



## Chapter 15: Jessop's journey

The trip back to Professor Pether's room was surprisingly uneventful.

Hector hissed as soon they entered, "Someone's here to see you."

Charlie was shocked. "Me? Who?" He looked around the room quickly but there was no sign of anyone else.

Hector, in accordance with his seemingly perpetual state of disinterest, merely nodded his head slightly towards the shelf of jars and then rested his head back down on his hot rock, closing his eyes. Charlie immediately turned to the shelf and noticed a small, but well built ant marching with rigid determination down the length of it. Charlie could barely believe his eyes but no one else in the ant kingdom had a swagger like that—somewhere between the walk of a bulldog and the arms of an overly enthusiastic drummer boy. "Jessop!"

With a swift sudden jerk, the ant on the shelf came to a halt and turned his head towards Charlie, Rock and Jewel. His eyebrows pressed together and his eyes squinted as he searched for the source of the sound. Of course, he saw only Rock and Jewel making their way towards the back of the room. It would never have dawned on him that his good friend, and the purpose of his journey, was actually voluntarily sitting on the shoulder of the male Provider he was warily watching.

Rock and Jewel needed to get home and they were bee-lining for the closet door.

"Wait! Wait!" Charlie sang into Rock's ear. "That's my friend Jessop over there on the shelf!"

Rock paused. "Charlie, pal, we've really got to go. We're cutting it close on time as it is."

"Rock, I've just got to let him know I'm here. Hector told me Jessop was looking for me!"

Rock sucked in a breath of air as he glanced at his watch. "OK, let him know you're all right, but save the

elaborate details for later. We've got to hurry."

Rock turned towards Jessop and Charlie stood up on his back legs, waving his front legs in the air for his friend. "Jessop! Here! Here! I'm up here!"

Jessop's eyes grew wide as they pinpointed the location of his friend. What in tarnation was Charlie doing on the shoulder of a Provider? Did he not know that he was in strict violation of army ordinance 53018: *no ant shall voluntarily touch, mount or otherwise come into contact with a Provider except when deemed necessary to rescue or prevent injury to other ants or friendly insects?*

"Charlie! I order you to dismount from that Provider at once!"

Rock was walking over towards the shelf now, putting Jessop on high alert. Ignorant of his friend's distress and elated at the sight of a friendly (although not happy) face, Charlie used his fake army recruit voice and joked, "Uh, that would be a negative officer. I am unable to comply with your request at this time."

"Are you being held captive?" Jessop puffed up his chest, squaring off at Rock as if he might have to launch an attack on his own.

"Negative, sir," Charlie replied.

"Then I shall have to assume that you have suffered a trauma which has rendered you incapable of making sound, prudent and self-preserving decisions. Stay where you are and I shall be with you momentarily to personally see your safe return to Acrivada," Jessop bellowed as he marched across the shelf confidently towards Rock.

"Uh, not advisable sir," Charlie smirked. Under his breath he whispered to Rock, "Do me a favor and bend your ear down to your shoulder when say I the word 'forces.'"

Rock, who suspected that a good joke was about to be played out, quietly whispered, "Roger that sir."

"Ant, it is my assumption that you are no longer able to make decisions about what is advisable and what is not. I shall continue with my mission until I have you safe and secure on the ground."

"Sir, I must warn you that there are forces at work of which you are not aware," and at the word "forces,"

Rock bent his ear towards his shoulder and Charlie began to mime being sucked into Rock's ear by some invisible vacuuming force. He grabbed onto Rock's earlobe and did his reverse back flip so that his legs stretched toward Rock's ear canal and with his front arms he pretended to be clinging on for dear life, all the while shouting, "Jessop! Jessop! Sir! Helppppp! It's got me!!!!!"

