

Charlie and Grok

By Jonni Good

Chapter One

The Halloween party at the Johnson's house was winding down. It was fun while it lasted, but now some of the little kids were starting to fuss, and some of the parents were getting cranky.

Charlie, the kid in the cardboard Minecraft Creeper costume, searched around for his sneakers. It wasn't easy with so many people milling around and with everyone talking at once. It was also really hard to move in his costume, or to see out.

He thought about taking off the costume's head, but he was really fond of that costume. He made it himself (with a little help from his mom) and he wasn't quite ready to take it off.

Charlie's costume looked just like the real Creeper in the video game. There was a big cardboard box on top for the head (covered with green squares, of course), and a long straight cardboard body that went down below Charlie's knees. Two boxy "legs" were attached to the bottom of the body, with Charlie's feet between them.

Mrs. Johnson, the hostess, finally found Charlie's shoes under a bench on their big front porch.

Even though he was really proud of his costume, Charlie had to admit that sometimes it wasn't very practical, like when he needed to bend over and put on his shoes. He also missed parts of the party because he was trapped inside a box.

"I never liked bobbing for apples, anyway," Charlie muttered to himself while his mom helped him put on his sneakers.

"What?" his mom said.

"Nothing ..." Charlie said. That's another problem with wearing a box on your head - you tend to forget that people on the outside can hear what you're saying to yourself.

By now, the Johnson's wide front porch was filled with kids and parents. Everybody said goodbye to everybody else. All the witches and ghosts and monsters and video game characters said "thank you" to the Johnson's, (after their parents gently reminded them), and the costumed crowd went down the concrete steps and left.

Charlie and his parents were among the last to leave, because those steps were a big problem for Charlie and his Creeper costume. He tried to not look too dumb while he went down those steps, but it wasn't easy. If it hadn't been for his parents helping him, he wouldn't have been able to go down them at all.

His mom was on his left and his dad was on his right. Each parent had a hand under one of Charlie's arm pits. (Sure, Creepers don't have arms, but his hands had to be free to hold his stash of candy). At each step, his parents lifted him in the air and carefully set him down on the step below.

"I wish we'd brought the car," Mom said.

"We only have to walk one block," Dad said, reasonably - although he secretly wished the same thing.

"I'm tired," Charlie said. "Can you come back and get me in the car?"

"No," Mom and Dad said in unison.

"Why don't you take off your costume?" Mom asked. "The party's over, and it will be much easier to walk home if you take it off."

"No," said Charlie, although that's what he really wanted to do. He always felt a little disagreeable at this time of night — and all the candy he ate at the party probably didn't help.

"You go ahead," he said. "I can go by myself."

Mom and Dad weren't too happy with this idea, but they were tired. Home was just down the street. They could see it from where they stood in front of the Johnson's house. There was a nice cup of hot mint tea waiting for them when they got home.

On the other hand, the idea of walking all the way home at a quarter of the normal speed while Charlie took tiny steps inside his boxy costume was not enticing at all.

They agreed to let him go alone. They tried to give their cardboard-encased son a goodbye hug, but it didn't work, and they headed home.

Charlie tried again. He called out, "Can you come back and get me in the car? Pleeeeeze?"

"No," Mom and Dad said again, as they walked away.

Charlie felt like whining, just a little, but he didn't because he knew it wouldn't help. He let out a sigh and started to shuffle slowly towards home ...

Chapter Two

... but after just a few steps, when he got to the alley that went down the side of the Johnson's yard, he thought he heard something moving near the garbage cans. He tried to that direction so he could see what it was. The eye holes in his costume's head weren't very big, and the street lamp was too far away, so he couldn't see much except the alley and the Johnson's fence and the garbage cans, dimly.

"Maybe it's a puppy," Charlie thought. Or maybe it's a grown-up dog that's lost. He tried to remember how you're supposed to act around strange dogs. He recited the list in his head:

- Move slowly,
- Don't make loud noises,
- Don't look the dog in the eye, and
- Hold out your hand, palm up, for the dog to smell.

"Here doggy," Charlie said, softly. He shuffled forward quietly and held out his hand, just like he'd been taught. He really liked dogs and if this one was lost he and his parents could help him find his owners. But it would be even better if it was a lonely puppy that he could take home with him. They already had a great dog named Otter, but he would like a new friend, too. I

f it was a really nice puppy, Charlie was sure he could talk his parents into keeping it.

He kept moving forward into the alley, one tiny cardboard-hindered step at a time.

When he got closet to the garbage cans it was even darker and it was almost impossible to see anything. A mental picture of bats came into his head, but he immediately erased it. It was too cold for bats (he hoped). If Charlie had been superstitious, he might have thought of ghosts or monsters because it was Halloween, but he knew those things weren't real.

He gave up, and took off the Creeper costume's head. It wasn't easy, but he managed by dropping holding his plastic bag full of candy in one hand and pushing up on the cardboard head with his other hand. When it started to fall, he managed to catch it. He dropped the candy inside the empty head so he'd have one hand free, and looked around.

He still didn't see a puppy, or a dog, or anything else that was moving.

But wait – there *was* something. It was peeking out from behind a trash can! Charlie shuffled closer.

Sadly, it didn't turn out to be a puppy. It was just another kid in a funny costume. "Why is he hiding behind the garbage can in the alley?" Charlie wondered. And why couldn't he remember anyone wearing that costume at the party? It was a very weird costume, so he would have noticed!

This kid's costume was soft and puffy – all rounded and bumpy in weird places, and it looked like it was made out of a white down comforter over a pillow-encased body. At first, Charlie thought it might be a ghost costume, but that didn't seem quite right.

There was a gigantic head that blended into the body without a neck, and the mouth was way further down than a real mouth would be, even for ghosts.

The big eyes on the crazy costume moved each time Charlie moved, watching him. "How does he do that?" Charlie asked himself.

Then he noticed that the kid's costume had four arms, and all of them were moving, too.

"There must be some pulleys or cords or something inside," he thought.

"How do you do that with your eyes and arms?" he asked the kid, who was still crouching behind the garbage can.

"Grok," said the kid.

When the sound came out, the mouth on the white costume opened up really wide, and Charlie expected to see the real kid's neck or chest inside. What he really saw was a huge tongue and the little dangly thing that hangs at the back of your mouth at the top of your throat.

"Cool!" Charlie said.

Then he remembered that he was in the alley, and it was dark, and his parents must be almost home by now. Or maybe they had already noticed that he wasn't behind them, and they were coming back to look for him. Now that he thought about it, there was a very good chance that he would get in trouble for wandering around in a dark alley all by himself.

There was no specific rule against it, but he was pretty sure his parents wouldn't like the idea very much.

