



Chapter 17: The hectic homeroom

Rock and Jewel shared their stories on the way back to school the next morning. Jewel felt like the fact that she was actually riding to school, on her own, with Rockville, was pretty close to having escaped a lifetime jail sentence. Rock was still reeling from his father's cryptic comment about the ice cream. He couldn't believe his father knew he had been out and was letting him get away with it. Sometimes he just couldn't figure parents out.

(Usually it was his mom that baffled him not his dad... This morning on his way out the door, Rock's mother bent down and gave him a great big squeeze, filling Charlie's antennae with her sweet perfume. When she pulled out of the hug, Rock's mom held Rock firmly in her hands at arm's length. She looked him straight in the eye and said, "Have a great day my Virgo. Should you feel like hiding today, remember that your stars require that you stand tall." She smiled and let him go— a typical send off for Rock.)

Rock and Jewel's mood turned a bit more serious though as they rounded the corner into the school parking lot and managed to nearly run over Professor Pommegray.

"My ego centered adolescents! You must try and be more careful! You nearly knock zah wind right out of me." Lundiva Pommegray peered down at the riders of the bicycles that had come screeching to a halt in front of her. She was certainly tall, and strange. She stood about five foot eleven, wore an ill-fitting red velour track suit, with high heels, and today had prepared her hair into an enormous bee-hive on the top of her head that gave her at least another eight inches in height. Bumble-bee earrings dangled from her lobes.

"Uh, sorry Mrs. Pommegray," Jewel stuttered.

"Yeah, me too," Rock joined in shyly.

“Oh dear,” Lundiva said tilting her head to the side. “Socially anxious, are we now, Master Turner? I would never ‘ave expected it from you given your latent leadership tendencies zat I expect will burst forth soon. Ent you, Miss Dervin, I’d ‘ave expected better use of zat extraordinary cranial capacity in navigating zat vehicle. Be more careful now, von’t you two?” She raised her left eyebrow at them.

“Yes, Professor,” Jewel and Rock said in unison.

“Oh! Oh! There’s Joseph. I must go talk to him about - “ Lundiva stopped short. “Well, zat’s really not for your ears now iz it? Tah Tah.” And off she strode straight for Sloppy Joe who, from his dramatic air guitaring, was quite obviously listening to something in the heavy metal genre.

Jewel turned to Rock, “Well, if that doesn’t seal the deal, I don’t know what does. Look at them, they are certainly intensely involved in something secretive.”

Rock glanced over and saw Lundiva remove the speaker head from Sloppy’s Joe’s left ear and then put her own mouth right up next to his now exposed ear as she began speaking. Sloppy Joe responded by nodding (to the beat) and leading her into the front doors of the school.

Inside the school, Jewel, Rock and Charlie’s hearts all skipped a beat when they entered Professor Pether’s classroom. The room was a total yard sale. Everyone seemed to be gathered around something—or someone—in the aisle that ran along the front of the shelf holding the jars. Truly and Ticky Trixie were sobbing and wailing as they looked down at the ground with sheer terror in their faces. Spencer Bluecraft was frantically spraying himself with some kind of disinfectant as Peter Fallows kept brushing up against him to get a closer look at whatever was on the ground. Earnest Wheetlebaum was actually standing on top of the nearest lab table frantically taking notes on the scene while Jeremy Smyth attempted to tie Earnest’s shoelaces together without anyone noticing. All of the other students were crowded around, some jumping up and down as if on pogo sticks to get a look at whatever was in the aisle. All that Rock and Jewel could see in the aisle was Nurse Weatherbottom’s rather large posterior blocking the entire area between the cabinets and the lab table.

Professor Pethers suddenly appeared behind Rock and Jewel, who were still blocking the door way, and he gently pushed them to the side as he hurried in. “Here you are Nurse Weatherbottom,” he said holding up a small vial.

Nurse Weatherbottom sat up on her knees and turned around to take the vial, reveling Taloula lying face up on the floor. Her insect jar lay on the ground next to her. Apparently she had checked on her ladybug

first thing this morning and fainted when she discovered it missing. Thankfully Ticky and Truly had been right beside her and caught her on the way down so that she hadn't been hurt as she fell.

Nurse Weatherbottom waved the smelling salts gently under Taloula's nose. "That's it now, girl. Yes, yes, come now little one. It's alright," she said in the most soothing of voices.

Taloula's head started to move slowly back and forth. She murmured bits about her ladybug and when she finally came to, she clung to Nurse Weatherbottom's sleeve and pleaded with her. "Please, please tell me it's not true. Tell me my little lady-beauty is still there."