If an ant's face could turn white, Jessop's would have. He could not believe his eyes. No army report he had ever read detailed Provider's ears as containing magnetic or vacuum-like forces which could harm an ant. He instinctively raced to help his friend while the dialogue in his mind gave him little answers on how he was to proceed. *Army file 968 on the qualities possessed by a Provider's ears does not contain aspects relating to suction. No unclassified records detail an ant attack by a Provider ear. Perhaps this is only classified information. If I had been promoted to lieutenant, I would have had access to such information and know how to proceed. Perhaps I will be promoted for this. Perhaps I will be providing the first eyewitness account of a Provider ear attack. Jessop! Center yourself! This is no time to think about promotions or news-breaking reports. You must save Charlie. Pull yourself together soldier!"*

Jessop powered on towards the edge of the shelf, losing the high drummer-like aspect of his walk and becoming more and more bulldog-like in his gait.

Meanwhile, in-between screams, Charlie whispered directions to Rock. "OK, great job so far. Now just move over to the shelf, put a very menacing face on and bend your ear down towards that ant approaching the edge of the shelf there."

Rock complied without hesitation sensing that Charlie's ant friend was falling hook, line and sinker for Charlie's prank. As he neared the shelf he contorted his face as if he were raving mad and even improvised some grunts and groans for added effect. Once there, he bent down over the ant, angling his ear down first.

Charlie delivered a howling scream, "Run Jessop! Run! He's after you too! It's our only chance! If he gets you, we're both doomed!"

Jessop did not know what to do. Nothing in his Division IV ant army manual had prepared him for this situation. He had intended on saving his friend but now surmised that he might be under attack. Rock's ear was descending dangerously fast.

He decided to run for it and then circle back for a surprise attack if he could. He stopped, turned round and shouted over his shoulder to Charlie, "Hang in there comrade! I will circle back for a secret approach

ASAP. Don't give up!"

As he turned to leave, Rock's ear was only three inches away. An ominous shadow fell upon Jessop and Charlie screamed "LOOK OUT!!!" just as he launched himself from Rock's earlobe onto Jessop's back.

Jessop's heart leapt from his mid-section and collided with his brain. The weight of Charlie landing on him flattened him. He had no idea what had hit him and so instinctively began thrashing about and screaming for his mother.

Charlie would never have dreamed that his joke would have played out so perfectly. He broke out into hysterics when he heard his giant bulky friend scream something close to "Mummy! I wuv woo! Your baby boompkee-kins wuvs woo!" Charlie rolled off to the side holding his belly that was positively shaking with laughter.

It took Jessop several moments before he realized that Charlie was rolling next to him laughing rather than writhing in pain. When he did, he instantly catapulted his enormous body onto Charlie's and put him into a half nelson that would have made any card carrying member of the WWE proud. "You!! You!!" seemed to be the full extent of his vocabulary.

Charlie could barely get any words out between his howls to calm his friend down. "Jessop!" (laugh laugh), "Buddy!" (Laugh laugh) "Boompkee-kins!" (Complete break down again.)

Had Charlie not been laughing so hard, he might actually have been able to perform a reverse roll through (courtesy of Uncle Jaxx) to release himself from Jessop, but his sides hurt too much.

"You! YOU! I'm gonna have your right leg!" Jessop finally managed to squeak out.

"My right leg?" chortled Charlie, and even though the half-nelson was beginning to endanger his head actually melding with the shelf top, Charlie couldn't resist adding. "What will your mummy say?"

If anyone else had said this to Jessop, the effect would have been disastrous, but oddly enough, when Charlie said it, it had almost the reverse effect. Jessop was so exasperated with Charlie that he had no choice but to give up and start giggling himself. He rolled off his friend and laid on his back with a big grin on his face, chuckling, "Oh soldier, that is what I love about you. I can trek 400 miles to rescue your shabby little thorax, brave a whole team of worm scum, infiltrate a Provider stronghold, attempt to deliver you from a perilous situation, and you still don't give me any respect, do you?"

“Nope,” Charlie said standing up on his back two legs and brushing his body off.

“Tell me, what’s it going to take?”

“You, in your underwear – the ones with super-ant on them, dancing the Macarena in front of Battalion VII.” Charlie quipped.

“I did that already.”

“You did? When?”

“Last night.”

“Oh well it doesn’t count if I didn’t see it – Boompkee-kins,” Charlie threw a grin at his friend.