Besides, he wanted to go home and play Minecraft for a few minutes before going to bed.

Would it be polite to just walk away without finding out why this other kid was hiding in the alley behind the garbage can? Charlie didn't think so, but he really wanted to go home. He wasn't wearing a hat, and his ears were freezing.

But, on the other hand, the kid was there in the alley without his parents., And it didn't seem right to leave him there. And he was acting weird, so maybe there was something wrong with him. Charlie's parents would know what to do.

"Do you want to go home with me?" he asked the kid in the funny suit.

The kid didn't answer. "He must be shy," Charlie thought.

"Here – you can have some of my candy if you want." Charlie moved the cardboard Creeper head around so he could see his candy bag, but he accidentally dropped the head. He tried to bend over and pick it up, but it was impossible, so he decided to leave it.

"I can come back for it in the morning," he thought. He looked inside the plastic bag and pushed the tiny candy bars around until he found the Tootsie Rolls – he didn't like them very much, so he didn't mind sharing them.

He held out the candy to the other kid. One of the four hands on the kid's costume slowly reached for it. "Ak ak ak ak!" said the kid inside the puffy suit.

"You like those?" Charlie asked, somewhat surprised.

"Bzzz st!" said the kid, after throwing the candy in his huge mouth, wrappings and all.

Charlie was getting tired of the play-acting. The sugar buzz he got at the party was wearing off, and he was really tired, and his cold ears and his cold nose and his cold hands were starting to hurt. As a matter of fact, he was getting seriously cranky.

“You can come home with me, if you want...” Charlie offered again, although he didn’t say it in a very convincing way this time.

Then he turned and started shuffling towards the street. He could hear the kid moving behind him, and when he looked back he saw the other kid picking up Charlie’s big square costume head.

That was when Charlie noticed that the other kid’s costume also had four legs as well as four arms. The feet weren’t wearing shoes, and they were shaped more like hands than real feet. The kid was using the fingers on one of his feet to help him pick up the cardboard head. A long, bumpy tail dragged on the pavement behind him.

“Oog oog oog!” said the other kid, as his big eyes looked into the eye holes on Charlie’s costume head. In the dim light Charlie could see a little button nose sniffing the cardboard, and he was almost sure he saw the big ugly tongue reach out to lick the cardboard on the inside of the box.

“Wait a minute,” Charlie thought. “You can’t make a costume do that!”

Maybe there wasn’t a kid inside that bumpy, lumpy costume. Maybe it wasn’t a costume at all!

But if it wasn’t a costume, what could it be? An alien or something? There’s no such thing!

Charlie wasn’t scared. Not very much, anyway, but he still turned and ran to the street where it was much brighter and easier to see. Then turned to see if the “thing” was following him. It was.

“Brrrrrr it!” the thing said. It was holding out Charlie’s costume head, as if he thought Charlie had forgotten to take it with him.

“Well, if it is a monster,” Charlie thought, “at least it’s a very nice monster.”

He held out his spare hand, the one that wasn’t holding the bag of Halloween candy, and the lumpy white thing gently handed the cardboard Creeper head to Charlie.

Those giant eyes looked from the costume head Charlie was holding, then at Charlie's head, and then back again to the box with eye holes ...

"He's confused," thought Charlie. "He doesn't understand about costumes." He dropped his cardboard head on the ground and dropped his bag of candy into it. Now he had two hands free, so he could take off the rest of the cardboard pieces that made up his Creeper costume.

It wasn't easy, and he ripped some of the cardboard, but eventually he had his entire costume in a pile beside him. It felt much better, after being stuck inside that stiff cardboard for so long.

"See?" he said to his new friend. "It wasn't real."

Now the monster's eyes were even bigger. "Ik ik ik!" it said. "Brrrr.... st!"

"Yeah, I know it's weird," Charlie said. "But we dress up like this every year for Halloween." The monster's eyes watched the words coming out of Charlie's mouth, while his own mouth hung open.

"He's trying to understand me," Charlie thought. Then he remembered the rules about what do around a strange dog, and he slowly held out his hand, palm up.

This wasn't a dog, obviously, but maybe the same rules applied.

"St st zzzzzz bbbt" the thing said, softly, as it reached out one of his own hands to touch Charlie's fingers. Then he slowly lowered his gigantic head by bending his body in the middle. He smelled Charlie's hand. Then he licked Charlie's hand with his giant tongue, which felt really, really weird.

"I sure hope he doesn't think it's food," Charlie thought. He almost grabbed his hand back, but he made himself stay very, very still, instead. When the creature let go of the hand and stood up straight again, Charlie let out a big sigh of relief.

He looked down the street, expecting his parents to be coming back for him, but they weren't there. They must be home by now, he thought, but they would be getting worried.

"Come on," he said to the blobby white creature. "Let's go home." He started off down the street, taking his candy but leaving his costume in a pile on the sidewalk.

“Awk awk awk awk!” the monster said, pointing with three hands at the pile of painted cardboard.

“Never mind,” Charlie said. “Just leave it.” He waved his hand in the “follow me” sign, and kept walking. Soon he heard the shuffling of four long-fingered feet behind him, and a scraping sound as the tail dragged along behind him over the concrete sidewalk.

Chapter 3

It didn't take long to go half a block and to cross a quiet street to reach Charlie's house. When they got there, Charlie could see through the front window into the living room, where his mother was pacing. She looked really worried.

His dad looked irritated, but Charlie knew he was worried, too. It was just a matter of time before Dad put on his coat and came looking for him.

Charlie glanced at his lumpy new friend, and thought about what would happen if he just marched through the front door with the strange 'kid,' as if it was perfectly normal to bring someone (or some *thing*) home with him on Halloween.

He shook his head. Charlie had never been *specifically* told that he couldn't bring home a weird four-armed and four-legged creature that he found in the alley.

But it might be better to introduce his parents to the idea more gradually. Maybe in a conversation over breakfast, or something.

“Come on, Grok,” he said. “We have to go around to the back. And hurry!”

“I guess I just gave him a name,” Charlie thought. But then he wondered if Grok was really a “him,” or was it a “her?”

“Doesn't matter,” he said to himself. “I'll figure it out later.”

Charlie rushed down the walkway beside the house that led to the back yard. The creature followed him.

He quietly walked up the back porch stairs to the kitchen door, and turned the knob very, very slowly. The door came open without a sound, and Charlie motioned for Grok to go inside. Grok didn't move.

"He's scared," Charlie thought. He held his finger up in front of his lips to say "be quiet," then made the "follow me" sign again.

Then he quietly entered the kitchen himself. He held the door open, and Grok came inside after him, stepping very slowly, one weird foot at a time. His eyes were huge, and he looked from side to side, ready to run if he needed to.

