



## Chapter 23: Witching hours

Charlie's journey out of Professor Pether's room was rather non-eventful. A few dust bunnies and dirt clumps managed to scare him initially but after the third encounter with a chewing gum wrapper monster, Charlie relaxed and decided not to let his imagination get the better of him. He had more important things to do.

He slipped under the closed science room door and entered into the parallel universe of the hallway. He was cruising along when suddenly, there at the end of the hall appeared Sloppy Joe, looking at his phone. He had come around the corner and stopped to change his music selection before putting his phone back into the bag slung over his shoulder. Charlie's surprise turned to amusement when Sloppy Joe started giving his own rendition of Drake's "Toosie slide" dance right there in the middle of the hallway, left foot up then a right foot slide, right foot up and a left foot slide. He was smooth- a sight to behold.

Charlie's amusement very quickly turned to panic when he realized that with all of Sloppy Joe's sliding and then improvised dance moves, Charlie could not predict where Sloppy Joe's feet were going to land. Sloppy Joe was certainly a great dancer but that also meant he was quickly becoming a potential hazard to Charlie.

Charlie looked right and left—he had only made it about a third of the way across the hall. Going back would waste time, but Charlie was unsure if he would make it to the safety of the side at the rate Sloppy Joe was advancing. He didn't quite know what to do.

He couldn't risk it. He dashed back towards the way he had come. It was the right decision. He had only just made it back to the safety of the crease between wall and floor, when Sloppy Joe glided past him doing a spectacular leg kick followed by a slide.

As soon as Charlie was sure that Sloppy Joe was safely past him (a good distance more than you might think—the possibility of a moon walk still loomed), Charlie headed on his way towards the auditorium doors being careful to stay near the crease of the wall and floor meeting.

He was mid-way down the hallway, just about to cross to the first set of auditorium doors when he felt the vibrations and heard the noise. At first he could not determine why a herd of wild buffalo would be loose in the school hallway, but then he saw them turn the corner. About seven adult Providers were headed for the auditorium. The front of the pack reached the door, held it open and the herd disappeared into the room.

Charlie glanced down at his arm to check the time, but of course his Chronopaw was gone. It didn't really matter though—if teachers were starting to enter the auditorium, that meant that the meeting was about to get started. Charlie had to hurry.

Again he started to cross the hall, when two teachers started down the hallway from behind him. Charlie stopped and let them enter the doors in front of him. Unfortunately, the flow had now started. It seemed every time someone entered the auditorium doors, a new set of Providers would appear down one end of the hall, or even at both ends. The hallway soon became a veritable mine field of feet.

Charlie sighed in frustration. He looked up towards the ceiling and contemplated using that route. He'd lose time climbing up the walls, but at least he wouldn't lose his life to a pair of oblivious feet. Even then it was risky. An ant his size could be spotted moving up a wall. Things on walls weren't supposed to move.

He was just about to make his way up when he heard a loud thundering in his ears, like someone banging a hammer. Whatever it was had the effect of causing everyone in the hall to check their watches, dash this way and that and then finally disappear into the auditorium. In a matter of seconds, Charlie found himself back in a ghost town hallway. He waited a few moments, not quite sure what had just happened, when one last teacher came barreling around the corner, threw the door open and raced through.

When the door slammed shut, Charlie suddenly realized that the hammering noise and the resulting flurry of activity must have meant that the meeting was about to start. Without another moment's hesitation, he darted across the hallway running as fast as he could and single-mindedly focused on his mission. He had no idea how he was going to find Professor Pethers.

Charlie finally made it across the hall and underneath the auditorium door. The room on the other side was dark and Charlie had to wait a moment for his eyes to adjust. That's when the sound hit him.

“Plonk.”

Charlie had heard it before. It was so familiar and yet he couldn't place it. He tried to focus in on it.

There it was again: “Plonk.” It had a scratchy quality to it and after the initial sound, it reverberated a little, just like when a coin finally settles down on the ground. Charlie looked off in the direction of the noise but all he could see so far in the dim light of the auditorium were hundreds of shoes attached to legs sitting in chairs.

Charlie still couldn't place the noise. *Alright*, he thought to himself. *Better focus on the mission. You've got to find Professor Pethers now.*

And that's when he saw it—the sunflower seed shell falling through the air as if it were in slow motion. It landed with the customary “plonk” and Charlie smiled. *Well, hello Professor Pethers.*

Charlie took off as fast as his tired legs would carry him. He easily crossed the aisle to the safety of the rows of chairs. Looking down, he charted a path through the empty seats to avoid all the jittering feet and the crossing and uncrossing of legs. He wondered if Providers could actually ever sit still.