“Uh, Charlie, I hate to interrupt this reunion but we have to go,” Rock said with urgency. He and Jewel had been standing over the wriggling ants now for what seemed like several minutes (although it was only seconds) and Jewel was throwing panicked looks at the closet and her watch.

Charlie glanced up at his friends. “Oh yeah, um, Rock and Jewel, I’d like you to meet my friend Jessop, Sargeant in Battalion VII, Acrivada. Jessop, this is Rock and Jewel.”

“Hi,” Rock and Jewel said simultaneously, flashing a smile at Jessop.

Jessop, meanwhile was gob macked. He stood there like a paralyzed goober just gazing at Rock and Jewel with his mouth ajar.

Charlie cleared his throat., “Ah hem, buddy. They said ‘Hi.’ Shall I tell them you said ‘hello’ as well?”

Jessop gave the slightest hint of a nod, never changing his expression, as Charlie relayed the greeting. “He says ‘hello’ as well.”

“What’s he doing here? Did he come all this way just to find you?” asked Rock.

“Yep. I think so, although I’m not just sure how he knew I wa -“

Jessop regained his senses in the middle of Charlie's sentence, "You're an Outerling?! You actually can speak to them?! Why didn't you ever tell me? You would be invaluable to the army! No one in the past 75 years has reported having the gift. Charlie this is amazing!"

"You know about Outerlings? How come you never told me?" Charlie looked at his friend in disbelief. Did everyone in the insect kingdom know about Outerlings except him?

"Actual documentation of Outerlings is sensitive information," Jessop informed Charlie, regaining his army composure. His voice became deep and clipped, very matter-of-fact.

"Well, that never stopped you from telling me things in the past!" Charlie shot back.

"Shh! You are not supposed to let anyone know that I have entrusted you with army intelligence." The two ants were now squared off looking at each other with furrowed eyes.

"Oh, like they're going to inform the army?!" Charlie said motioning to Rock and Jewel.

"I don't know, now do I? I am not equipped with a thorough understanding of Provider behavior, now am I?" His face moved closer to Charlie's.

"Boys! Boys!" Jewel interrupted. Although she could not understand what Jessop was saying, she clearly got the picture from the tone in Charlie's voice and his words that the two were bickering. "We haven't got time for this. Rock and I need to get home – now!"

Charlie looked sheepishly down at the ground. "You're right. I'm sorry." He turned to Jessop. "Listen buddy, it really doesn't matter. I only discovered today that I have it when I was trapped in that jar up there and then I met Rock and Jewel here, who took me home –"

"You went to a Provider's home?!" Jessop interrupted.

"Yeah, Rock took me on his bike –"

"You rode on a bike?!" Jessop interrupted again. "Charlie, do you have any idea how many Acrivada laws you have broken concerning underage interaction with Providers? A Provider's home, a bicycle, voluntarily riding a Provider's shoulder, not to mention entering a forbidden zone monitored by army

intelligence. What else is there?"

"Did army scouts see me breaking through The Fence?" Charlie gulped, ignoring Jessop's last question.

"Negative. But you're lucky I was on patrol and not Sniper or Horvath. They'd 've turned you in without ever raising an antennae."

"Did you see me get jarred then?"

"Negative. At 17:07, I was on patrol of the Northeast sector of The Fence..."

"At 17:07, he was on patrol of the Northeast sector..." Charlie whispered under his breath, translating. Jessop glared over at Charlie. He did not enjoy having an echo. He found it most irritating particularly because when he heard his words come out of Charlie's mouth he had the distinct impression that he sounded, well, somewhat pompous. He continued on anyway.

"I lifted my Hawker 5's, issued to me under army regulation 713, and determined that said object was a Vesuvius III backpack in red and black snake hide. Not army issue. The army doesn't approve of snake use for ant wear or gear. There's only one ant I know of in Acrivada that has a Vesuvius-made backpack and that's Charlie, um well, you. The army had reported a sharp increase in kidnappings over the last 24 hours and so I surmised that may have been your fate. I retrieved said backpack from the forbidden zone, without detection, and returned to my patrol duties. After being relieved of my post, I circled back and attempted to locate your position."