"Hurry up," Charlie whispered. When all of Grok was inside, even his lumpy tail, Charlie slowly and quietly closed the kitchen door and pulled on one of Grok's four hands. He led the creature around the kitchen island to the tiny bathroom at the far end of the kitchen.

The bathroom was so small that there was barely room to close the door if you were sitting on the toilet. Grok seemed to like the dark, cave-like space. He quickly shuffled inside. When he turned to face the door he used all four hands to pull his tail in with him and Charlie closed the door.

Then Charlie quietly rushed back across the kitchen, out the back door, and around the side of the house. He got to the front porch just as Dad was coming out to look for him.

"Where have you been?" Dad asked? "We were worried about you!" Otter, their red spaniel-golden retriever cross, whipped out of the front door and came to greet Charlie excitedly, as if he'd been away for weeks.

When Otter stopped jumping and Charlie could act out his part, he said "I'm sorry," with his chin on his chest. "I stopped to talk to a friend, but I didn't mean to stay out so long."

His fingers were crossed behind his back, although he wasn't really telling a fib. Grok *was* a friend, wasn't he? And they *did* say things to each other, even though they couldn't understand each other's language.

He went inside with his Dad and Otter. His mom gave him a hug to let him know she was happy he was home, even if he did scare her by not coming home sooner. His parents were so glad to see him that they didn't notice that he wasn't wearing his costume anymore.

"It's been a really long day," Mom said. "I think we should all go to bed now."

Otter heard the word "bed" and raced up the steep stairs to the second floor. Charlie's parents followed him, and Charlie went up last.

Charlie's bedroom was at the top of the stairs, and his window looked over the back yard. His parent's bedroom was on the other end of the hall, on the left. As his mom and dad kept walking down the hall, Charlie opened his own door, but stood there and waited. Otter followed his parents into their room, and they closed the door.

Charlie wondered why Otter didn't hear them sneaking into the kitchen. He could hear a squirrel climbing a tree a block away, but he didn't notice when Charlie opened the kitchen door and hid Grok in the bathroom.

"Oh well," Charlie thought. "It's good that he didn't notice us coming in."

When his parents had been in their room long enough to get into bed with their books, Charlie quietly went back down the stairs, through the living room and into the kitchen. He opened the bathroom door as quietly as he could - the hinges sometimes squeak, but this time Charlie was lucky.

He found Grok happily sitting with all four legs dangling on the sides of the toilet. He was unwinding a roll of toilet paper and sniffing each sheet as it came off the roll. A pile of white fluffy paper was lying on the floor in front of him, between two of his feet. The fingers on his second left foot were balling up the bits of paper and throwing them back on the floor.

"Great," Charlie thought. "I'll have to blame the mess on Otter."

He felt guilty for even thinking that. It had been several years since Otter had turned a hand-knit afghan into a thousands bits of colorful, slobbered-on bits of yarn. A strong talking-to from Dad had convinced him to only chew on his own toys, and he'd been really good about it ever since. It wouldn't be fair to get him in trouble for something he didn't do.

"No time to think about it now," Charlie thought. "Come on" he whispered to Grok." We have to go upstairs.

"Grok!" said Grok.

"Shhhhh!" Charlie said. Then he held very still and listened very hard. He expected to hear Otter whining or barking or scratching on his parent's bedroom door, but it was totally quiet.

"Whew!" Charlie thought.

He quietly tiptoed through the dining room, and then the living room, and then slowly, slowly up the stairs. Grok tried to mimic him, holding himself up on the finger-like toes of all four feet. It looked really silly. When Charlie looked back he almost started to giggle, but he stopped himself just in time.

They made it to the top of the stairs without anyone noticing, and slipped into Charlie's bedroom.

That's when Otter started to whine.

Chapter Four

Charlie heard Mom say "Otter, do you want to sleep with Charlie tonight?"

"Whuf," Otter said.

Charlie could hear his parent's bedroom door open, and then Otter's toenails clicked along the hardwood floor down the hallway. He stopped just outside Charlie's door and whimpered again.

Charlie slowly walked towards the door, reached for the handle, and then turned around to tell Grok to hold very still.

But Grok wasn't there! The big, lumpy white creature was gone. The closet door was open because Otter's bed was in there, and Grok was too big to hide behind the T-shirts hanging on the pole. He was too big to squeeze under the bed, too.

Charlie's mouth hung open in stunned surprise. "Have I been dreaming this whole time?" he wondered.

Otter whined again, and Charlie turned back to the door and opened it. Otter trotted in and headed to his bed on the floor of the closet. He turned around a few times and settled in for the night.

Charlie still didn't move, except for his eyes, which he used to scan the room one more time. "Grok seemed so real!" he thought to himself. "How could I make up something like that?"

Just then, he saw a white long-fingered hand (or was it a foot?) reach out from under the comforter that was hanging over the side of the bed.

"How could he fit under the bed?" Charlie asked himself quietly. "He's way too big!"

The fingers touched one of the fuzzy white bunny slippers that Grandma sent to Charlie last Christmas, even though Charlie was way too old to wear bunny slippers. (He wore them anyway, because they were warm and cuddly, and he really liked bunnies.) Grok's fingers took hold of a few strands of fake bunny fur and slowly started to pull the slipper towards him, under the bed.

"So I'm not going crazy!" Charlie thought, thankfully. "There really is a monster in my room!"

But Charlie wasn't the only one who saw the slipper moving. Otter was watching, too.

Otter knew the bunny wasn't real. He sniffed those slippers every morning, just to make sure they weren't real - and each morning he was disappointed. But now one of the bunnies had come to life!

Otter slowly uncurled himself from his pillow and stood up on all four feet, with his nose held low, pointing at his furry target in typical spaniel style. Then he started to move towards it, catlike, one careful step at a time, ready to pounce as soon as he was close enough. His hind legs gathered into a spring and he lunged - but the slipper was pulled under the bed just in time.

Otter snuffled and snorfed all along the edge of the bed. Then he put his head under the overhanging comforter. He froze, yelped, and pulled his head back out from under the bed, banging his head on the bed frame in his haste to get away from the big eyes he'd seen looking back at him.

Charlie knew Otter would start barking, so he rushed to the dog and gently held Otter's mouth shut.

"It's OK," Charlie said softly in Otter's ear. "It's only Grok. He's our friend."

Otter didn't believe it - he knew friends didn't hide under beds and steal bunny slippers. Otter was sure of this, because it had never happened before. But he trusted Charlie, so he relaxed. But just a little.

Another long-fingered white hand reached out from under the bed and grabbed the remaining bunny slipper.

