



Chapter 22: The ghost is a witch

Jewel and Rock turned toward the door. The dark figure of Ms. Jitherburrs stepped into the room, closing the door behind her.

“So does Professor Pethers know that you spend your time talking to bugs? Quite an odd pastime I might say,” Ms. Jitherburrs said menacingly, slowly walking down the aisle towards Rock, Jewel and all the bugs.

Rock and Jewel stood speechless, too afraid to move. They had no idea how much Ms. Jitherburrs had discerned from their conversation. Surely she knew that they knew what she was doing but they didn’t know if she believed that their insects could actually understand them.

“Not that odd,” Rock tried to cover it up. “People talk to their pets all the time. I mean, that’s why you had everyone bring in hair from their pets. People love their pets and they talk to them.”

Ms. Jitherburrs eyes narrowed. “Hmm, I didn’t know you were so attached to your bugs. Let’s see what you have in there.” She leaned over and peered into the jar, her shadow making the jar go dark. Charlie could see Jessop shiver. XL shook like he was a gummy worm and not a real one. Suddenly, Charlie knew why he had gotten a chill earlier. He should have known Ms. Jitherburrs was present. It was the same feeling he had had in her classroom and the same feeling that briefly wafted by him when the dark hooded figure had escaped from the gym. In fact, he thought, he had even felt it when that flying hooded thing narrowly missed him.

“Let’s see now. An ant, rather scrawny looking, an ailing worm and a dreadful caterpillar. I wonder which one is your favorite? Perhaps the worm? No?” She turned with her eyebrows raised in question to Rock and Jewel. When they didn’t answer, she continued, “That’s good because then you won’t mind if I, how shall we say it? Discard him?”

“No!” Rock and Jewel shouted at the same time.

“Oooo, rather fond of him now are we?” she clucked. Grabbing the jar, she reached her fingers down into it. Every single one of its occupants flattened themselves up against the jar walls. Charlie would never have believed Gunther could move that fast if he hadn’t seen it for himself.

Ms. Jitherburrs held the jar in front of her face, temporarily distorting it from the viewpoint of Charlie, Rock and Jewel. Through the glass her forehead grew big and her eyes bulged like a gecko. She reached in, dangling her fingers about trying to grab at XL. “Come here little guy, I won’t hurt you,” she crooned.

Rock, Jewel and Charlie stared in abject horror. No one knew what to do.

“Good luck catching him,” Rock smirked.

Ms. Jitherburrs glowered at Rock, lowering the jar slightly. “He may have a bit of luck left but I am afraid yours and Miss Dervin’s has run out. It’s not smart to go snooping around in what doesn’t concern you. Especially at night. I wonder what Principal Geriatrik will think when he hears you broke into the school at night.”

“I knew it was you!” Jewel blurted out. “And just what will Professor Geriatrik think when we tell him you spend your nights making ball and rope configurations in the gym and brewing love potions during the day?”

“Ha!” Ms Jitherburrs snorted. “And just what makes you think he is going to believe you two instead of me? I’m about to get substitute teacher of the year—children *love* me—and you two spend your time talking to bugs and breaking into schools looking for ghosts.”

Jewel was relieved to hear Ms. Jitherburrs refer to just the “two” of them. The ghastly woman didn’t seem to know about Charlie.

Jewel’s eyes narrowed, “That was you, wasn’t it? That flying thing.”

“It’s amazing how the mind works, my dear. I heard you talking in the hall. You came looking for ghosts and I gave you one. Nothing like using the rock climbing equipment and a hooded jacket to give you a show. You should have been happy to have seen what you wanted and then left it alone.”

“Wait until we tell everyone what you’ve done!” Jewel huffed.

“You have absolutely no proof, mind you, and I really don’t think any one in their right mind is going to believe some cockamamie story about a love potion, do you?”

Jewel’s mouth hung open, suspended by the realization that what Ms. Jitherburrs was saying was entirely true. No one would believe them.

Rock, however, was not so easily persuaded. “Mind you, you have absolutely no proof that we were in this school last night. I mean, I don’t see any signs of forced entry, any break-ins, anything missing.”