"My backpack!" cried Charlie. In all that had happened, he had forgotten that he had been wearing it. Given to him by his Uncle Jaxx, of course, it was one of his prized possessions. Nobody had a Vesuvius in Acrivada. Snake-use was frowned upon by the establishment although not yet outlawed. Only the roughest of ants ever had the nerve to acquire or carry snake hide.

Flashes of shoes, brooms and birds came rapidly into his mind as well as his rocket-like flights from bicycles, second story windows and Rock's shoulder a few moments ago. However, he surmised, as Jessop would say, "that it would not be prudent at this juncture" to relay any of that information to his friend. He coughed, averted his eyes and fibbed, "Jessop. I can assure you, I could not be in safer hands. Rock and Jewel have turned out to be really great friends and I just need to help them figure out if there's a ghost in the—"

“Need to find out if there’s a ghost?! I think you may just have lost your marbles, Charlie!”

“Jessop!” Charlie interrupted. “Look, we’ve really got to be going. I promise I’ll be back by tomorrow evening. We can meet at say 4 o’clock by The Fence, I’ll have Rock and Jewel drop me off. No one will know.”

A large hissing noise broke into the conversation. “Professor Pethers may notice you’re not in the jar in the morning. I didn’t mention it before but feel compelled to now.” Hector said.

(From the slow disinterested quality of Hector’s voice, Charlie had a hard time believing that *anything* compelled Hector. As a result, he took Hector’s warning very seriously.)

Jessop nearly flew off the ledge. As Hector spoke, Jessop laid eyes on the giant reptile for the first time and about had a heart attack. “What in high oaks is that? You expect me to believe that you will be safe with something like that in the vicinity? That’s it Charlie. You are leaving with me this very instant. I was right all along; your judgment has been seriously impaired.”

“Oh don’t let your stripes get wavy Jessop. That’s just Hector. He’s very cool too. Saved my… uh, doesn’t speak much, but what he does have to say is usually important.” He turned toward Hector. “You think Professor Pether’s will notice if I’m gone?”

“Does Peter Fallows have terrible body odor?”

Charlie turned back to Rock and Jewel and repeated Hector’s question.

“Uh, that would be a definite ‘yes’,” Jewel scrunched up her face as if she had just bitten into a lemon. (Peter Fallows did not believe in taking showers. He believed instead that one’s own natural scent was best and that showers should only occur on a quarterly basis.)

“I guess we’ll have to leave you here then,” Jewel said sadly.

Charlie’s face visibly fell. He loved being with his new friends. Despite all the mishaps, he was having a great time. This was an *adventure!*

Jessop noticed the change in his friend’s face. “Charlie? What’s wrong Charlie? Why did Peterrr… whoever, why did his body odor upset you? Are you to come into contact with said Provider?”

“No, it’s just that, I *really* wanted to go home tonight with Rock and Jewel so that I could help them figure out what is going on, but our friend Hector over there thinks that the teacher will notice if I am missing from that jar tomorrow morning,” Charlie pointed over to the jar where Gunther and XL were fast asleep. Gunther had fallen asleep in the same spot he had occupied since Charlie first saw him, while XL had fallen asleep with his eye and mouth half open smashed up against the jar.

“And the consequences of that would be?” Jessop asked.

Charlie tilted his head to the side thinking. “I don’t know. Rock? Jewel? What happens if I’m not in my jar tomorrow morning and Professor Pethers discovers it?”

“I get marked down a full grade on my project,” sighed Rock. “Professor Pethers has very strict protocol about insects getting loose ever since last year when some kid let a bunch of mosquitoes out. I plan on having you back in first thing in the morning. I don’t think the Professor will notice before then.”

“Oh,” Charlie turned to Jessop. “Rock will get in trouble.”

Charlie looked positively downtrodden. Jessop put a hand on his friend’s shoulder and tried to sound sympathetic. “Charlie, I have to get you back to Acrivada any way. You can’t re-enter that jar or go home with these Providers. I’d be breaking every rule in the book if I didn’t return with you.”