“Why is Grok doing that?” Charlie wondered. And he still couldn’t figure out how that big, lumpy creature fit his big body under the bed. And how did he get under there so fast?

Charlie got down on his hands and knees and crawled to the side of the bed next to Otter. He lifted up the edge of the comforter and leaned down so he could see under the bed. There was Grok lying on his side, holding the bunny slippers tightly to his chest – or where he would have had a chest if he’d been built like a normal person. One of his extra hands was stroking the fur on one of the slipper’s ears.

That’s when Charlie figured it out. “He thinks they’re real!”

Charlie reached under the bed and gently tugged on the heel of the slipper that was closest to him, while muttering “it’s OK, Grok, it’s OK.”

“AWK AWK AWK AWK!” Grok hollered. “AWK AWK AWK!”

Charlie let go of the slipper. “Shhhhh!” Charlie shushed, but it was way too late. He heard his parent’s door opening. Then he heard four slippers slapping quickly along the hallway floor, and the click just before his own door was flung open.

Mom got there first, but Dad was right behind her.

“Are you OK?” she said? “And what are you doing down there on the floor?”

“Um, I was just, you know...” Charlie said. He remembered that his rear end was sticking up in the air, and felt really silly. He pulled his arm out from under the bed and stood up.

“Um... I was just trying to reach my slippers.”

“But what was that horrible noise?” Dad asked.

“Um...” Charlie said.

He looked down behind him to make sure his parents couldn’t see under the bed, but it was too late. Grok’s big head was now sticking out from under the comforter and looking straight at Mom and Dad.

“Aaaaaak!” Mom gurgled.

“What is that?” Dad asked, rather loudly. He rushed to Charlie’s side and pulled him away from the bed.

“Don’t!” Charlie said. “You’re scaring him!”

Grok didn't actually look all that scared. In fact, he started to slide all of his soft lumpy self and all of his arms and legs and his long bumpy tail out from under the bed. Then he stood next to Otter, looking curiously at Mom and Dad. He still held onto the bunny slippers, though, and cast a fast glance at Otter to make sure the bunnies were safe. Otter kept his eyes on the slippers, but he wasn't scared of Grok anymore.

"Call 911," Dad said to Mom, but Mom didn't move – she was frozen in place.

"You can't call the cops!" Charlie cried. "He's my friend, and I told him he could stay here tonight!"

Mom and Dad looked at Charlie like he was nuts.

"But..." Mom said.

"Why did you...?" Dad said.

"I found him behind the garbage cans in the alley next to the Johnson's house, when I was coming home from the party," Charlie explained, quickly, with the words tumbling out. "I thought it was a kid in a weird costume, so we just sort of talked for a while..." (Again, Charlie wasn't sure it was true that they "talked" to each other. But it was close enough.) "...and I gave him some candy, and then I couldn't just leave him out there. It's cold, and I think he's lost or something."

This all seemed totally reasonable to Charlie, but he could tell from his parents' expressions that they weren't convinced.

He had to do something that would let them know Grok was safe.

He sidled over to Grok's side, getting much closer than he'd ever been before. Then he slowly reached his arm around Grok's shoulders – or around the area where Grok should have had shoulders, even though he didn't.

Charlie held his breath when he was doing this, and he really hoped that his arm didn't end up in Grok's huge mouth. After all, he didn't actually know this creature all that well and he couldn't be absolutely sure that Grok wouldn't bite. Fortunately, he had nothing to worry about.

When Grok felt Charlie's arm around him, his eyes swiveled to look at Charlie lovingly. He moved the bunny slippers to the hands farthest away from Charlie (but he still held them high to protect them from Otter). Then he wrapped his slipper-free arms around his new friend, laid his head on Charlie's shoulder, closed his eyes, and began to hum.

“MmmmMmmmmMmmmmMmmmmmmmm...” he sang, a low, vibrating sound that made Charlie feel completely relaxed.

“Weird,” Charlie thought. “But nice.”

“He’s purring,” Charlie said out loud. “See? He’s not dangerous. He likes me.”

Even though Charlie kept relaxing more and more, he couldn’t help but notice that there didn’t seem to be any muscles under Grok’s skin. It felt like his hand was holding onto a soft liquid-filled bag covered with the warm fuzzy velour material that his grandma’s track suits were made out of. But even though he did sort of notice this weirdness, it just didn’t seem particularly important.

In fact, if he hadn’t been standing up, Charlie may have fallen asleep as the vibrations from Grok’s humming relaxed every cell in his body.

Mom slowly approached. She was relaxing, too, but now she was curious. She lightly touched Grok with one finger. His eyes sprang open and his humming stopped.

“Mom!” Charlie complained.

Then Grok reached around behind her with the arms, that were holding the bunny slippers, and pulled Mom closer.

“Group hug!” Charlie said.

Mom relaxed even more, and put her own arm around Grok's shoulder-ish area. Grok closed his eyes slowly, leaned his head back on Charlie’s shoulder, and started to hum again.

“MmmmMmmmmMmmmmMmmmmmmmm...”

“Well,” Dad said in his sleepy voice. “He seems harmless. So far, anyway. Maybe we can let him stay tonight. We’ll figure out what to do with him in the morning.”

Mom smiled at him, gratefully. She had fallen in love with the bumpy, lumpy creature.

“Thanks, Dad!” Charlie said. He carefully pulled himself away from Grok. “I’ll go brush my teeth and put on my pajamas.”

Grok’s humming stopped, and he stretched his head around Mom so he could see Charlie leaving. “Grok!” he said.

"I'm coming back," Charlie said. "It's OK." Then he went out the bedroom door, across the hall, and into the bathroom.

Chapter Five

In the bathroom, Charlie took off his jeans and T-shirt and changed into the PJ's that were hanging behind the door. Then he pulled on his robe and turned to the sink. He squirted a gob of toothpaste onto his toothbrush, and started brushing.

That's when he heard a horrible sound coming from the bedroom. Four horrible sounds, actually.

One was his mother, screaming.

Another sound was from Grok: "ARK ARK ARK ARK!!!"

Then Otter chimed in with his own very loud "ROOF ROOF ROOF" and Dad was yelling "LET GO, LET GO!"

Charlie rushed out of the bathroom with his mouth still full of toothpaste bubbles, and crashed into his bedroom. His Mom was trying to take the bunny slippers away from Grok. Grok's eyes were swiveling from Mom, then to the slippers, then to Otter, who was dangerously close so he could get in on the 'game.' (Tug-a war! Fun! I want to play!)

When Otter's teeth snagged a bunny ear, Grok's protest became even louder. Loud enough that the neighbors might even hear.

"ARK ARK ARK ARK!!!!!"