Ms. Jitherburrs’ expression grew dark and she slammed the jar down on the counter top sending its occupants flying as if they had been attacked by some invisible martial arts insect. She studied Rock carefully, as she screwed on the top and then drew in a deep long breath. “Fine. It seems as if it will be your word against mine and as such, I think we will just have to make sure that we change your word.” Suddenly, she grabbed them both by the arm, digging her long fingers into their skin, and pulled them along side her.

It wasn’t her grip on them that frightened Jewel, it was more what she had said about changing their word. Something about the way in which she had said it made Jewel apprehensive. She had the distinct feeling that perhaps Ms. Jitherburrs knew how to brew more than just love potions.

Rock and Jewel both struggled to get free but Ms Jitherburrs' strength was surprising. She had a vise-like grip that lifted then both partially off the ground. Charlie still balanced precariously on Jewel’s shoulder not knowing what to do.

Rock was dumbfounded by the grip Ms. Jitherburrs had on him. Being a lacrosse player he would have bet his stick (secretly signed by the Mix Master) that he could have taken down Ms. Jitherburrs with one hand tied behind his back. But now *she* was taking *him* down with one hand and try as he did, he could not free himself from her grasp.

Jewel did not know what to do either but she took the only option she saw available to her—she started to scream at the top of her lungs. It was a high pitched, ear piercing scream and despite the hardship it caused his ears, Charlie was impressed at its volume.

However, before Charlie knew what was happening, Ms. Jitherburrs had spun Jewel up against the wall and leaned her body weight against them, pinning the both of them while she used her, now free hand, to

grab at a roll of duct tape sitting on edge of the shelf. Ms. Jitherburrs used her mouth to rip off a five-inch section and promptly slapped it over Jewel's open mouth. Her siren call was instantly reduced to a muffled hum. Not wasting any time, Ms. Jitherburrs then turned and slapped a second piece over Rock's mouth, slung the masking tape roll on her arm like a bracelet and re-gripped Jewel. She then led the two of them into the closet shutting the door behind her.

She worked quickly. Her speed and agility in completing the task at hand made both Jewel and Rock wonder if she had not been schooled in the military or some secret service. Ms. Jitherburrs wrapped the duct tape around their wrists, securing their hands behind their backs and then circled the tape around their ankles as well so that they were both tightly bound and unable to make any significant movement.

"I have too much to do right now to waste my time taking care of you two bug-talking idiots. I mean how ridiculous can you be?" She shook her head and lifted her eyes towards the ceiling in disbelief. "I shall be back after the meeting to make sure that you change your minds about telling anyone anything other than what *I* wish you to tell them. In the meantime, nobody will miss you in here."

Ms. Jitherburrs checked her handiwork, stood up and made her way to the door. She glanced at them briefly, smiled at them evilly and shut the door calmly.

Jewel and Rock could hear the click of her feet as she made her way across the room and out the classroom door.

Jewel and Rock's eyes met. They could not utter anything other than muffled "umps" and "mmmamms" with the duct tape over their mouths.

In the meantime, Charlie got the picture fast: he was their only chance of escape, although how that was going to happen, he had absolutely no idea. As soon as he heard the classroom door close behind the wicked witch of Fiercedale, he began talking into Jewel's ear, "Are you okay?"

"Mmph."

"Is that a yes?"

"Mmph."

This was getting them nowhere fast, thought Charlie. "OK. Here's what I need you to do. You need to scoot

over next to Rock so that when I talk the both of you can hear me. You'll need to nod with your head 'Yes' and 'No' for now, while I try to figure out how to get this duct tape off of you. Okay? Nod 'yes' if it's okay."

Jewel gave a decidedly "yes" nod and then made her way like an inch worm closer to Rock.

"Rock, can you hear me? Nod 'yes' if you can," Rock's head shook up and down.

"Good. Now listen. I'm going to crawl up onto the tape over Jewel's mouth and see if there is anything I can do to get it off. Jewel, you have to keep your head still, okay?"

Jewel nodded "yes."

Charlie took the most direct route possible. He knew they had limited time before the meeting and he needed to get his friends' mouths untaped in order for them to start screaming for help. He climbed right up Jewel's neck, around her jawbone and then up onto the tape. He started pulling at the corner trying to lift it from Jewel's skin.