This only made it worse for Charlie. Although he never would have thought so nine hours ago, he’d rather be in the jar, than return to Acrivada right now. He fell silent and shifted his gaze towards the ground, shuffling his feet. Then suddenly, an idea struck him.

“Jessop,” he grabbed onto his friend’s hand. “Jessop, you’re right. You can’t return without me, it would ruin your career. BUT, if you returned with me tomorrow afternoon after being trapped all night in a torture jar, escaping and then *rescuing* me from certain doom, you’ll probably be promoted immediately. Plus, you will definitely earn a few medals.”

Jessop tried to pull away from Charlie but he couldn’t. Charlie had a firm grip on his hand “Now just hold on there. If you think I’m going to spend the night in that there jar – with those two bunk mates,” Jessop nodded at XL and Gunther, “you’ve got another thing coming. Uh, uh. NOOO way.” He shook his head.

Charlie looked up at Rock and Jewel and ad-libbed, “Look, it’s perfectly safe—I promise Jessop—and just think of the reception you’ll receive in Acrivada! You’ll be a hero! I promise to back you up 100% and give them a story about your bravery that will make Gunga Gavin’s rescue mission look like a stroll through a garden.” (Gunga Gavin was infamous for having single-handedly saved three hundred school ants from a misguided field trip that ended up at an insect repellent testing site.)

Charlie paused for effect and lowered his head so that his eyes met Jessop’s, “Buddy if there was ever a time that I needed you it’s now. Please, please do this for me. I promise everything will work out for the best.”

There was a long silence before Jessop said anything at all. He shook his head several times without saying anything, heaved an enormous sigh and then looked up at his childhood friend to break the bad news to him. But, when he opened his mouth, Jessop was as shocked as anybody to hear the words that came out. “I’ll do it.”

Charlie about did a jig. Before Jessop could correct himself, Charlie threw his arms around his friend and said, “Thank you Jessop. If there is one person in the world that I can always count on, it’s you. You are the best friend an ant has ever had.”

The deal was sealed. Jessop no more wanted to spend a night in a jar with a Monarch caterpillar and a drooling worm (a small stream was running down the jar wall from XL’s mouth), than he wanted to be a test ant for anti-shoe devices (none had been successful so far). But the look on his friend’s face and the words of camaraderie that flowed from Charlie’s mouth made Jessop keep his promise.

“Just tell me what time I will see you in the morning,” Jessop said as if he were a defeated ant.

“Guys, what time will we be back in the morning?” Charlie looked up at Rock and Jewel.

“Never, if we don’t get out of here soon!” Jewel said in a panic. She was almost frantic now.

“We’ll be fine,” Rock tried to calm her. “School homeroom is at 8:00 a.m. and Jessop will be able to see us then, but we won’t be able to get him out until science class, which is just before 11. You’ll need to give us a few minutes though—we probably won’t get to the jars until after 11:00.”

“You’ll see us at 0800 hours and we’ll relieve you of your duties somewhere around 1100.”

"Fine," Jessop grumbled. He turned to Rock and Jewel. "If anything happens to my friend, I will hold you both responsible. Now how am I supposed to enter that glass chamber?"

"Can you open the jar for Jessop?" Charlie asked.

Rock unscrewed the top and laid his finger down next to Jessop to give him a lift. Jessop jumped back raising his two front legs into fists before his face, ready to fight.

"Woo, woo, take it easy buddy. Rock's just offering you a lift up there," Charlie said soothingly.

Jessop grunted, "No thanks, I'd rather walk."

Jessop, the drummer-like gait now returning to his walk, made his way up the side of the Jar while Charlie jumped onto Rock's finger and dismounted onto his shoulder. Jessop mumbled under his breath the entire time. Occasionally Charlie would pick up pieces of it like, "risked my neck," "against army code," "three kamakazee crows," "gad-blasted Outerling," "a gang of worthless worm scum," etc. and so made a note to himself to ask Jessop later about the details of his trip. They certainly didn't have time now, Jewel already was five steps towards the closet.

