we’d better go.”

Jewel took one last brief look around. “Nice work Charlie” she said. “If this is really our home room, we would never have figured it out without you.”

Charlie beamed at the compliment from Jewel although he had some doubts that it *was* a depiction of the classroom. “Who in their right mind would make Jewel a decrepit old tennis ball? But then again,” Charlie thought, “who in their right mind would create something like this?”

**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. Hector looked like a piece of “modern art” when Charlie looked at him through the ventilation shaft. Do you like modern art? What exactly is “modern art?” What is your favorite piece of art in your home?
2. Hector has a fire phobia. Do you know what a phobia is? Do you or anyone in your family have one? If so, what kind? The most common phobia is arachnophobia. If you don't know what that is, look it up!
3. Have you ever played kickball? If so did you like it? What games do you and your friends play during free time?
4. Do you like to jump rope? Do you do it by yourself or with friends? Can you double dutch? (Don't know what that is? Look it up!)
5. Rock didn't want to turn on the lights but he trusted Jewel. Who do you trust? What makes someone trustworthy?
6. Rock said the balls and rope patterns looked like a classroom from outer space. Do you think there is life on other planets? If so, do you think they have classrooms??!! Make up a great name for a planet with aliens on it and a name for the aliens too.