He tugged as hard as he could. There was absolutely no movement at all. The tape didn't even budge. Charlie tried again. Again nothing. He glanced over at Rock who was watching Charlie with keen interest. Charlie had to try harder. He would not let his new friends down. He grabbed hold of the tape one more time, tucking his leg under the edge as much as he could trying to get the sticky side to stick to his leg for better grip. Under normal circumstances, he knew better than to ever do such a foolish thing, a leg stuck to duct tape could mean the loss of a limb if one wasn't careful but Charlie had no other choice. He needed the best grip possible. When he felt the stickiness on his leg, he took a deep breath tightened both his grips and pulled with the entire .003 ounces of his body.

Not only did the tape fail to budge, but Charlie completely lost his footing and fell. If it had not been for his leg being stuck to the tape, he definitely would have fallen all the way down into Jewel's lap. As it was however, he dangled from his one limb as he tried to regain his footing.

After several tense moments, Charlie succeeded in getting his legs back on the outside of the tape. He looked over at Rock. "Okay so I don't think that's going to work, I'll have to try something else." He smiled, and thought to himself "*like how to extricate my leg from the duct tape.*" He didn't want Rock to know there was a further complication.

"Let's see," he said as he tried to discreetly remove his leg from under the tape. "Does any one see any sharp objects in here?"

Jewel's and Rock's eyes darted around the closet looking for anything that might help them, while Charlie wiggled his leg some more to try to release it from the tape.

Both Jewel and Rock could see nothing of practical purpose in the closet. Some cleaning supplies, some extra paper and vials, microscopes and looking glasses lined the shelves. Rock's eyes fell on the secret trap door which they had used last night. It was sealed up so that there was no way Rock and Jewel could open it and escape in their present state.

Rock shook his head "No" to try to indicate that he couldn't see anything of use on the shelves. Charlie glanced up at Jewel, who very delicately made the same movement with her head. In a stroke of luck, she also murmured the word, "Nothing" out of habit. It had the odd effect of releasing the pressure on Charlie's leg and he found himself suddenly free of the duct tape.

"Alright, let me think," Charlie said out loud, conscious that he was still the single best source of hope for his two captured friends. He crossed his legs across his chest and instinctively looked down to glance at the time on his Chronopaw. "When is that meeting supposed to start?"

Rock and Jewel both murmured something at once and Charlie was painfully reminded of his friends' predicament. "It's 4:15 now. Is the meeting at 6?" Charlie asked.

Rock shook his head "no."

"Less?"

A nod, "yes."

"5:30?" Charlie winced.

Again, Rock nodded "yes."

The closet suddenly got even smaller. An hour and a quarter was not a lot of time to figure out how to escape and gain evidence against a woman as crafty as Ms. Jitherburrs. Charlie was disheartened. He glanced down again at his Chronopaw.

It was then the idea came to him. *“My Chronopaw! Maybe I can use the web cutting feature to slice at the duct tape!”* he thought to himself. He glanced up at his friends. *“Hang on a minute I’ve got an idea, just give me a second, I’ll be right back.”* Straight away, Charlie headed back down Jewel’s jaw, neck and shoulder and then crossed down onto her back. He focused on her bound hands. *“If I can just position the tape in the right spot, maybe I can slice open the tape enough for Jewel to get her hands free.”* He was running now at top speed.

He reached Jewel’s hands very quickly, crawled onto the tape and made his way to the area of duct tape that bridged the section between her two hands. Charlie very carefully maneuvered the edge of the tape between the side dial and the face of the watch. It was difficult to manage, the diameter of the tape being significantly thicker than spider webs but after some time he managed to position the tape correctly over a frayed edge.

Charlie’s excitement mounted. He was about to release his friends from captivity. He counted to three in his head and then pulled his arm downward to slice through the tape.

Charlie’s excitement quickly dissipated into devastation. Pieces of his Chronopaw flew every where. The dial landed on the ground and rolled off into a crack on the floor while several springs and a pin also catapulted to the ground.

Charlie could not believe his eyes. He stared helplessly at the ground in silence, his brilliant plan smashing to bits with every piece that landed.

It was then, however, that Hector’s hissing caught Charlie’s attention.

“Charlie!”

“Yes?” Charlie yelled back.

“You need to get out of the closet now!”