In the background, Charlie could hear a man's voice speaking into a microphone. “We have had another fine year this year, yes, yes quite fine and this is reflected in the close race we have had in our student poll, yes, yes -“

The student poll! The man was starting to discuss the results of the student poll. Sweat rolled off of Charlie's forehead, *Please, please, please let there be a lot of awards to hand out before Substitute of the Year.*

“...so let's get to those awards right away, yes, yes. I'm sure you are all anxious, yes, yes, to hear those results, yes yes. I'm sure you'd all like to know that the favorite dish of the year in the cafeteria was Mildred's Hawaiian Hula Pizza Special (yes yes) and the favorite school event seems to have been the— oh dear, well yes yes, kids will be kids, the overflow of the laundry soap suds into the main hallway.”

The sound of laughter filled Charlie's ears as he raced towards Professor Pethers shoes. He was not too far away now.

*Okay, Charlie focus*, he coached himself. *You need to introduce yourself, tell Professor Pethers not to move... oh no, that will sound like I am going to harm him. Okay, okay, just tell him who you are and go right into what has*

*happened... oh gosh, he's going to think he's going crazy if I go right into it!*

Charlie realized that he he had to act swiftly. The safety of his two friends rested on him communicating effectively with an adult Provider—something he had never done before. Realizing the gravity of his situation, his head started spinning and he actually began to lose focus. Everything turned blurry. Charlie had to stop altogether to keep himself from falling over. Then suddenly, as if someone had beamed him a message, Charlie saw Professor Pethers' face smiling at him in the glass jar. He remembered the sparkle in the Professor's eye as he had said, "There's something I like about you little fella. Glad you're in Mr. Turner's jar—good choice." The room stopped spinning. Charlie knew he was going to be alright.

Charlie finally reached the area just below Professor Pethers. The Professor was wearing a pair of dark brown loafers. In between his feet was a briefcase/bag also dark brown, worn and slightly dirty. Charlie made his way around several sunflower seed shells and then suddenly everything went pitch black. He could not see a thing.

"What in the world?" Charlie thought to himself. He couldn't imagine anyone turning the lights off in the auditorium during the meeting and he didn't hear any commotion around him. In fact, what he heard was the muffled voice of the male speaker about to give out the "Coach of the Year award."

"Why is everything suddenly muffled as well?" Charlie wondered.

"This is so odd!" Charlie exclaimed to himself. "And not what I needed!" He had so little time to begin with and now he had to contend with sudden unexplained blindness. Things in the Provider world were so unpredictable.

Charlie decided to feel around in the dark and that's when it hit him. Or rather, that's when he hit it—a great big wall surrounding him. He tapped on it—very solid. He ran his fingers along it—smooth and expansive. Then he did what any smart ant would do. He smelled it.

Charlie laughed. *I've been shelled!* he thought. He was surrounded by a great big sunflower seed shell.

A huge sense of relief came over him. He could not have been happier to have been shelled. It would prove only a minor detour on his mission. He slid his front legs down the side of the shell and slipped them under the edge. Giving a little one-two count in his head, he soon hoisted the shell up on its side and was just about to step out, when Professor Pethers' foot came sliding back towards him.

Charlie had just enough time to drop the shell back on top of him before impact. It was as if a hand grenade had exploded. Charlie and the shell were hurled across the floor under the Professors' chair. The shell spun off somewhere to the right and Charlie swirled off to the left colliding into several small items and then the side of the chair.

Charlie rubbed his head and groaned. He then struggled back up to his feet and wiped the dirt from his body. As he swiped left and right, he caught a glimpse of something pink to his left. He stood up straight and stared at it. This too was familiar—he had seen it before, but he smiled because, for once, he knew exactly where he had seen it before—on Jewel's sweater. It was the button that he noticed had been pulled off sometime last night in all the confusion. He made a mental note to let Jewel know exactly where it was.

The sound of clapping brought Charlie back to the moment. He turned quickly to the iron leg of the Professor's chair and decided that it was as good a place as any to start his ascent. He rose quickly up the side and headed out under the arm. He was upside down when the clapping stopped and he heard the main speaker start again, "Yes, yes. And now I must say we have a special item on the agenda..."

Charlie rounded the wooden arm and finally found himself right side up facing the all important Professor Pethers. Fortunately, the Professor's elbow was leaning on the arm of the chair and equally as fortunate, the Professor was wearing long sleeves, which meant that Charlie had a good chance of mounting his arm undetected. He made his way over and with a deep breath stepped onto the Professor. Charlie trekked the soft cotton of the Professor's shirt with ease.

Charlie had just made it to Professor Pether's shoulder when he heard the speaker say, "In a moment, (yes, yes) we will turn to another record breaking achievement in the category of substitute teacher..."

Charlie's heart leapt from his thorax right down into the bottom of his abdomen. Without thinking he turned to the Professor and began speaking, "Professor Pethers, my name is Charlie and I have important news for you."

