



Chapter 24: Near promises

Sergeant Combs scanned the paper once again. “Well, I guess we’ll take this into evidence. It sure would be nice though if we had a clue as to what language this is. Officer Gunion will have to handle it.” He bent over and picked up Ms. Jitherburrs’ pocketbook which she had placed in the last draw of her desk.

“Not a very original place to hide this,” he heaved it up onto the desk and rummaged around in it for a few moments, finally pulling out Ms. Jitherburrs’ wallet. He opened it up, checked the billfold and then plucked out the credit cards one by one. “Credit card, debit card, license, Salem Public library card. Is that where she lives? Salem?”

Professor Pethers shrugged his shoulders, “Actually, I’m not too sure.”

The Sergeant nodded his head, “Well, might be worthwhile checking out what Ms. Jitherburrs has checked out of the Salem Public Library recently.”

Rock peered up at Professor Pethers, “Didn’t someone pull all the books from the horticultural and paranormal sections of our library recently?”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Maybe Ms. Jitherburrs got this from a book. I bet if she checked out anything in those sections of the Salem library, it’d have that recipe in it.”

Sergeant Combs raised his eyebrows and shook his head happily, “You kids are good.” He pulled a blank metallic card from Ms. Jitherburrs wallet. “Hmph, never seen a credit card like this before.” He flipped it over and examined the back which was equally as blank. The Sergeant held it out for the Professor, Rock and Jewel to see, holding it with three fingers on top and his thumb on the bottom. “Ever see anything like this before?”

Every one shook their heads from side to side. “Nope.”

“Can I see it Sergeant?” asked Rock.

“Sure,” he said handing it over to Rock. “Maybe it’s a key card for a garage or something. It’s just strange that it doesn’t have anything on it, no address, no letters.”

Rock held it up closer to his face, tilting it in the light to see if anything was hidden, like a holographic image or something, but nothing showed up. He handed it back to the Sergeant. “Weird.”

“Yep, seems to fit her whole profile doesn’t it, just one strange cookie? Nothing much else in here though.” The Sergeant placed the metallic card back in place and then folded the wallet back up slipping the library card into the pocket of his shirt along with the pad of paper he had used for his calculations. He heaved a big sigh as he lifted himself up from the chair. “I’m going to send Sergeant Links over to do a more thorough run down of the classroom if you don’t mind. If I get him over here in the next hour, I’m sure he can do whatever he needs to do so that the classroom is available for use tomorrow.”

Professor Pethers nodded, “I don’t see any problem with that, but, of course, I think you should run everything past Principal Geriatrck so that he can manage it all.”

“Of course. Where can I find him?”

“He’s probably in his office, on the other side of the auditorium, third room down on your left.”

“Roger. Should we head out? I’ll need to shut this door behind me,” said the sergeant.

The Professor, Rock and Jewel headed out the door, the Sergeant following, closing the door and stringing a line of police “Do Not Cross” tape in front.

“If you don’t mind Sergeant, I’m going to help Rock and Jewel retrieve their things from my classroom and see them out. Do you need anything else?”

“Not at the moment. I’ve got both of your names and numbers, if we need anything later. Even if we can’t decipher that recipe, with Ms. Jitherburrs’ confession, we should be in pretty good shape. No need to bother you anymore unless something odd turns up. Oh, uh, where can I find the football player?”

“Mike—Mike Dirk— should be out on the field at practice, the main field with the stands.”

“Thanks,” the Sergeant headed off and Professor Pethers led Rock and Jewel (and Charlie) into his room, closing the door behind him.

Hector hissed loudly as they entered.

Professor Pethers smiled and said, “Yes, yes. Every thing worked out just fine. Thank you for your help, Hector. Ms. Jitherburrs is on her way to the police station as we speak.”

The Professor leaned back, half sitting on his desk, folded his arms across his chest and crossed his legs out in front of him, “Well you guys have had quite a day haven’t you?”

There was so much to say, neither Rock nor Jewel knew where to begin. “I’ll say,” quipped Rock.

Jewel rubbed her hand across her mouth, “Yeah, I don’t think I’ll ever look at duct tape quite the same way.”

The Professor smiled, “So I was wondering if you guys could fill me in on a few things. I got a lot from what you told the Sergeant, and of course, Hector kept me updated on things...”

“You and Hector talk all the time don’t you?” Rock interrupted.