“What? Why? I’m trying to help my friends!” Charlie was now racing back up Jewel, around to the front of her torso so that Rock and Jewel could see him again.

“The only way you can help your friends is to get out of that closet and get to the auditorium,” Hector

hissed.

Charlie reached the front of Jewel's shirt and spoke to his friends, "Hector's speaking to us. Hold on a second and I'll fill you in." He turned his head back to the closet door and yelled, "But Rock and Jewel are tied up. I need to get them free so that they can tell someone what's happening!"

"Charlie. Listen to me very carefully. Ms. Jitherburrs was right. No one is going to believe a word Rock and Jewel say unless they actually *find* them bound and gagged in the closet. There's no way they could have bound and gagged themselves that way."

Charlie was interpreting for his friends and as soon as Hector said this, they knew he was right. If someone actually found Rock and Jewel tied up in a closet, then that someone would have to believe their story. By tying Rock and Jewel up, Ms. Jitherburrs might actually have provided them with the evidence they needed to get people to listen.

"That's true. But no one's going to listen to me! An ant. Any sane Provider, er, adult, is going to squash me into oblivion before hearing what I have to say," Charlie shouted back.

"Not Professor Pethers. Trust me. He's your only hope and he will listen."

Pieces of the puzzle clinked into place in Charlie's head. "You talk to him all the time, don't you?" Charlie asked.

"Yes. But that's not important right now. What is important is that you find him *now* and tell him everything that is going on. He's has some idea that something is amiss here. He just couldn't figure it all out by himself. I've been watching out at night for him—which is why I could hear you with Electra, I was listening for anything out of the ordinary. But that's also why I missed Ms. Jitherburrs entry when she stole the ladybug. I was sleeping since I've been staying up until sunrise. Charlie, you've got to go right now to the auditorium and find Professor Pethers. Someone needs to find Jewel and Rock before the assembly ends because after that there's no telling what she has in store for them."

Instantly, Charlie knew that Hector was right. He needed to get to the auditorium.

Charlie looked up at Rock and Jewel. "I think Hector's right—that our best bet is for me to go find Professor Pethers."

Both Jewel and Rock nodded affirmatively and Charlie heard Rock give a muffled, “Mmm!” which he interpreted as “Go!”

Charlie looked down at his Chronopaw to see how much time he had left only to remember that it had burst into pieces moments ago and was now as useful as a fork for chicken broth.

“Hector, how much time do I have?”

“Bout an hour and fifteen minutes. But it’s going to take you some time to get to the auditorium without being stepped on or seen. You need to hurry.”

Charlie turned back to Rock and Jewel. “All right, I’ve got to get going. I’ll be back with Professor Pethers as soon as I can. Don’t worry guys. As Hector said, this is actually good. When Professor Pethers finds you like this, we’ll be able to tell the whole story.”

He gave them both a short nod and then turned and embarked on his mission. He had a lot of ground to cover and he would have to keep up a good pace to make it on time.

He made it out the closet door and immediately looked up to find Gunther, XL and Jessop. Ms. Jitherburrs had been careful to replace the jar back up on the shelf so that his friends were out of view from his current vantage point.

“Don’t worry,” Hector said. “They’re all safe, just a little rattled from the near death experience with Ms. Jitherburrs. Jessop is keeping up the morale. Your job now is to find Professor Pethers. Good luck.”

“Keep your eyes out on everyone here. Hiss like you have rabies if that woman comes back before Professor Pethers and, well, thank you,” Charlie smiled.

“Pleasures mine,” Hector smiled back and Charlie was on his way.

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. What are your thoughts about this chapter? What surprised you? What do you think is going to happen?
2. Ms. Jitherburrs was incredibly strong. How strong are you? How many pushups can you do in one minute? That's one way to test arm strength. What other types of strengths are there?
3. Jewel has to inch worm over to Rock with her hands bound behind her back? How difficult would that be? Try it now if you can.
4. Charlie had to do some quick thinking when trying to save his friends. How do you keep yourself calm in tough situations? What helps you to think well?
5. Charlie's broken Chronopaw was about as useful "as a fork for chicken broth." When would a spoon be useless? A knife? Be silly!
6. Jessop was keeping up the morale of his jar mates. How do you think he did that? What do you think he said and did?