The Professor's head turned instinctively towards his right shoulder and Charlie could feel the breeze of the Professor's chin coming towards him. "No, please keep watching straight ahead of you. I'm just an ant, Charlie the ant, actually, you talked to me yesterday when I was in Rock's, er, Mr. Turner's, jar. I'm sitting on your shoulder and, well, I was told by Hector to come directly to you and that you would know what to do."

Charlie's heart still sat glued to the bottom of his stomach. Thankfully however, when he was done with this first part of his speech, he saw a small smile spread across the Professor's face. The Professor gave the slightest nod of his head. Charlie took this to indicate that he should continue.

"I have no idea where to start. The whole explanation is rather lengthy but the gist of it is that right now Rock and Jewel are bound up with duct tape in the storage closet of your room."

Professor Pethers face turned dark and his body tensed as if he were about to jump up from his chair. But he didn't. Charlie keep going.

"Ms. Jitherburrs put them there after they discovered that she had made an ancient druid love potion for her students today so that they would vote for her for Substitute Teacher of the Year. If I understand correctly, if she wins again this year, that makes her eligible for a permanent position?"

The Professor nodded in agreement.

"The problem is that it is her word against Rock and Jewel's which is why Hector told me to come straight to you, that if they were found bound up, people would believe their story. So..., well, let's go! We have to get there first because she said that after this meeting she'd be back to 'make sure the only story around was hers,' or something to that effect."

Charlie braced himself on the Professor's shoulder, waiting for him to jump up and make his way quickly down the aisle to rescue his students. But much to his amazement, the Professor still sat perfectly still. He could tell from the expression on the Professor's face that his mind was working rapidly, but about what, Charlie could hardly guess.

The Professor leaned forward, dropped his seeds on the ground, and grabbed his pad and paper.

In a quick scribble the Professor had wrote: "Problem: people might not believe even me. Ms. J has supporters in staff. Any more evidence?" Charlie was amazed to discover that being an Outerling meant that he could read as well but then he quickly felt a wave of gloom sweep over him. Ms. Jitherburrs had supporters? People might actually believe her even though two kids were bound and gagged in a closet? The thought was preposterous at first, but then Charlie had to admit that he didn't know to whom else Ms. Jitherburrs might have given the love potion.

"Not really. I mean, the writing on Professor Fahid's board was the recipe for the love potion and I tasted

the base of it myself this afternoon in her class but we weren't able to save any, in fact we couldn't dump it down the drain fast enough..." Charlie thought out loud. "Oh! Wait! The recipe called for sugar and pickle juice—both of which were stolen from the cafeteria recently."

Professor Pethers quickly started to write, "Do you think some of it is left over? Did anyone see Ms. Jitherburrs in the cafeteria supply room?"

"Not that I know of..." Charlie's despair was rising, his heart melding further to the floor of his stomach. There had to be something that could help prove their case.

"We're pretty sure she was the one that knocked over all the books in the horticultural and mythology sections of the library..."

"No proof?"

"No. It just fits in with all the rest, like the castor oil also missing from Nurse Weatherbottom. That's in the base too. The triplet's ladybug was taken by Ms. Jitherburrs, I saw her come in yesterday. The love potion needs a love item added for each person."

The Professor winced at hearing this. He slowly scribbled, "The potion was unique to each person?"

"Yup."

"Even harder for people to believe she could individualize 100+ potions."

The soldering of Charlie's heart to his abdomen wall was now complete. He saw the futility of their situation while the image of Jewel and Rock bound and gagged, remained imprinted on his brain.

Then it got worse.

A thunderous round of applause shot up in the auditorium and to the right, three rows in front of him, Charlie saw the tall lanky, plain figure of Ms. Jitherburrs rise to her feet. She was smiling. The same familiar chill swept over Charlie. However, this time it was coupled with a feeling of intense nausea.

"What's happening?!" Charlie practically yelled into the Professor's ear, although he knew the answer already.

“Ms. J won sub teacher third time in row. Asked to make speech,” Professor Pethers scribbled.

The professor was barely clapping—moving his hands only enough not to draw attention for being rude from those around him. Ms. Jitherburrs was smiling brightly and was about to step forward to the podium when her skirt got caught in the folding chair she had been sitting in. Embarrassed, she bent down to try to release it without success.

This gave Charlie an idea. It was a long shot, but he didn’t even have time to think of it as such. He just acted instinctively and put the plan into action immediately.

“I’ll get something better than evidence, Professor. All you have to do is sit here and when Ms. Jitherburrs looks at you just silently mouth the words, ‘It’s over.’ Okay?”

A quizzical expression passed over the Professor’s face but he did nod “Yes.”

“Quick. Put your finger up to your shoulder and then put me on the ground. It’ll save me time and energy.”

The Professor did as he was instructed, as if he was the student and Charlie the teacher. The Professor made it look like he was reaching up to scratch his shoulder and then reaching down to put his pen and paper away. Charlie alighted his hand with no problem and jumped to the ground the second he knew he would land safely. In the distance he could hear the applause dying down and the mummings as her seat neighbors attempted to release her skirt from her chair without tearing it.