At the top of the jar lip, Jessop surveyed his new quarters and bunk mates shaking his head in disbelief. He turned to Charlie and said, "0800 first sighting, correct? Shortly after 1100, I shall be released?"

"Yes sir, Lieutenant," Charlie saluted his big rugged friend.

Rock picked up the lid to screw it back into place. Charlie could still hear Jessop mumbling as he trekked his way down the side of the Jar: "illegally entering a forbidden zone," "nearly crushed by foreign falling items," and "delinquent dung beetles."

Charlie turned his attention towards Jewel, who was inside the closet now, and Rock was just about to close the gap between jar and lid when a few more random pieces of mumbling made their way to Charlie's ears: "my extensive night training," "dark hooded Providers running at me," "trudge through turtle turds."

"What?!!!" Charlie whipped around and started running down Rock's arm towards the jar. "Wait! Wait Rock! Don't close it yet! Lift it up! Lift up the lid!"

Rock stopped the lid in mid-air and looked at Charlie. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“Jessop just said... I’ve just got to....,” he huffed as he sailed toward the jar. In his excitement, he jumped the small distance from Rock’s hand to the jar lip. He barely made it. Hanging on with just his front legs, he used his other four legs to push himself up and peer down into the jar. He had a very nice bird’s eye view of his friend’s rear-end walking downward.

“Wait! Wait Jessop! What did you say?”

Jessop turned around and gave a puzzled look at his friend. “Uh, I was just saying how I ran into a field of turtle turds...”

“No, no! Before that!” Charlie panted.

“Uh, my night training?” Jessop puffed up proudly.

“No, no! After that! What did you say about the Provider?”

Jessop’s heart fell a bit at not being able to revel in his expertise as a night commander. “Oh, the Provider?”

“Yeah yeah, the Provider – what did you say he look liked?”

Although not talking about his night expertise, Jessop puffed up a little bit anyway. “Well, sir, it was dark, and I had just spent some time circumnavigating a gang of delinquent dung beetles, they could’ve used a little time in boot camp to get ‘em into shape, you know?”

“Jessop! We don’t have time—you can tell me about them later! Right now I need to know about the Provider.”

Jessop looked mildly annoyed. He thought the encounter with the dung beetles would have been a far better story to have told his friends. He could have included his use of the stars for navigation, his camouflage skills, and his lightening-like reflexes in creating a diversion with a rotting orange seed that he personally thought was brilliant. However, he continued on as asked.

“Sure, sure, no problem. Just as I had gotten ‘round the dung beetles, I heard a crashing sound to the

North—sort of like a door slamming. In order to ascertain the origin of this sound, I scaled the nearest grass blade and upon summiting, discovered the source of the rhythmic vibrations that had slowed my ascent up the grass. There, coming directly towards me, was a Provider dressed entirely in black including a dark hood obscuring said provider’s face. I had only enough time to abandon my grass post by jumping off the top, to avoid getting crushed.”

“Did you get a look at the Provider’s face? Can you tell me if it was a male or female? Any chance it was a ghost?”

“No chance of the ghost thing—ghosts wouldn’t make vibrations like that in the earth. And a negative on identifying features, all I saw was a black figure.”

Charlie’s heart sank a bit, “Nothing? You can’t tell us anything? Hair color? Eye color? Anything?”

“Negative on all accounts. I had to dive towards the ground, Charlie. I barely hit the dirt in time to escape getting annihilated,” Jessop explained.

“Could you tell what type of footwear the provider had on at least?”

“Negative.”

Charlie looked about as disappointed as the time he had learned that Jared Redsmall had just asked Mitzi Millflour to the annual Acrivada outdoor festival. Charlie had had such a crush on Mitzi that he and his Uncle Jaxx had even gone so far as to concoct a love potion for her from some ancient druid spell book Uncle Jaxx had found. The potion worked great, only Charlie’s pet dust mite accidentally drank it and Charlie had to spend the next 24 hours trying to keep his mite from attempting to kiss with him.