Charlie rushed in to put things right. First, he pulled Otter away. "Leave it!" he said, sternly. This confused Otter and hurt his feelings, but he did as he was told. He let go of the bunny and retreated to his bed, giving Charlie a sad look before lying down.

Then Charlie gently tried to pry his mom's hands off the slippers.

When she stopped screaming so she could hear him over Grok's loud complaints, Charlie said "Let go. Grok is just trying to protect the bunnies. He thinks they're real."

When Mom let go, Dad pulled her a safe distance away from Grok. Grok stopped yelling, and it was finally quiet again.

"I didn't know he was going to get mad," Mom said, in a shaky voice. "I tried to let go, but ..."

"It's OK, Mom. He's not mad," Charlie said. "He was scared, too."

Then Charlie had an idea.

"Everybody stay where they are!" he said, and ran out of the room. He ran into the bathroom first, so he could rinse the toothpaste out of his mouth. He did that really fast. Then he ran out of the bathroom and into his parents' bedroom, where he grabbed his Dad's plaid slippers off the floor.

He ran back into his own bedroom, where everyone was still exactly where he had left them.

He walked up to Grok and showed him Dad's slippers. He put his hand down deep inside one of them, to show Grok there was a place for the feet. He pointed from Dad's slippers to the bunny slippers that Grok was still holding tightly to his chest, or where there would have been a chest if he'd been built like a normal person.

Then Charlie handed one of Dad's slippers to Grok, who took it with one of his spare hands.

Charlie put the slipper he still held up to his nose, and took a big whiff. He coughed a little – it was pretty rank in there. He motioned to Grok that he should do the same with the plaid slipper he was holding.

Grok put his little button nose down into the slipper and sniffed — and quickly pulled his head back.

Charlie took the plaid slipper away from Grok, who was happy to let it go. Then Charlie leaned down and put his dad's slippers on his own feet. They were way too big, of course, but it didn't matter. Then he pointed from the slippers on his feet to the bunnies that Grok was still holding. Grok's eyes moved from Charlie's feet to the bunnies, and then back again. He slowly raised one of the bunnies and found the space below the ears where feet go in. He smelled inside the slipper. He pulled back his head.

He smiled a bit sheepishly and looked at Mom. "Bzzzt mmmmm, gligum st" he said, quietly.

"That's OK," Mom said. "You didn't mean to scare me."

Mom looked at Dad, and said “He was afraid I’d let Otter hurt the bunnies.”

Dad nodded, and relaxed.

Grok pointed at his feet and handed the bunny slippers to Charlie.

“Sure,” Charlie said. “You can wear them.”

He dropped down to the floor, and when Grok held up one of his hand-like feet, Charlie slipped on one of the slippers. Then the other slipper went on another foot. They fit surprisingly well. When both slippers were on, Grok had a smile so wide that it almost cut his whole head area in half.

“MmmmmmmMmmmmmm...” Grok hummed to himself, happily.

“OK, everyone,” Dad said, sleepily. “Now that we have that settled, we need to get to bed. I have to go to work in the morning and it’s already really late.”

“Can Grok sleep in here with me?” Charlie asked.

His parents looked at each other, and then they both nodded. “Just for tonight,” Dad said. “We’ll figure out what to do tomorrow when I get home from work.”

Chapter Six

Charlie couldn’t convince Grok that you aren’t supposed to wear slippers to bed, but it didn’t seem to be worth arguing about. Charlie got into bed, covered himself up, and then held up the covers so Grok could crawl in with him. It was a tight fit with both of them in the narrow bed, but it was also surprisingly comfortable. Grok felt all soft and squishy, like a big down pillow.

As soon as Charlie curled up beside him, Grok started humming again. Within seconds, Charlie was fast asleep.

When Mom came in the morning to wake Charlie up, she could still hear Grok quietly humming to himself. Grok’s eyes were wide open, looking back at her. “Does he ever sleep?” she wondered.

She went around to the other side of the bed and shook Charlie’s shoulder, gently, like she did every morning. Grok watched curiously.

“Time for breakfast,” she said, when Charlie woke up.

“OK,” Charlie said. “We’ll be down in a minute.”

Mom went back down to the kitchen and Charlie went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and get dressed. When he got back to his room, Grok was shuffling around slowly, looking proudly at the slippers on two of his feet.

“Come on,” Charlie said. “We have to go downstairs.”

Charlie went down first, but when he looked back, Grok was still at the top of the stairs, looking very scared. Charlie looked at Grok’s weird body shape, and he could see that Grok wasn’t really built for walking down a steep flight of stairs. After a few seconds, he thought he had it figured out.

He went back up the stairs until he was standing just below Grok, and then started going back down again. This time, he went “tail first,” on all fours.

Grok watched curiously, and then he caught on. He turned around and let his tail flop down the stairs. Then he put all eight of his hands on the floor, including the ones wearing his new bunny slippers, and started to crawl slowly and carefully down the stairs.

“Good boy!” Charlie said. When Grok was all the way to the bottom, Charlie reached down and helped him stand upright again. Then they both walked rather proudly into the kitchen, with the sound of Grok’s bunny slippers slapping the hardwood floor.

When they got there, Charlie looked at the tall kitchen stools, and then looked at Grok’s bottom-less body again.

“Can I stand up to eat my breakfast?” he asked Dad. When Dad looked up from his coffee, Charlie pointed at where Grok’s bottom should be, but wasn’t.

Dad understood. “Sure,” he said. “That’s probably a good idea. Just for today. Mom made us some French toast.”

“Yay!” said Charlie. “That’s my favorite!”

Mom smiled at him, and put a piece of French toast on Charlie’s plate. Then she put a piece of French toast on the plate in front of Grok. Grok wasn’t sure what it was for. Charlie used his fork to cut off a piece of French toast and put it in his mouth. He rubbed his tummy while chewing dramatically.

“Eat it,” he said, talking with his mouth full.

Grok looked at his French toast again, touched it with the tip of one finger, and put his finger in his mouth. He smiled. Then he picked up the French toast without cutting it and popped the whole slice in his mouth, where it immediately disappeared.

“Bzzz st!” Grok said, happily.

“He didn’t even chew!” said Mom.

“I don’t think he has any teeth,” said Dad.

“Well... he seems to like it,” Mom said. “Charlie, would you like another piece?”

“No thanks,” Charlie said. “I’ve got plenty.” He put a little more butter and a little more syrup on his French toast to get it just the way he liked it, and dug in.

Mom put another piece of French toast on Grok’s plate, and he popped that one into his mouth, too. Mom kept making more French toast until all the eggs and bread had been used up. Each time she put a piece on Grok’s plate, he ate it.

“I hope he doesn’t get a tummy ache,” Dad said. “I sure wouldn’t want him to throw up.”