As his feet touched the ground, Charlie scanned under the seat for his critical piece of equipment. To his amazement, it was even closer than he remembered it. Without hesitation, he ran over to Jewel’s button, which was propped up against the side of the Professor’s chair.

Instinctively, he ran up the metal chair leg and climbed high enough so that he could place his legs on top of the button with ease. With a simple one-two-three in his head, he steadied his legs and then pushed off the chair with his front legs.

The button started rolling forward immediately and for one terrifying instant Charlie thought he was going to lose his balance altogether, his mission over before it had begun. Almost immediately, he regained his composure. Unfortunately, Charlie did discover that riding buttons was actually more

difficult than coin riding. Although Jewel's button was thicker than the average quarter which should have given him more stability, it was also smoother, which in fact decreased the stability. The only upside was that Charlie was moving faster than he ever had on a quarter and judging from his target he needed all the speed he could muster up.

He was rolling at a good pace, fairly balanced but he would have to adjust to the left if he was going to make it. It would take precision, deftness of foot and luck. Out from under one row of chairs was the greatest space available and Charlie saw that he had to use the next space to maneuver if he was going to succeed.

He timed it in his head, counted down, and then as soon as he noticed the light increasing as he passed the edge of the seat, he shuffled his feet back, shifted his weight and free legs in various directions and managed to slip to the left of the next chair leg with about a hair's distance to spare.

Judging from sound and occasional sightings, Charlie guessed that he was rapidly approaching his target but at a speed he had never reached before. He suddenly wondered how his dismount was going to go.

Ms. Jitherburrs' skirt being stuck had caused a significant delay in getting to the podium. That delay, however, was the critical piece in making Charlie's whole plan work. He was just nearing the last row of seats and saw Ms. Jitherburrs' small heels clicking toward the auditorium steps, which were now just to his left.

Against his better judgment, his feet sped into overdrive sending the button at warp speed out from under the last chair. His aim could not have been better. One second later the button slammed into the side of Ms. Jitherburrs' shoe. The impact sent Charlie flying, much farther than he cared to go, but by the grace of Uncle Jaxx, Charlie instinctively put himself into a swanning back flip that enabled him to grab onto Ms. Jitherburrs' rough corduroy skirt. When the room stopped spinning he found himself hanging by his front and middle left legs, swinging rhythmically to Ms. Jitherburrs' gait which was now taking him up the stairs to the podium.

Charlie glanced from left to right looking for any insect that could have witnessed his acrobatics. Unfortunately there were none, and thus Charlie knew that his display was lost forever. Even he might not believe himself later, it had been that good.

Quickly recovering, he started scrambling up the skirt, passing her waistline as she topped the stairs. While she walked across the stage, Charlie raced up her (ugly) shirt.

He pinnacled over her shoulder just as she reached the podium and cleared her throat. She placed her hands on each side of the lectern and was just about to speak when she heard a small but clear voice say, “Stop right now because everyone here knows what you did. We’re all just waiting to hear your confession.”

Ms. Jitherburrs stared out into the crowd seated before her, her mouth open but no words coming out. She could feel the panic rising in her throat. Who had said that? She could not believe that they had tricked her into believing she had won the award so that she would be standing up here all alone in front of everyone when accused of wrong doing. Of course, she had anticipated various scenarios in which things had gone wrong and she would have to explain her behavior, particularly after she had discovered that those two meddling kids were on to her, but this? This she had never anticipated.

And just who exactly was speaking to her? It was odd, but she felt as if the person had been speaking directly into her ear. Was someone using mind control on her? She looked to her left, the direction in which she had thought she heard the voice, but her eyes fell upon an empty space. Next she scanned the left side of the room quickly looking for her accuser. All eyes were singularly-locked upon her and she felt their anticipation for her to say something rising. She kept looking. Who had it been? Certainly not any of her allies—Professor Lockway, Professor Tunis, Professor Schlesnick, Cynthia Junip, David Reinhaur. She searched each of them out in the crowd only to find them all staring at her with the same quizzical expressions of expectation on their faces.

Ms. Jitherburrs swallowed hard. She had no idea what to say and the silence that now pervaded over the auditorium was becoming uncomfortably loud. Perhaps she had imagined it. Perhaps she was being paranoid, just like when she misplaced her love potion file and assumed someone had stolen it. After all, it had been in her file drawer all along, right where she normally kept it. She took a deep breath and told herself to calm down.

She decided to ignore the voice, in all likelihood a figment of her imagination, and to continue with her acceptance speech. She cleared her voice to begin speaking but was interrupted again by the same voice, still loud, clear and demanding. “Don’t try to talk your way out of it. We have found Jewel and Rock. They’ve told us everything. Mildred knows you took the pickle juice and sugar from her supplies. We have the translated recipe in our possession and obtained a sample from your last period class. It will be better for you if you just admit to everything now and just explain what you have done from the beginning and why.”