Nurse Weatherbottom patted Taloula's arm, "Here, here my little darling. Now don't you fret a single moment more about your ladybug. You come on down to my office and have a nice cup of tea and then we'll have a chat about your ladybug."

Nurse Weatherbottom's voice was hypnotic and with it she was able to lead Taloula, zombie-like, out of the classroom, down the hall to her office. Professor Pethers stood in the spot where Taloula had been, raised both his arms, and let out a whistle that nearly broke every glass jar in the room. "Everybody back to your seats. It's time for roll call—come on now everybody settle down," he directed.

Earnest Wheetlebaum was just about to have a disastrous dismount from the lab table when Professor Pether's halted him and untied his shoe laces from one another. Earnest shot Jeremy a scathing look but Jeremy wasn't paying the least bit attention. He was too busy reading "21 Ways to Blow up a Garbage Can" in his new issue of *The Tactical Teenager*.

As Trixie and Truly comforted each other, Rock and Jewel made their way to their seats down the aisle closest to the jars so that Jessop could see Charlie as planned. Charlie was petrified to look over at his friend. All last night, he had thought about how Jessop was probably never going to forgive him for knowingly sending him into a jar occupied by a pompous caterpillar and a trash-talking worm. Jessop had never met a worm he liked.

Rock took his seat and glanced over at his jar, unaware of his friend's angst. "What the heck? Hey, Charlie," Rock said, "Is that normal bug behavior?"

Charlie's heart dropped into his stomach. Very slowly he turned his head to look up at his friends and just about pulled a Taloula special. What he saw was exactly that about which he had been having nightmares. Jessop and XL were fighting as if they were competing for the WWE heavyweight

championship of the world. Jessop took XL from a rear headlock hold, flipped him over his shoulder, and slammed him to the ground. Then he ran up onto Gunther's twig and hurled himself like a flying squirrel square onto the motionless XL, whose whole body jerked up and fell again from the force of Jessop landing on him. Gunther in the meantime was hanging upside and motionless from a branch of the twig. Charlie swallowed hard. It was ugly.

Jessop was now banging XL's head against the ground. Rock squinted his eyes to get a better idea of what was going on. "Charlie, it looks to me as if-

"Jessop's beating the living daylights out of XL," Charlie broke in. "I was afraid this might happen. You've got to get me back into that jar and Jessop out. XL's life depends on it."

"I can't," Rock whispered. "After everything that just happened with Taloula's ladybug, Professor Pethers will be on me faster than Jeremy Smyth can sling a spit ball."

"Well maybe I can—Oh oh, that did not look good," Charlie's face cringed. Jessop had just slammed XL's entire body up against the side of the jar. "Oh what's the use! Even if I save XL in time, he'll still kill *me* for sending Jessop in there. And that's only *after* Jessop, kills me." He slumped down further into the folds of Rock's shirt.

The bell rang for homeroom to begin and Professor Pethers started roll call: "Olivia Adams?"

"Here."

"Spencer Bluecraft."

"Here." (Muffled, he was breathing into his paper bag again. The whole Peter Fallows thing had been too much for him.)

"Sheryl Croft?"

"Yep."

"Jewel Dervin."

Silence.

“Jewel?” Professor Pethers looked up from his list.

“Oh, sorry. Here.” Jewel had been busy trying to understand the strange writing she had copied from Professor Fahid’s blackboard.

Professor Pethers gave her a brief smile and then continued with the list right on down to Earnest Wheetlebaum, who answered with his usual brown-nosing, “Here and happy sir.”

Just as the Professor finished, the announcements for the day crackled through the PA system. The very nasally but perky voice of Penelope Pickany filled the air: “Good morning Fiercedale students and teachers. Today is Thursday, May 5th...”

Jewel completely tuned out Ms. Pickany, the mysterious writing was way more important than anything that woman could have to say. Rock wasn’t listening either. He was trying to piece together all the events from last night. He shot a glance over at his insect jar. Jessop and XL seemed to be lying on their backs on the ground but he couldn’t tell if they were all right. He was too far away. “Hey Charlie,” he tried to cheer his friend up. “I think your friends have finally called a truce.”

Charlie looked cautiously up at the jar and then bolted straight up on Rock’s shoulder, putting his hands on his mid section hips. “I’m going to kill them!” he blurted out. Indeed, Jessop and XL had taken a break but they were now both laughing hysterically on the floor of the jar, their bodies shaking in laughter. The whole fight had been one big joke. Charlie had performed such spectacles with Jessop a hundred of times for his brothers and sisters who loved to watch the big army ant “pound” their brother, only to have Charlie come back in the end and put Jessop in a toe lock to win the battle. He couldn’t believe he had been fooled so easily.