“Ewww!” said Charlie.

Grok just smiled.

After Dad left for work, Mom reminded Charlie that his friends Amy and Ian were coming over that morning to play. “We’ll have to keep Grok upstairs in your room until they leave,” she said. “I don’t think we should let anyone else know he’s here until we figure out what to do with him. Why don’t you take him upstairs now? They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Chapter Seven

Charlie and Grok had only been upstairs for a few minutes before the doorbell rang. Charlie told Grok to stay in the bedroom. Then he went downstairs to greet his friends.

He opened the front door. “Hi Amy,” Charlie said. “Hi Ian.”

His friends said nothing back. They were looking over Charlie's shoulder, with their mouths hanging wide open.

"Uh oh," Charlie thought. He turned around, slowly, afraid of what he'd see, and saw exactly what he expected – Grok was standing at the top of the stairs, grinning down at them.

Charlie turned back towards the front door. He could see that his friends' mother was locking her car so she could come inside for a cup of coffee. The two moms liked to sit and talk while the kids played upstairs.

"Oh no," Charlie said. He turned around again, just in time to see Grok's tail swing around so he could come down the stairs, tail first.

Charlie grabbed one of Ian's hands and one of Amy's hands, and pulled them towards the stairs. They didn't want to go, but he held on tight and urgently whispered "Come upstairs! We have to!"

At the top of the stairs he let go of his friends' hands and squeezed past Grok's soft lumpy tail. He grabbed one of Grok's front hands and started to pull. "Push!" he said to the kids below. Amy and Ian looked at each other, but didn't move.

"Push!" Charlie said again, a bit louder. "We have to get Grok into the bedroom before your mom sees him!"

Reluctantly, both Ian and Amy put one hand each on the hind parts of Grok's soft body, where Grok's tail started and his leg area stopped. When Grok figured out what they wanted him to do, he scrambled back over the top stair, past Charlie, and into the bedroom. Ian and Amy went in after him, much slower. Charlie slipped in behind them just as Otter came bounding up the stairs and into the room. Charlie closed the bedroom door just as he heard the two moms walking towards the kitchen to have their coffee and a chat.

"Whew!" Charlie said. "That was close!"

He turned around to see Amy and Ian standing very close to each other, and standing very, very still. They were looking at Grok – at his very big eyes and his enormous mouth, but no neck whatsoever. Their eyes moved downward to his four arms, and then on down to see Grok's four legs and his the four long-fingered feet. Two feet were wearing Charlie's bunny slippers.

Their eyes slid over to Charlie.

“What is it?” Ian asked.

“Does it bite?” Amy asked.

“He’s nice,” Charlie said. “I found him last night in the alley behind the trash cans next to the Johnson's house. I think he’s lost.”

“Can he talk?” Ian asked.

“Does he bite?” Amy asked.

“He can talk,” Charlie said. “But he doesn’t talk like we do. He has strange words that sound kind of funny. And he doesn’t bite. I don’t even think he has teeth.”

Just then, Charlie’s mom called upstairs. “Charlie,” she called, “are you guys OK?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Charlie called back, after opening the door just a crack. “We’re going to read a book up here. Is that OK?”

“Sure, honey,” she called back. Charlie closed the door again.

Ian and Amy were still looking at Grok suspiciously, but they didn’t seem to be as scared. “Maybe we should read a book,” Charlie thought. “It would help them relax.”

He turned to his book shelf and tried to decide which one to read. Amy pushed in beside him and pulled out one of Charlie’s really old books, one with just big pictures and one word on each page. She took it back to the middle of the room and sat on the floor.

“I see what you’re doing,” Charlie said. “That’s a great idea. We can teach Grok the words for things.” He sat on the floor, too, and then Ian sat down beside him. Grok watched them, and then settled into the circle next to Amy, pulling his tail around behind him so he would fit. Otter squeezed in between Charlie and Ian.

Amy opened the book and showed Grok the first picture.

“House,” she said. “Ho-o-o-w-sss,” she said again, drawing out each sound for a very long time.

“Gra-a-a st st st st,” Grok said.

Amy sighed. She turned the page. “Horse,” she said. “Ho-o-o-r-r-sss.”

“Bit bibit bu bibit,” Grok said, with a huge smile. He pointed to all four legs on the picture of the horse, and then held up one of his bunny-slippered feet.

“He’s hopeless,” Ian said. “He’s never going to learn how to talk.”

“That’s because he thinks he’s teaching us instead of us teaching him,” Charlie said. “Can I have the book for a minute?”

Amy gave the book to Charlie. He turned back a page to the picture of the house. He pointed at the picture, and looked at Grok.

“Gra-a-a st st st st,” Grok said.

“Gra-a-a st st st st,” Charlie said.

Grok’s smile got even bigger. He started to gently rock back and forth, and then started to hum. “Mmmm Mmmmm Mmmmmm,” he sang, contentedly.

“What’s he doing?” Ian whispered.

“He does that when he’s happy,” Charlie said. “It’s like he’s purring.”

Charlie turned the page of the book, and pointed. “Bit bibit bu bibit,” Grok said, while also humming.

“How does he do that?” Charlie wondered, silently.

“Bit bibit bu bibit,” Charlie said.

“Bit bibit bu bibit,” Amy and Ian said together. Grok smiled even wider, rocked front and back, and began to hum even louder.

Charlie kept on showing Grok the pictures, and repeating Grok’s words.

Amy, who was two years younger than the boys, got bored. She got up from the circle and went to Charlie’s desk, where she knew he kept colored paper and scissors and glue sticks and markers.

“Can I make something?” she asked Charlie.

“Sure,” Charlie said.

Amy sat down on the floor near the desk and started to cut out pieces of paper. Then she stuck them all together with the glue stick. She was quite happy to be busy making something while the weird creature taught the boys to say funny words.

But then, suddenly, the humming stopped.

“Grok!” Grok said.

Everyone looked at Grok, who was looking at the thing Amy had just made. Charlie and Ian looked at it too. Amy had been making a little picture of Grok out of paper and glue. Actually, it sort of looked like a long white slug, with black eyes and a big mouth drawn with a felt tip marker. It had eight legs – well, actually seven if you really counted, and Grok’s eyes were really blue, not black – but it was close enough.

“Grok!” Grok said again.

“Gosh!” Charlie said. “Your name really is Grok?”

“Grok!” Grok said again. One of his hands reached out, gently, and Amy put her artwork in Grok’s hand.

“You can keep it,” Amy said.

Grok smiled and nodded his head area up and down while he hummed even louder than he had before. It made Amy feel very proud.

“Ian and Amy!” Their mother was calling from down below. “It’s time to go home.”