Ms. Jitherburrs' head turned sharply to the left, making Charlie instinctively duck even though he was well out of harm's way, safely hidden in the fold of her shirt.

Charlie could smell the fear now pouring out of Ms. Jitherburrs (literally, he was after all, just above her armpit). She was obviously shaken. Her nerves had been on edge all day trying to accomplish her task without discovery, and now, it seemed her worst fear had been realized.

The silence in the room was broken by the growing number of whispers among the audience members who were wondering what the delay was. To Ms. Jitherburrs, the whispers were menacing. She could have sworn everyone in the audience was discussing her guilt. Whispers of "What's wrong with her?" morphed into "What shall we do with her?" and "Is she all right?" transformed in her panic to "We've got her all right!" She took one desperate last look at her allies, but they too had strange looks on their faces.

Then in a totally coincidental twist of fate, Professor Schlesnick shut his eyes and turned his head from side to side slowly. Ms. Jitherburrs knew then that something had gone terribly wrong, that he was carefully signaling to her the desperation of her situation.

(In fact, as usual, Professor Schlesnick was tired with the day's proceedings and was paying no attention whatsoever to the current state of affairs. He was simply attempting to relax the muscles in his neck, tense from another day of sticking his nose in the air and rebuffing his students for their continual failures. Both Jewel and Rock had had Professor Schlesnick for algebra and, through the name game, called him "Boogerhead." Not very sophisticated but the end of a thirty-five name list of alternatives, including "Sludgehead", "Pick-Your-Nose-Nick", and "Drool-Monger," Jewel had just lost the ability to come up with anything else.)

Finally, she caught sight of Professor Pethers, a teacher she particularly despised (he was so naturally popular), who sat with a smug expression on his face and clearly mouthed the words to her, "It's over."

The words then came flying out of Ms. Jitherburrs' mouth, "I don't care if you have a gallon of the love potion! You will never be able to stop me from my mission! You can not take me away! You don't know what you're doing. Your methods of instruction are archaic and ineffective! *I'm* the future! I shall bring these children, this school, this town, and this world to its rightful state! Mark my words! You shall surrender to my power. This is not over!"

The room was so stunned that if Charlie so much as burped, everyone in the room might have heard it.

Ms. Jitherburrs stood clenching the lectern as if she might hurl it from the stage at any moment. Her face was full of defiance and rage. No one knew what to do, much less what was actually going on.

Finally, Principal Geriattrick slowly (he could not have rushed if he wanted to) rose from his chair and began, "I'm sorry Ms. Jitherburrs but I'm afraid..." he was about to say "that perhaps you have misunderstood the award. You have just been granted a permanent position here," when Professor Pethers stood up and interrupted him.

"...that this means your guilt has been confirmed. The entire room has just heard your confession." He turned to Professor Handel, the music teacher sitting to his right. "I have been secretly informed that Ms. Jitherburrs has illegally detained Rockville Turner and Jewel Dervin in the storage closet at the back of my room. Could you please go with Lundiva, promptly release them and bring them here? Do not tell them anything about what has just happened here, do you understand?"

Both Professor Handel, with his big curling mustache, and Lundiva Pommegray, with her big swinging bee earrings, nodded an affirmation and then left hurriedly.

He then turned back to Ms. Jitherburrs whose eyes were now directly focused on him, a mixture of seething anger and total confusion. He spoke so calmly and eloquently that if Charlie had not known better, he would have thought that the Professor had practiced his summation for weeks.

"By now you are all aware of recent events in our school that have been a cause for concern but baffling in nature. I speak, of course, of the pickle juice and sugar being stolen from Mildred – our wonderful and conscientious chef, the castor oil supplies taken from dear Nurse Weatherbottom, the odd night-time use of Coach Cranium's gym equipment and the strange orange writing that appeared on Professor Fahid's blackboard for several days in a row. I must confess, that even I could not link these strange and obscure happenings together, try as I did.

"The vandalism of the horticultural and paranormal sections of the library might have set us thinking in the right direction, but of course, how many of us here are familiar with the intricacies of these two subjects?" The Professor scanned the room around him, smiling, and then continued, "Ms. Jitherburrs, here, for reasons I'm afraid even I can not begin to understand, decided that the acquisition of a permanent position here at Fiercedale was worth any price and certainly worth dabbling in a little ancient chemistry. Today, she had her students each make a love potion which would exert its influence over them during the annual vote."

At the words, “love potion” a murmur swept through the auditorium. The Professor’s listeners were obviously a bit skeptical about such a piece of news.

