



Chapter 14: Flying ghosts & slithering hosts

They headed to the door, peaked out into the hallway and tiptoed out towards the science lab.

They made it to the end of the corridor without delay but as soon as they turned the corner they were confronted by something none of them had ever seen before.

It was high up and seemed to descend upon them. Rock ducked just in time to miss having his head shaved, but the bottom of whatever it was brushed across his shoulders and back, knocking Charlie to the floor. Rock stood up in just in time to see a dark hooded flying figure disappear into the gymnasium.

Jewel had been just behind Rock, so she missed getting hit by leaning back. It seemed to her that the same hooded figure that had run out of the gymnasium earlier had now just flown by them. She was stunned.

“What the?” Rock was nearly speechless too. He just stared at Jewel.

Jewel’s mouth was wide open, as were her eyes. “Did I really just see that?”

“Yeah, but what was *that*?”

“I’ve no idea,” Jewel said still staring in the direction of the gym.

“Me neither,” whispered Rock. “How about you Charlie?”

There was no reply. The flying hooded thing had sent him flying to the floor, knocking him unconscious. Charlie was just waking up when he heard Rock.

“Charlie?” Rock shined the flashlight on his shoulder. It was empty of his companion. He quickly moved

the light onto the ground and started scanning it back and forth. "Charlie?! Jewel! We've lost Charlie! That thing must have knocked him off my shoulder."

"Don't move!" warned Jewel as she started to help in the search and rescue mission. "We don't want to step on him." She moved her flashlight across the floor as well.

The hallway floors were almost black, which made the search for Charlie in the dark almost impossible. Neither Rock nor Jewel could see anything on the floor.

Charlie, in the meantime, had been keeping his eyes closed in order to stop his head from spinning. When he finally felt as though he had his wits about him, he opened his eyes to try to locate the voices that were calling.

The light of Rock's flashlight shone directly into his eyes, blinding him. The sheer brightness made his head hurt. He let out a small "Ahh!" as he held his hand over his eyes and turned his head away.

Jewel and Rock went quiet. They thought they had heard Charlie but they weren't quite sure. Charlie was just about to call out to them again, when all three of them heard a door opening.

"Someone's coming!" Jewel whispered as she looked in the direction of the sound.

"It's Jinkin! Hurry, in here!" Rock pointed to the auditorium door behind them. The two of them dashed into the doors just as the wheels to Jinkin's cart could be heard coming out into the hall.

(The Janitor's room was located at the end of the hall, just past the gymnasium on the right. Its door was about twenty feet from where Charlie was now sitting, about ten feet away from the gymnasium doors where the hooded figure seemed to have disappeared.)

Jinkin turned on the hallway light.

As Charlie's eyes adjusted, he was able to make out the dirty black wheels that were now headed his way. He had to act fast. He leapt onto all six of his legs and tried to guess which side of the hallway looked closer. It was a tie: he figured he was just about right smack in the middle. He decided to head in the direction that he thought Rock and Jewel had gone. He had to get to the wall fast. It was his only way to insure that he wouldn't get run over by the approaching wheels.

Charlie moved as fast as he could towards the wall. Every time he glanced over his shoulder, though, it was as if the cart had a heat seeking device locked on Charlie: the cart was headed right at him.

Charlie started to get a cramp in his side as he raced towards the wall. He could now feel the wind of the wheel at his back and the dark shadow of the cart beginning to descend on him. He was close but not close enough. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to determine that he was going to have to dive out of the way.

As much as an ant can jump, Charlie threw himself to the side and landed with a heavy thud on the ground. Of course, just as he made this heroic effort that sent shock waves through his body, the cart stopped. Charlie looked over to see what was happening and then felt the thunderous vibration of Jinkin's foot landing beside the cart. He barely had enough time to throw his body, for the second time in less than three seconds, off to the side. He narrowly escaped Jinkin's boot which came crashing down on the exact spot Charlie had just vacated.

Jinkin grabbed onto the front side of his cart and used his body to open the two large doors of the auditorium, pulling the cart in with him. Charlie watched as Jinkin and the cart disappeared into the dimly lit room where Rock and Jewel had gone only moments before.

Inside the auditorium, Jinkin entered with his back to Jewel and Rock who scurried into a row of seats and flattened themselves underneath the chairs as much as they could. Jewel looked at the ground and swore she'd never litter in the auditorium again if she got out of there without any type of fungus attached to her. Spencer would have fainted outright.

Jinkin wheeled the cart to the stairs at the side of the stage and hefted the bucket of water up onto the it. He slowly trudged up the stage stairs with mop in hand, all the time muttering something under his breath. It sounded so strange and foreign, that both Rock and Jewel had the thought that if they had not seen Jinkin complaining about the strange writing on the blackboards, they would have thought he was speaking it.

Meanwhile, Scraggs lifted himself off Jinkin's shoulders and soared high up into the air. Jewel and Rock watched in amazement. They had never seen Scraggs actually fly. Of course he had glided a bit in Professor Pethers room earlier in the day, but that was nothing like this. *This* was beautiful. The auditorium had a vast ceiling that reached three stories in height and Scraggs was slowly circling his way up in large smooth circles that outlined the room. Up and up he went, until once finally at the top he lengthened his wings and spiraled down the center of the room.

For a moment, Rock and Jewel were mesmerized, until Jewel remembered the time.

“Rock,” she whispered, and daring not speak another word, she pointed to her watch. They were becoming dangerously short on time and they still had to sneak out and find Charlie again.