“Yep. Just like how you talk to Charlie there, although in Hector’s case, we can often communicate without sound.”

“You mean mental telepathy?” blurted out Jewel.

“You might call it that,” said the Professor. “

“Do you think that with time, we could communicate with Hector as well?” Jewel asked.

Rock replied first, “Yes, cause I think I sort of did already. When Hector was behind me on that stool, I had the strangest sensation that everything was all right, that he wasn’t there to hurt me, but that he was there as a friend and, of course, later we found out that was true. He was communicating with me wasn’t he? I didn’t get the words, but I got the general gist.”

The Professor just nodded.

“Did you know I could talk when you peered in the jar for the first time?” Charlie asked.

“No, not fully. I had a sense you wanted to talk, that’s all. You’re the first ant that’s ever spoken back to me.”

Charlie raised an eyebrow, “So you talk to ants on a regular basis, they just don’t talk back?”

The Professor chuckled, “I know, it sounds strange, but don’t forget I grow things and well, the Druids and the Buddhists do believe that you can communicate with insects to help your garden grow, so I generally have a little discussion with the insect community whenever I’m planting or weeding. I don’t broadcast it, but I have to say, I do think it helps.”

Charlie’s interest perked up, “Druids?”

“Yep. In fact,” the Professor said slowly, “I think I have a horticultural book which references some Druid techniques laying around here somewhere...”

“It’s on the windowsill,” Rock remembered.

“Oh yes,” the Professor walked over and grabbed the book from the pile. “Opps, dear me. I think this may be overdue at the library...”

“I’ll bet you a jelly bean that’s what Ms. Jitherburrs was searching for in the library,” Charlie guessed. “Can we take a look at that?”

“Sure,” said Professor Pethers who laid the book on the countertop in front of them.

Jewel knew exactly what Charlie was thinking and immediately looked to the index to find the entry. “Page 348,” she said. “Part of an appendix, not the main text.”

She flipped the pages back and forth until she found page 348. It was marked at the top, “Love Potion” with the caption, “believed to induce love for 27 hours, the Druids used this formula mainly to create love between nature and man, although it was also used in special circumstances between humans.”

Underneath the caption, was the same formula written on Professor Fahid's blackboard as well as a translation and explanation in English.

"It says here that the Druids actually used this formula when they had a particularly bad crop season. If there was an infestation of say, beetles, eating their crops they would mix this formula and spread it over the plants and surrounding grounds. They then would hold a ceremony during the 27 hour time period asking the beetles and plants to reconsider their relationship with them so that they could work together in harmony. It was hoped that the experience of love would remind them of their interconnected relationship. Hmmp. That's wild."

"And look! Here is the translation," Charlie said excitedly, "I knew there was more to it:

...and when at last time is gone,
you will feel nothing wrong,
for nothing compares to love pure and true
to give and feel love is what we should do
so this spell is not evil or meant to lead one astray
but rather remind one of what has been lost for a day.

You see there's beauty in it. That's how my Uncle Jaxx presented it, that it was a reminder of the beauty of love rather than a deception or a lie."

"Wow," sighed Jewel. "It has such a different meaning here, the opposite of how Ms. Jitherburrs was using it."

"Yes. I'm afraid Ms. Jitherburrs lost the true meaning of it, didn't she?" sighed Professor Pethers. "I think that Sergeant Combs will be very happy to see this. Do you kids mind waiting here while I run this down to him. I bet he's still around here somewhere."

"No problem," Rock replied. "We need to check on our other bugs anyway. I suspect they're having a royal fit by now trying to figure this all out."

"Oh chili peppers! I forgot all about Jessop, XL and Gunther! Jessop's going to have my head!" exclaimed Charlie.

“Well, go ahead and take care of things. I’ll be back in a minute,” said the Professor as he took the book out of the room.

Jewel, Rock and Charlie turned at the same time and looked up to see Jessop, XL and Gunther standing at the front of the jar staring, sending out what looked like death rays from their eyes. Charlie knew that if Gunther had been moved to actually get up off his twig and stare at them, than things in the jar were pretty bad.

Rock took the jar down from the shelf and Charlie was absolutely positive that it was not going to be a happy homecoming. As rock opened the jar, “Wha choo be thinkin’ bout, ‘sect? Do I need to come give you a worm whoopin’?,” “Your behavior is sub-par soldier, completely unacceptable and worthy of dismissal and physical reprimand,” and “You maaaaddd peeeaaa braiiinnn coockroach,” all hit Charlie’s ears at the same time.