The Professor put up his hands to calm the noise. “I know, I know! It sounds utterly absurd and even I would have a hard time believing it, if 1) we had not just heard the strange but clear and, mind you, unprompted, confession from Ms. Jitherburrs herself and 2) we now have two students who I believe will corroborate her confession, despite not having heard it.”

As if on cue, the doors at the back and to the left of the auditorium swung open and Jewel and Rock appeared followed by the music and psychology teachers. Jewel and Rock were rubbing their wrists where the duct tape had been. Both had a slight pink color surrounding their mouths where their skin had been irritated by the tape.

Lundiva started speaking first, “Oh my heavens, Professor! Zay were exactly where you zaid. In zee closet, bound by duck tape!” (She did actually say “duck.”)

“Wait, wait,” Professor Pethers said quickly but calmly. “Did you discuss at all what was happening with Jewel and Rock?”

Both the teachers shook their head negatively at the same time, “No. No. But they...”

The Professor held up his hand again. “Actually, I think it is important that the whole room hear what happened to them directly from them. Jewel, Rock, would you like to tell us what happened?”

Jewel stood like a deer in headlights. She was stunned that this was all happening—that they were the star witnesses and Ms. Jitherburrs, the teacher she had always loathed, was now staring down from the podium at them with a look of obvious hatred.

Ms. Jitherburrs, herself, was also somewhat of a deer in headlights, although behind her stunned gaze her mind was working fervently to try to figure out what was happening. Hadn’t Professor Pethers just said she had made an *unprompted* confession as if no one had asked for it? But the voice she had heard had been as clear as day! Professor Schlesnick had certainly signaled to her that the situation was helpless—plus, all that whispering! Why now did she get the growing feeling that no one really understood what she had been talking about? Were people were shocked by what she had said? Was she going insane from all the stress? Was someone playing mind games with *her*?

Rock took the lead. Unlike Jewel, he was undaunted by all the attention. “Well, uh, I know this is going to sound odd and I’m not quite sure where to begin but, we, meaning Jewel and I, had the sneaky suspicion that something odd was going on at Fiercedale and well, to make a long story short, we discovered that Ms. Jitherburrs had devised a plan to insure that she would win Substitute Teacher of the Year again so that she could get a permanent teaching position. When she found out that we knew, she bound us with duct tape and locked us in Professor Pether’s closet.”

A general feeling of disbelief still hung in the air. People were whispering and looking from Ms. Jitherburrs to Rock and Jewel, not knowing what to think.

As if he were a superb lawyer instead of a high school science teacher, Professor Pethers then approached the critical question. “Can you tell us any details about that plan?”

“She devised a love potion,” Jewel said loud enough for the whole room to hear. “She disguised it as a syrup exercise and had us individualize our own by adding ingredients that were specific to us. I never drank mine, nor did Spencer Bluecraft, but everyone else did as far as I know.”

“Did it work?” Rock and Jewel heard a voice ask from somewhere in the auditorium.

“Well, Mike Dirk told me he thought she was the best teacher in the school, period,” Jewel said.

“Mike Dirk? Wait just a minute. There’s no way he said that,” Coach Cranium blurted out.

Professor Pethers mind worked quickly. “If Mike Dirk came in here and said he had voted for Ms. Jitherburrs, would you then believe Jewel and Rock?”

Coach Cranium, with an astonished look on his face, nodded his head, “Absolutely.”

“Then why don’t you go fetch him from the football field. I believe his dad is substituting for you at the moment and won’t mind him leaving for just a few moments.”

Coach Cranium did an about face and walked briskly out the doors. Again, a silence fell over the auditorium with the faculty members not quite sure what to do. No one had ever been accused of concocting a love potion on school premises before. They might have all easily dismissed the whole thing as a prank except that all of them had just heard Ms. Jitherburrs confess to it. Even without her admitting to the love potion, what she had said about controlling the school and the world had left them all pretty

much freaked-out.

Ms. Jitherburrs, in the meantime, was searching for a way out of the whole mess. Still confused by how Professor Pethers had tricked her into making a public confession, she decided that she needed to do some damage control if there was any hope left for her. She cleared her throat, "Now really, everyone. I think this little prank has gone far enough, don't you? I shall be happy to excuse Rock and Jewel's behavior this once in the interest of moving this meeting along." Ms. Jitherburrs said in a voice that was so falsely sweet, Charlie nearly threw up all over her shoulder.

Professor Fahid stood up. "Ms. Jitherburrs, I am sorree but we can't discount dah fact dat you just confessed to a love potion your self in dah middle of an unprompted rant. I dink we all agree dat given dah evidence it's quite clear what you have done, how-ever out of dah ordinary, and I dink that someone should call dah police."

"The police?!" Ms. Jitherburrs gasped. She looked out across the auditorium and saw numerous people nodding their heads in agreement. The realization settled on her, heavy and thick, that she had done herself in and that there would be no backing out of what she had said. Her eyes grew narrow and anger fell across her face like a window shade being pulled down.