“Don’t tell anyone about Grok,” Charlie said hurriedly. “We haven’t figured out what we’ll do with him yet. Please don’t tell.”

His friends promised, (mostly because nobody would have believed them anyway), and they all said goodbye. Charlie stayed upstairs for a while to make sure Grok was hidden until his friends (and their mother) were safely on their way. When he heard the click of the front door closing, Charlie turned to Grok.

“I’m going downstairs to play,” Charlie said. “You can come, too, if you want.”

Grok smiled at Charlie, but he stayed where he was, squatting on the floor and surrounded by the picture book and the glue stick and scissors and tiny pieces of paper. He was still gently holding Amy's picture and rubbing the tip of a finger over it, feeling the edges of the paper and following the wide black line of his portrait’s smile.

“OK,” Charlie said. “You can stay here.” Then Charlie went downstairs, where he hoped to play Minecraft for a while.

Chapter Eight

Charlie sat down on the couch in the living room with his laptop, and logged into his Minecraft account.

Just as he began to play, he heard a most horrible sound. It was piercing and high-pitched, and incredibly loud. In fact, it sounded like the tornado-warning siren that the city tested every fourth Wednesday at 1 PM. But this wasn't Wednesday, and the sound was coming from directly over Charlie's head.

"Grok!" Charlie cried. He ran as fast as he could up the stairs and into his room. Otter was already there, trying to find out what all the fuss was about.

What Charlie saw there made his heart skip a beat. Grok was still sitting on the floor, but now he was holding the scissors in one hand while using his other three hands to hold up his tail. Thick clear goo was coming out of a hole in his tail. A big puddle was quickly forming on the carpet.

Charlie did the first thing he could think of. He ran to Grok and used his fingers to squeeze the hole shut. The goo stopped coming out, and Grok stopped screaming. He was still scared – you could see that in his eyes. Otter licked his face, trying to make Grok feel better, but it didn't seem to help.

Charlie then did the second thing he could think of. "Mom!" he yelled. "Grok is bleeding!"

Just then Charlie's mom rushed into the bedroom. She had been out in the garden when she heard Grok scream, and she came as fast as she could.

"Oh my," she said, when she saw the puddle of goo on the floor. "Oh, you poor dear," she said, when she saw the fear in Grok's eyes.

Grok tried to smile at her, but his smile came out lopsided. Then he tried to hum, to calm himself, but that didn't work very well, either.

"Mmnz... Mmnz..."

"We have to take him to a doctor!" Charlie said. "I don't think there's anything inside him except this stuff." He nodded his head towards the puddle of goo. "If it all comes out, Grok will..."

Charlie couldn't say the rest, but his mother nodded. She knew what he meant, and she knew Charlie was right.

"I don't think we can take him to the hospital," Mom said. "They might be scared of Grok, and who knows what would happen..." She bit her lower lip, trying hard to think of what they could do.

While Grok kept trying to hum, Charlie closed his eyes so he could think better. "What would a doctor do, if we took him to one?" he asked himself.

Then he said, out loud, "Mom, you have to stitch the hole together."

"Oh," she said. "But..."

"You have to, Mom! You have to!" Charlie cried.

"But it will hurt him!" Mom said.

Charlie thought this was probably true, but he had to find out. He was pinching the hole closed, but he was trying to do it as gently as possible. Now he pinched harder. Grok didn't seem to notice. Charlie pinched so hard that he knew it *had* to hurt, but Grok still didn't flinch.

"I don't think it hurts," he said. "He's just scared because of the goo coming out. We have to fix it."

Mom knew he was right. It was the only thing they could do. She ran into the bathroom and grabbed the dental floss from the medicine cabinet. Then she ran into her bedroom and found the sewing needles in the top drawer of the old sewing machine cabinet, and chose the biggest one there.

Then she ran downstairs to the kitchen. She threw the needle and floss into a small pan, added water, and put it on the stove.

She turned on the burner and while she waited for the water to boil, she washed her hands really well. When she thought that everything was as sterile as possible, she poured out the water in the pan, and carefully picked up the needle and floss.

"This isn't how the doctor would do it," Mom thought. "But I hope it will be good enough." She wondered if human germs would hurt Grok.

And then she wondered if *any* earth germs would hurt Grok. “Where did he come from?” Mom asked herself, as she ran back up the stairs, but she was too worried and busy to think about it now.

Grok looked very scared while he watched Mom sew up the hole, but he tried really hard to hold very still. The hole wasn't very big so it only took a few minutes.

When she was done, Mom said “Charlie, go get a band aid for Grok. And bring me a washcloth so I can clean the goo off Grok’s tail.”

Charlie ran to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He chose the biggest bandage in the box, like the kind his mom put on Charlie’s knee when he crashed his bike. It was much bigger than it needed to be, but Charlie thought Grok would like the big one best.

When he was back in the bedroom, Mom took the washcloth and gently washed off the wound. Then she held up Grok’s tail and wiped away all the drying goo that was sticking to his soft white skin.

When she was done, Charlie ceremoniously stuck the bandage over the stitches.

“I hope it doesn’t hurt too much when he pulls it off,” Charlie said.

Mom looked at Grok, who now had a very big, happy smile on his face. “I don’t think he’ll be taking it off any time soon,” she said. “I think he likes it. but we should hide the scissors.”

Charlie totally agreed. He took the scissors into the bathroom and put them up high on top of the medicine cabinet. When he went back downstairs to play Minecraft he made sure Grok went with him. Otter followed them downstairs and sat very close to Grok. He was becoming very attached to his strange new friend.

When Dad came home Grok was once again teaching Charlie words from the picture book, while they both sat on the living room couch.

Mom and Dad stood near the front door, watching Charlie and Grok. “What are we going to do with him?” Mom asked Dad, almost in a whisper, after telling him about the earlier emergency.

“I don’t know,” Dad murmured. “Charlie and Grok seem so happy together. But we really should call someone and let them know he's here.”

Mom held her lips very tight together, and looked really worried. "If we call someone, they'll take him away," she said, as quietly as she could.

"I know," Dad said, just as quietly. "He could end up in a zoo, or a lab or something."

They heard a sharp sound, like someone drawing in their breath really fast. They turned and saw Charlie looking back at them, with his eyes big and scared. He got up slowly, leaving Grok to look at more pictures in the book. He quickly walked over to his parents.

"You can't let them do that," he said as quietly as he could so Grok wouldn't hear. He clenched his teeth and said "You can't!"

"Shhh," Mom said, putting her hand on Charlie's shoulder. "We'll sleep on it, and figure it out in the morning. I'll go get dinner started - you stay here and ..."

She intended to tell him to stay and play with Grok, but Grok wasn't there anymore. Charlie and Mom looked around the room.