“Guys! Guys!” Charlie held up his hands to halt the verbal attack. “Dudes, we got Ms. Jitherburrs! She’s been taken to the police station already.”

“Reallllly?”

“Juiceee!”

“Right on!”

The news of Ms. Jitherburrs’ demise and Charlie’s pumped up version of how the three of them had supplied Rock and Jewel critical information necessary for her confession kept them all joyously occupied for several minutes. (The fact that Charlie, Rock and Jewel had pretty much figured out the envelope thing themselves was a detail Charlie was willing to omit.)

After several minutes, the door of the science room opened and Professor Pethers could be seen backing his way into the room. “Yes, yes, I’m sure it’s delicious..... for the pumpkin festival?... Well, it’s not really the season for cucumbers... True, true... I look forward to it.” He closed the door and let out a small sigh of relief before turning to see everyone looking at him.

“What was that all about?” asked Rock.

“Death by Pickle,” Professor Pethers responded with a smile.

“What?” everyone seemed to say simultaneously.

Professor Pethers started his way across the room rubbing his hand over his (bald) head. “Apparently, Lundiva—er, Professor Pommegray—just got ahold of Freud’s favorite recipe, “Death by Pickle” from Sloppy, uh, I mean, Joe Prentice, who works in the cafeteria. Apparently, Joe was the recipient of all the left over pickles when the juice went missing. Lundiva found out that he had the recipe and well, now that she has her hands on it she’s keen on making it for the pumpkin festival next year, like Ms. Spellbound’s jambalaya.”

“Death by Pickle?” winced Jewel. “Sounds revolting if you ask me.”

“Yeah, I’m not too sure how well it will go over, but then again what do I know? Who am I to question the overall desire for pickles?”

“Now that’s one piece of the puzzle that fits. We smelled pickles on Sloppy Joe’s breath and Lundiva was bugging him this morning for something she wouldn’t tell us, so we thought they were in on something suspicious together.”

“Oh there in on something alright,” laughed the Professor, “Except it’s not a love potion, that’s for sure.”

Everyone chuckled. “Speaking of Sloppy Joe though, I wonder why Janitor Jinkins covered for us when Sloppy Joe stopped us in the hall,” said Jewel. “Charlie thought it was because Scraggs didn’t like Sloppy Joe. Scraggs called him something or other that wasn’t very nice.”

“A stingy wart hog,” Charlie supplied.

“Yeah, I don’t doubt that. I know Sloppy Joe is not particularly fond of Scraggs—thinks it’s unsanitary to have a bird in the cafeteria and he refuses to give Scraggs any scraps. I think Scraggs and Jinkins hold it against Sloppy Joe,” the Professor supplied. “It would be reasonable to assume that Jinkins covered for you, purely to irritate Sloppy Joe.”

“Jinkins is an irritating sort of guy,” Rock said.

“Not really, Rock. Don’t let his appearance and mutterings fool you. He’s just not that social. He has had

a hard time with people and so generally keeps to himself. But if you give him time, which of course I don't expect many teenagers to do, he's just a guy trying to go about his business. You have to remember that we don't all see the world in the same way."

"Like Spencer!" Jewel laughed.

"Exactly. Like Spencer. We don't all see the world as a series of germ traps but Spencer does, and so therefore his actions seem perfectly reasonable to him," Professor Peters agreed.

"Although you should have heard him talk about Ms. Jitherburrs. He suspected she was involved in a conspiracy to take over the world through mind control," Rock said. "What was it he called the organization? Solap, or something?"

"Somic," Jewel corrected him.

"Uh, guys, I think I need to tell you something," Charlie said slowly.

"What's that?" asked Rock.

"You know that blank card the Sergeant held up?"

"Yeah," Rock and Jewel said at once.

"Well, it wasn't so blank."

"What do you mean?" Rock's face was now turned towards his shoulder.

"On the bottom edge of the card, not on the face, on the edge, were the letters S-o-M-i-C. It was so small, none of you could see it. But my eyes see smaller things," Charlie said.

"S-o-M-i-C?" Jewel said worriedly, "Are you serious? Are you certain?"

"Absolutely."

"Wow. I can't believe that Spencer could be right about the mind control stuff. I totally took it as his paranoia working in full force. Charlie, are you absolutely, positively 100% certain?" Rock asked.