“What?” whispered Rock.

“They were joking the whole time! Look at em! The two of them are laughing their heads off!” Charlie complained.

“Well, don’t you think that’s better than them killing each other?” Rock offered quietly.

“Barely! I’ve been worried about them all night! How could they lead me on like that?” Charlie had a furious look on his face which Jessop and XL finally noticed causing them to actually fall over in laughter

again, their hands holding their midsections. Even Gunther was laughing, apparently he had been in on it too. Charlie slumped even further down into Rock's shirt.

"Well, it was kind of funny...," Rock whispered back.

"No it wasn't!" Charlie snapped back. "Ugh. When are these announcements over?" He just wanted to get away. He was basically mad at himself for being so easily duped. He would have done the same thing in a heart beat.

"And, finally, your last class will end ten minutes early today so that you may return to your homerooms and vote for your favorite teachers, classes and activities in our annual school poll. The votes will be tallied tonight at the district meeting and we will announce all the winners on Monday. That's all from your favorite anno-"

Just then the bell ending homeroom rang and the room broke into complete chaos as everyone gathered up their belongings and headed for the door. Jewel rolled her eyes as Mrs. Jitherburrs entered the classroom and cornered Professor Pethers at his desk shoving a stack of papers and colored pens into his hands. "Ugh. Let's get out of here quick." Jewel whispered to Rock.

"But I wanted to swing by the jar first for Charlie..."

"Uh-uh. Let's just go. I don't really feel like talking to those guys right now," Charlie sulked. He was avoiding eye contact with them and didn't want to see them laughing at him up close. Suddenly, he had a bad feeling come over him.

"Alright, we're outta here. What class do you have next?" Rock asked Jewel.

"Math with Professor Fahid. So I return to the scene of the crime..." Jewel did her best Alfred Hitchcock voice. "What do you have?"

"History."

"With Professor I-love-to-hear-my-voice?" Jewel said.

"Yep. Professor Drone-on."

“The Anti-Wake.”

“The need-toothpicks-in-your-eyes guy.”

“Ewww...”

“To hold your eyelids up!”

“Oh. Sorry, I had a vision of them,” Jewel pointed a finger going straight in the center of her eye. “Well, good luck Charlie. At least you can catch up on some sleep.”

Charlie perked up. He had an idea. “You’re going back to Fahid’s classroom? Can I come? That way I can have a good look around to see if there are any more clues or anything...,” his voice trailed off. Charlie didn’t know what he could actually find, but the idea of sitting on Jewel’s shoulder seemed a lot more inviting to him than going to hang out with the “toothpicks-in-your-eyes” guy.

Jewel shrugged her shoulders, “It’s okay with me. What do you think, Rock?”

“He’s all yours. At least that way I know he’s safe from dying of boredom.”

“Well, I wouldn’t count on that. It *is* Math.”

Rock passed through the science room door helping Charlie off his shoulder and onto Jewel’s as she tried to slip past Ms. Jitherburrs unnoticed.

Jewel avoided making any sort of contact with Mrs. Jitherburrs whenever possible which generally worked to her advantage.

But not today.

If she had looked up in her direction, Jewel might have noticed the manila envelope tucked underneath Mr. Jitherburrs left arm which only partially obscured the letters “LP;” while if Charlie had merely glanced in the direction of his three insect friends, instead of purposefully ignoring them, he would have seen them all banging their heads up against the jar, pointing at the envelope and screaming wildly to try to get his attention.

But, as it was, Charlie and Jewel left the room noticing nothing.

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. How are you feeling about the chapter you just read? What are you wondering about now? Are you excited to read more?
2. Lundiva Pommegrays says Rock has "latent leadership tendencies." What does "latent" mean? What skills does one need to be a leader? What makes a good leader. Name someone you think is a good leader. Do you like to lead or follow?
3. When Rock and Jewel entered Professor Pether's classroom, it is described as a "total yard sale." What does that mean? What image does it bring to your mind?
4. Some kids in the classroom were jumping up and down as if on "pogo sticks." Do you know what one is? Have you ever tried a pogo stick? Can you pretend like you are on one now?
5. Professor Pethers handed Nurse Weatherbottom smelling salts. What are they? When are they used?
6. Nurse Weatherbottom is described as having an "hypnotic voice." What does that mean? Can you imitate a voice that you think would be "hypnotic?" Do you know someone who has that type of voice? What is hypnosis?
7. Rock was about to go to a boring history class. When you are in a boring class, what do you do to help keep yourself focused? What strategies do you use?