Ms. Jitherburrs turned to Professor Pethers. Somehow she was sure he was responsible, or at least connected, to the voice that had spurred her outburst. She spoke directly into the microphone and said "You will regret what you have done here today. Someday you will all see what good I was bringing to this school. No matter what you try to do to me, I will rise above it all."

A staring contest ensued between Professor Pethers and Ms. Jitherburrs, only to be interrupted when the auditorium door flew open, Mike Dirk rushed into the room and upon seeing Ms. Jitherburrs standing at the podium, shouted, "Ms. Jitherburrs you're juicy!"

Mike followed his statement of approval with a few "whoa's" and "yeah's," his hands sticking straight up in the air, celebrating what he thought was Ms. Jitherburr's Substitute Teacher of the Year win. Coach Cranium merely nodded to Professor Pethers, signaling his belief, and then did his best to escort his now end-zone dancing student back to his football practice.

As the door shut, on the other side of the room the double doors flew open and two policemen entered, followed by Janitor Jinkin. "That's her up there," he said pointing to Ms. Jitherburrs. Janitor Jinkin turned to Professor Pethers. "I called the police as soon as I heard what she said. I hope you don't mind, but I

wasn't going to let her defile my blackboards again," he huffed.

Ms. Jitherburrs' face now filled with fear. She backed away from the podium and looked to her sides for a means of escape.

Scraggs, who was sitting on Jinkin's shoulder, let out a tremendous caw and heaved himself into the air. He headed directly for the stage, barely clearing the heads of the faculty members who were now ducking left and right. Janitor Jenkins yelled for Scraggs to return but if Scraggs heard him in the mayhem, he didn't obey. Instead, he went straight for Ms. Jitherburrs and started circling her head, flapping his wings so that he occasionally walloped her with his feathers. She put her hands on her head and ducked trying to avoid him, but it was of no help.

Charlie, in the meantime, nearly got both smashed and catapulted in the onslaught. To save himself he cried out, "Scraggs! Scraggs! Be careful! I'm right here! It's me Charlie, Hector's friend!"

Ms. Jitherburrs couldn't believe her ears. In the middle of this onslaught, she had heard the same voice and yet she still couldn't place where he was. *Who on earth was Charlie?* There wasn't a single Charlie amongst the entire faculty. She looked over her shoulder to try to locate whoever it was, ignoring the feathered blows.

"Cawww!" she heard.

Charlie heard, "Charlie, the ant! What are you doing on this monster?"

"I'll explain later. But right now I could use a lift. Can you help me out?"

"Caaaw, Ca-caw!" (Sure, I'm coming in from back to front. Grab onto my wing as I come through.)

"Roger!"

Scraggs circled up high, maneuvered to the rear and then made a low sweep over Ms. Jitherburrs' left shoulder. Charlie grabbed on to a feather, and was lifted off only seconds before Ms. Jitherburrs' hand instinctively descended on her shoulder looking for the source of the voice. Three seconds later she was trying to explain herself to the police.

The ride was incredible: even better than Rock's bike. He was flying! The gentle stream of wind that blew

over him as they circled the auditorium was exhilarating and the sight of everyone down below was incredible. Charlie could not believe his luck. Wait until he told his Uncle Jaxx everything that had happened to him!

“Where to?” Scraggs cawed.

“Uh, if you can swoop in low over Rock’s head – that boy over there, standing by that girl?”

“Sure thing.”

“I can let myself off on him.”

“No problem.”

Rock and Jewel had no idea what to think or where to look. One minute they were watching Ms. Jitherburrs being led away and the next minute Rock spotted Scraggs bee-lining for his head. He was about to duck, like everyone else in the room, when his mother’s parting words popped into his head, *“Bye my Virgo. Should you feel like hiding today, remember that your stars require that you stand tall.”* They still made no sense to him and he had no logical reason to obey them, but as Scraggs barreled toward him like a B-52 bomber, he felt the urge to heed his mom’s words. As Jewel ducked and hid her head under her clasped hands, Rock stood steady, locking eyes with the ragged old parrot headed his way.

He closed his eyes only at the last second when he felt Scraggs’ feathers brush past his face and shoulder. When he opened them again, Scraggs was well past him, soaring high up into the air. A small voice whispered in his ear, “Hey friend. That was excellent. You need to try flying sometime.”

“Charlie!” Rock exclaimed quietly.

“Yep. Right here.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, it’s a long story. Let’s wait until we get out of here.”

Jewel, Rock and Charlie watched as a policeman approached Professor Pethers.

"We, of course, will need to speak with the students involved in order to take statements, although I understand a confession was publicly made by the suspect?" the policeman stated.