“Charlie, hey look, buddy, I wish I could help you out but I was too busy dodging a big fat heavy manila envelope to look over and see what type of footwear the provider had on. I’m sorry.”

“Manila envelope?!” perked up Charlie. “You almost got hit by a manila envelope?”

“Yeah,” Jessop said shaking his head sadly. “I didn’t get to see the type of footwear. The Provider was in such a rush coming out of that door that he—or she—dropped this massive manila envelope right over my head. That’s what I had to dodge. That’s why it was such a surprise. I could tell from the intensity and frequency of the earthly vibrations that I wasn’t going to be hit by a foot. My stride-factor

calculations told me that the Provider would be stepping two feet beyond my field position.”

“A manila envelope! Rock! Jewel! Did you hear that?! Jessop almost got hit by a manila envelope!”

The fact that Jessop had nearly been crushed to death by a weighted packet of paper did not seem to Jessop to be news fit for prime time airing, but Charlie certainly seemed to have a different perspective on the matter.

“Jessop, did you get a good look at the envelope?” Charlie panted, his front legs held out in front of him as he leaned over the lip edge balancing on his stomach.

“Of course I got a good look at the envelope. When something nearly makes you into a Sunday morning pancake, you’d better darn well get a good look at it!” Jessop replied in disbelief. He still didn’t understand what all the hoopla around the envelope was.

“Well what did it look like Jessop?!” Charlie half-screamed, nearly ready to dive bomb Jessop from the lip of the jar to get the information out faster. “How big was it? Can you guess how heavy it was or what was in it? Was it addressed to anybody? Did it have any markings on it at all?”

Jessop rolled his eyes at Charlie’s frustration. He still didn’t see what the big deal was. His get away from the dung beetles surely had much more value than this. “It was a standard Provider issue manila envelope, I think. Fairly basic, with the letters “LP” scribbled on the front in black ink and then underlined. No address though. No stamps either.”

Charlie had been translating all this to Rock and Jewel, who Rock had motioned to move closer the second he heard Charlie ask about a Provider. She still was throwing worried glances at the closet door, as if at a certain stroke of time it was going to evaporate into thin air.

Charlie spoke first, ““LP”? What could that possibly mean? Do you have a class with those initials? Or maybe a teacher? Or a student?”

“Lundiva Pommegray!” Rock blurted out.

Jewel waved her hands frantically as she spoke, “Lundiva! Of course! She’s new! But—oh gosh! We’ve got to go—we’ll think about it on the way home. Come on!” and with those last words she scooped Charlie right up off the lip of the jar before he knew what hit him.

Rock screwed the lid on as fast as he could and barely managed to get it back in its place without it tumbling off the shelf. The earthquake inside it woke up both XL and Gunther who both screamed in horror at the shock waves and at the sight of one of the largest ants they'd ever seen surveying them with a scowl on his face.

**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 friend Jessop is in the ant army. Do you know of anyone in the military service? What was/ is their experience like? Ask them. What can you do to honor their service?  
#CTASalutesTheArmedForces
2. Jessop puts Charlie in a "half-nelson." What is that? What is the WWE? If you don't know google the answers (just don't try to put anyone you know in a half-nelson).
3. Can you dance the Macarena? Do it!
4. Charlie and Jessop began "bickering." What is bickering? How is it different from arguing? Do you ever bicker with someone? If so, who? What is a good way to stop bickering? What strategies do you use?
5. Charlie fibs about being in the "safest of hands" with Jewel and Rock. What is the difference between a fib and a lie? Is there one?
6. Peter Fallows doesn't shower often. How often do you think someone should shower? Do you shower or take a bath? Use deodorant? Perfume? Do you think people should be conscious of how they smell? What are the rules of good hygiene and why is good hygiene important?
7. Jessop is a friend on whom Charlie can always count. Who is that friend for you?
8. Jessop had to circumnavigate a gang of delinquent dung beetles. What does the word "circumnavigate" mean? What does "delinquent" mean? Care to find out what dung beetles eat?