Charlie nodded again.

Then the Professor spoke. “Well,” he sighed. “Charlie may be onto something. Confidentially, it’s not the first time I’ve heard of SoMiC.”

“What?!” Jewel and Rock gasped together.

The Professor held up his hands to calm them. “I’ll explain, but first you must promise that this all remains confidential, that not a word of it leaves this room, until we all decide otherwise.”

Rock and Jewel nodded quickly in agreement.

The Professor took a deep breath. “Do you remember Professor Schmitenhaur?”

“Professor Schmitenhaur?! He was as loony as Saturday morning cartoons,” Rock said in disbelief.

“Yep. At least that’s what everyone thought, and that’s why he’s no longer working at Fiercedale. In fact, one of the main reasons he is not here is because he started talking about mind control and a secret organization that was trying to infiltrate several schools—an organization he referred to as ‘SoMiC.’ He never actually told me what it stood for, and I must say, I was never interested enough to ask, until now that is.”

The Professor paused and looked directly at Rock and Jewel.

“It stands for ‘Society of Mind Control,’” Jewel said.

The Professor lifted his eyes upwards as if seeing the letters in his mind, and then smiled. “Rather simple and to the point isn’t it? If I had been more open to the idea, I would hope that I’d have figured that one myself.”

“Sounds completely scary. What do we do about it?” asked Jewel. Rock was thinking the exact same thing.

Professor Pethers took a deep breath before answering. “For now? I think *we* do nothing. Let me look deeper and very carefull, over the next month. You have both done enough, and with end-of-term exams

coming soon, I think you have enough to keep yourselves occupied.”

“But...,” Rock began.

Professor Pethers cut him off, “I promise I’ll keep you updated on anything significant that I discover. We can use Hector’s enclosure cleaning as a regular time to meet and review the details.”

Rock shook his head thoughtfully. “I have to tell you, I’m still having a hard time believing in the mind control stuff. It just seems so, so, I don’t know, like some kind of science fiction movie or something.”

“Or a ghost movie?” the Professor said with a twinkle in his eye.

Rock and Jewel each turned a slight shade of red. “How did you know that we were searching for ghosts?”

The Professor merely tilted his head towards Hector. “Which reminds me, just what exactly did you see in that hallway?”

Jewel grinned, “Ms. Jitherburrs admitted to us that she overheard us talking about ghosts and that she’d set the whole thing up.”

“I’ve got to admit I’m a little bummed,” Rock said quietly.

“Why’s that, Rock? You guys did great job.”

“It’s just that, I would’ve liked it to have been a ghost. My parents admitted that they’d seen ghosts before and, well, I would’ve liked to believe them.”

“Don’t go doubting your parents just yet, Rock. Like the songs says, ‘Our pasts are all around us, like ghosts waiting to be heard.’ Don’t give up trying to hear them, you never know,” the Professor looked directly into Rock’s eyes. He had just quoted an Indus song and it threw Rock. Was it coincidence or was it a message? Was the Professor letting him know that he knew Rock’s dad’s real identity? His dad had always done such a great job at concealing his rockstar career, that Rock hardly ever wondered who knew and who didn’t. It just seemed like no one knew.

Now he wasn’t quite sure. Having Professor Pethers know didn’t bother Rock, but having Ms. Jitherburrs

and SoMiC know did. In fact, the very thought of SoMiC made him anxious... and curious. He really wanted to investigate it himself which is why he hadn't *exactly* promised Professor Pethers that he wouldn't hunt around on his own.

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. Ms. Jitherburrs had credit cards in her wallet. How do credit cards work? What are the benefits? What are the risks of using them? How do you think people will pay for things in the future?
3. Professor Pethers and Hector have a sort of mental telepathy between them. Do you believe in mental telepathy? If you could have mental telepathy powers, how would you use them?
4. The love potion was originally meant to connect nature to humans and rebalance the ecosystem when it was out of balance. How is the ecosystem now? How is humankind's relationship with the earth now? Do we need a love potion? What do we need to help our climate?
5. Jewel and Rock have end of the term exams coming up. Do you have end of term exams at your school? When you have to study for a test, what do you do? What helps you to study? What interferes with studying?
6. Professor Pethers quotes an Indus song to Rock. Do you think he knows who Rock's dad is? Do you think it was a cryptic message or just a coincidence? What does cryptic mean?