Rock nodded that he understood. He peered out to look for Scraggs. They would have to move between rows as he circled his way up towards the ceiling.

Like army commandos, Jewel and Rock slithered under the seats up the rows. They needed to get up to the row that ended at the middle exit doors of the auditorium. That way, when Jinkin wasn't looking they could sneak back into the hallway and look for Charlie.

It was slow going. They barely fit under the seats, and the floor was so filthy, Rock and Jewel winced on more than one occasion. At about the third row up, Jewel's button on her sweater got caught between the one of the chair legs and the bolt securing it to the ground. Jewel watched as the button rolled down under the seats for a few rows before veering off to the left and slowly circling to a stop as it fell flat. There was no chance of going back to get it.

After about five minutes of crawling, they made it to the exit row. This was the most dangerous part. They wouldn't be covered for the length of seven chairs, plus they'd have to cross the aisle and then open and close the exit doors without attracting attention. They waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Several minutes passed and Rock and Jewel knew they needed to get out. They could no longer afford to wait for the perfect moment. If they didn't go soon, they'd never make it back to their houses on time.

Rock eyed Scraggs, circling overhead, and then Jinkins still mopping the stage. With his eyes on Scraggs, Rock held up an open hand to Jewel and then slowly and methodically lowered one finger at a time. When the last finger closed the two of them scrambled as fast as they could out from under the seats and then bent like miniature hunchbacks, ran for the exit.

They reached the exit door in a thankful silence. Not wasting a moment, Rock gently bent the lever down to open the door and held it open for Jewel to slip through.

On the other side of the door, in complete darkness, Jewel whispered hurriedly to Rock “Do you think they saw us?”

Rock grinned in the darkness, “No. I think we’re in the clear, believe it or not. But we’ve got to find Charlie and then get out of here or we’re going to be grounded for centuries.”

“No you’ll get centuries, I’ll get millenniums. And you’ll probably talk your way down to minutes, whereas I could possibly talk my way into eons. So,” Jewel heaved a sigh, “let’s get Charlie and go!” She flicked on her flashlight and pointed it back down the hall towards the first set of auditorium doors. “Charlie!” she whispered.

Charlie, in the meantime, having recovered from his daze, had waited several minutes for Rock and Jewel’s return and then made the decision to make his way back towards the science lab. He planned to go back to the jar and check on his friends while he waited for Rock and Jewel to arrive.

Of course, no sooner had he started out on his journey and reached the second set of auditorium doors Jewel and Rock had come flying out nearly crushing him to death. He did another full body throw to escape getting harmed and now felt like he was in some action-adventure film. He was brushing himself off when Jewel flicked on her flashlight. When he heard her call his name, he stood up and yelled rather grumpily, “I’m right down here by your feet!!!!!!”

Both Rock and Jewel froze and plunged their light beams down on their shoes (which, Rock noted to himself looked really cool in the spotlight). There, marching right up to the toe of Rock’s Techflight was their very special insect friend.

“Charlie!” Rock and Jewel whispered in excitement. Rock bent down and extended a very dirty looking finger for Charlie.

Charlie climbed up anyway, picking the least filthy spot he could find and then jumped off quickly onto Rock’s shoulder.

“You okay?” Rock said.

“Barely, but yeah. What the heck was that thing?” Charlie asked.

"I have no idea, do you?" Rock said, the excitement in his voice rising.

"No. I didn't get a good look," replied Jewel. "All I saw was a big black... *hooded thingy* soaring over your head and then disappearing into the gym."

"Hooded thingy?" Rock smiled.

Jewel gave him an exasperated look. "Well, that's what it was! You think of a better description, Mr.-I'm-too-busy-ducking-to-look," she smirked.

"Try Mr. Lighting-quick-otherwise-I'd-be headless."

"Uh, Mr. Slow-as-molasses."

"More like Mr.-Cat-like-reflexes."

"How about Mr.-time-to get-out-of-here!" Charlie butted in. "Guys, if my Chronopaw is correct, we've got to get going."

"You're right," Rock agreed, "We've got to move!"

Jewel eyed the gym door where the hood had disappeared. "I wish we had time to go check out where that thing went. Did anybody see if the gym door was open?"

"Nope," said Rock. "Too busy being Super-Ducker."

"Not me," said Charlie. "Too busy testing gravity without a parachute."

"Why?" Rock raised an eyebrow at Jewel.

"Well, because human objects need doors to be open to pass through them. Ghosts don't."

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's eyes had to adjust to the light when Janitor Jinkin turned the hallway lights on. Have you ever had that experience where it is hard to see when you go from dark to light? Do you know what causes it? If not, find out!
2. Jewel was disgusted over the litter on the auditorium floor. What are your family's rules about littering? What should you/ do you do if you see litter? Do you say something if your friend litters? A classmate? Your parent? A stranger?
3. Jewel was worried she might pick up a fungus from the auditorium floor. What is a fungus? Can you eat it or do you want to avoid it?
4. Jewel and Rock loved watching Scraggs fly. Do you like to watch birds fly? Do you have a favorite bird? If so, what kind and why? Look out the window or up into the sky, can you see a bird? What kind? If you don't know, find out.
5. Rock and Jewel crawled like "army commandos" under the auditorium seats. Challenge #1: Demonstrate what that is now. If possible have a race with someone to see who can travel that way the fastest. Set up an obstacle commando course. Challenge #2: Sneak up on someone that way!
6. Charlie says he was "testing gravity without a parachute." Would you ever go parachuting?