"That's correct. The students you will want to speak with are right here, Rock Turner and Jewel Dervin. They were the ones detained by Ms. Jitherburrs. You may also want to take a statement from Mike Dirk today and then again sometime in the future as evidence of Ms. Jitherburrs' actions," Professor Pethers said.

"Yes. We will need to do that. In addition, we'll need to have access to the suspects' classroom to see if we can gather any additional information. We'd like to do that today so that you can have use of the facility tomorrow, if need be."

"I'm sure we will find someone more suitable to teach Unified Arts for tomorrow—I can hardly imagine anyone *less* suitable—but perhaps you should talk to Rock and Jewel first so that they can go home as soon as possible. I believe they've had a long day," Professor Peters replied.

The officer turned to Jewel and Rock. "Yes. Well, kids, I'm Sergeant Combs. Perhaps you'd like to tell me everything from the beginning as we walk to Ms. Jitherburrs classroom."

"Sure," Rock replied.

Rock and Jewel (supplemented by secret tidbits thrown in by Charlie) explained everything that had happened to them over the past two days, omitting of course the talking ants, caterpillar, worm, reptile and the late-night visit to the school.

As they finished telling their story, they all arrived at the classroom and the Sergeant went over to Ms. Jitherburrs desk to look through some papers. He pulled out the top two drawers of the desk and rifled through some folders. He came across the folder marked "L.P." and, after pulling it out, let it fall on the desk in front of him to examine the contents.

Inside was a sheet of paper with the now familiar blackboard scribbling. He turned it over, saw nothing on the other side, and flipped it back to the front. "Not much in here except this and several seating charts," Sergeant Combs said holding up the piece of paper.

"That's it!" said Jewel.

“That’s certainly the same writing as on Professor Fahid’s blackboard,” Professor Pethers said.

Sergeant Combs tilted his head. “Well that may be, but I can’t say you’ve convinced me that it’s a love potion recipe.”

Jewel walked over to the desk and peered down at the piece of paper. “That’s it, I’m sure of it. The only difference with the writing on Professor Fahid’s blackboard is that it had various equations at the bottom which this one doesn’t have.”

Professor Pethers had come up next to her and was now looking at the paper as well. “That’s true. The equations were various factors of 117, if I remember correctly.”

“You do. I couldn’t figure it out and I’m not sure even now, but I’m wondering... how many students does Ms. Jitherburrs have all together?”

The sergeant eyed Jewel and then opened the roster on her desk. “Let’s see here. 22, 21, 25, 25 and 24.” He scribbled the numbers on a small pad of paper he pulled from his shirt pocket.

But before he could add them, Jewel said, “Bingo. 117.” Several seconds later, the sergeant’s own calculations confirmed Jewel’s answer.

By that time Jewel had pulled out her own sheet of paper and was studying it intensely. Charlie ordered Rock to move closer so that he could have another look as well.

“So we’re getting closer. But I can’t say the deputy is going to like this. It would be great if we could know for sure that this was the love potion,” the sergeant scratched his head.

“The top part is the recipe, the middle the incantation to be said... although it looks shorter than I remember – something is missing,” Charlie whispered to Rock.

“Uh, I think that this top part here is the recipe,” Rock pointed to the first paragraph, “And then I think you’re supposed to add the final ingredients while saying this part here.”

Sergeant Combs let out a long sigh- “Wow, this is all so strange. Can’t say I’ve ever had another case quite like this.”

“I never had another teacher quite like her,” smiled Jewel.

“I never had another day quite like this,” beamed Rock.

“And let’s all hope, you don’t have another,” concluded Professor Pethers.

**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 next?
2. Charlie sees Sloppy Joe dancing to the song "Toosie Slide" by Drake. Dance like that now. If you don't know the dance google it!
3. The dish of the year was Mildred's Hawaiian Hula Pizza special. What do you think that was? Describe it and all the ingredients used. Would you like it?
4. Charlie began to panic when he thought about talking to Professor Pethers for the first time. Do you ever get nervous talking to adults? To anyone in particular? What do you do to manage your emotions?
5. Charlie's skills with the button riding and back flip onto Ms. Jitherburrs' skirt is described as "acrobatics." What are those? Do you have any acrobatic skills or tricks? If so, do one now if you are in a safe place where it's appropriate to do it!
6. Ms. Jitherburrs was going to speak in front of a large audience. Have you ever had to speak in front of a large group of people? What was it like? Do you like public speaking? Why or why not?
7. Professor Schlesnick coincidentally turns his head from side to side which Ms. Jitherburrs sees as a signal that she is caught. What is a coincidence? Have you had a coincidence happen to you? Talk about it and how it made you feel.
8. Ms. Jitherburrs says the school's teaching methods are "archaic." Name something people might say is archaic now and then describe how it was once valuable. Is it still?
9. Charlie got to fly with Scraggs. Have you ever been on an airplane? What was that like? Would you ride on the back of a giant bird? How would that be different than an airplane?