"Maybe he went into the kitchen," Dad said.

Both Mom and Charlie thought about knives at the same time, and raced each other to the kitchen, with Otter and Dad running after them.

When they got there, Grok was just exploring. They watched from the doorway as he felt the shiny edge of the counter, the wooden cabinet doors, and the fabric on a kitchen stool.

When he got to the other end of the kitchen he tried to turn the doorknob on the door to the pantry. They called it "the pantry" because it was in the kitchen, but it was really a closet where all of their sporting equipment was stored off-season.

And it wasn't stacked in there very carefully.

Charlie almost made it there in time, but Grok got the door open first. Down came an avalanche of snowshoes, baseballs, hockey sticks, basketballs, soccer balls, and one lonely hockey puck that rolled slowly, almost drunkenly across the tile on the kitchen floor. Otter went after one of the baseballs, but Grok was interested in a different piece of equipment.

"Yak ma! Yak ma!" Grok yelled, as all four feet scrambled to catch up with the hockey puck. His upper body leaned forward, and all four arms reached for the puck in a slow-

motion tackle. His tummy gently connected with the kitchen floor as two of his hands wrapped around the puck.

He stood back up and a huge smile split his head from side to side.

Then he held the puck tight against the area where his heart should be , his eyes closed, and started to hum.

But the smile faded and his eyes came open. The humming stopped.

Grok held the puck away from his chest so he could look at it more closely. He brought it up to his nose and took a sniff. He held the puck against his chest as if to test it one more time. The hand that held the puck dropped dejectedly to his side.

Grok's body slumped with all the joy leaking out of him. The puck fell to the ground with a plunk against the floor, and it rolled away.

Otter watched it go, but didn't try to catch it. His eyes went back to Grok. He went up to Grok and poked him with his nose, but Grok ignored him.

Grok closed his eyes again, and he jerkily swayed from side to side. He tried to hum to calm himself, but he couldn't even get an "mm" sound to come out. His body bent in the middle until his hands were touching the floor.

As Charlie, Otter, Mom and Dad watched, Grok slowly trudged on all eight hands to the tiny bathroom, pulled his tail inside, and closed the door behind him.

As Charlie, Mom and Dad brushed tears away from their eyes, Otter sniffed at the puck. He pushed it across the floor with his nose, trying to find out what made it so special. Then he gave up - it was just an old hockey puck, and wasn't special at all. He padded over to the closed bathroom door, sniffing at the crack at the bottom. Then he laid down with his chin on his paws and his body pressed against the door.

Charlie picked up the puck. Otter was right - there wasn't anything special about it. It was black and puck-shaped. It was just a puck. But...

Chapter Eight

"I have to go back to the alley where I found him," Charlie said. He looked out the window to see if it was still light outside, but it was already dark.

"If I take a flashlight and look around in the alley, and if somebody sees me, they're going to think it's really weird. Mom, could you go visit the Johnson's for some reason? To distract them?"

"You have an idea?" she asked.

"Yes, but I don't know if it will work." Charlie looked at the closed bathroom door, hoping to hear a reassuring hum. All he heard was silence.

"Otter wasn't the one who tore up the toilet paper," he said.

"We kind of figured that," Dad said, with his arm around Mom's shoulder. "This idea you have - can I help?"

"Sure - but who will stay here to make sure Grok's OK?"

Otter lifted his head, let out a very soft whine, and laid his head back down on his front paws.

"I think Otter has that covered," Mom said. "Let's go."

Dad opened the junk drawer and grabbed a little flashlight. Then they grabbed their jackets off the hooks next to the back door, and headed out.

"We could take the car," Dad said.

"It will be faster if we walk," Charlie said.

They crossed the street and hurried down the next block, careful of the cracks in the sidewalk because the streetlights were far apart.

"Thanks," Charlie said to his parents, for no particular reason.

Mom and Dad both turned and looked at him, without breaking stride. They smiled at him, then at each other. Dad put his hand on Charlie's shoulder, and Mom took his hand.

In a few more steps, they stopped - they had reached the alley next to the Johnson's house. Charlie was glad that the cardboard pieces of his costume had disappeared, but he also felt a little guilty because someone else had to pick it up and throw it away.

Mom turned to Charlie. "Do you have something fairly small that you might have forgotten when you left the party?"

"I wasn't carrying anything," he said.

"I know - but we need something that you *might* have left behind at the party, even though you didn't."

Charlie thought for a second. Then he said "I know - the baseball cap that Grandpa gave me when we went fishing. I love that cap, and I've shown it to lots of kids. They won't know I didn't have it on."

"Perfect," Mom said. "If one of them says anything strange about your cap when you see them again, just play along. I'll have to make something up." She started walking quickly towards the Johnson's front porch, then stopped and turned. "Good luck, guys."

They 'guys' both gave her a little wave and watched as she climbed the porch steps. They moved into the dark alley before she rang the bell so the Johnsons wouldn't see them.

"OK, we're here," Dad said. "What are we looking for?"

"Something that looks like a hockey puck."

Dad handed the flashlight to Charlie, and turned on the light on his phone. They split up and scanned the ground around the garbage cans, without finding anything. They looked near and under and behind the Johnson's wooden fence, but there was nothing there except dried grass and a couple of sticks. It was hard to see, even with the flashlights.

They lifted the heavy plastic lids of the garbage cans and peeked inside. They were empty - the garbage truck had driven through that morning. When they lifted the lid of the recycling bin, Charlie's costume was in there with all the cardboard pieces squashed together. There was also two empty plastic milk jugs and a bag full of aluminum cans. But no hockey puck.

Dad lifted the garbage cans so Charlie could look under them - all he found was one receipt from Walmart that had fallen out of the cans when they were emptied.

It was starting to look hopeless.

They were about to give up when Charlie swung his light to the other side of the alley. The Johnson's neighbor had a white picket fence and a narrow flower bed in front of it, running along the alley. The plants were all dried up so you could see the bark mulch that covered the ground. A flat, black stone was half-hidden under a dead chrysanthemum bush.

Charlie leaned over and picked it up, then shut off his light.

"We got it," he said, quietly.

Dad turned off his light, too, just as they heard Mom coming out of the Johnson's front door. She was apologizing for taking up their time.

"I hope you find it at home," Mrs. Johnson said.

Mom smiled back at her, and then hurried down the steps. As soon as the front door was closed and Mrs. Johnson was inside, she hurried into the dark alley.

"Did you find it?" she asked.

Charlie switched on his flashlight for a few seconds so they could all see the puck-shaped stone in his hand.

When the light went out and it was dark again, he held the stone to his chest, like Grok had done with the real puck. He didn't feel a thing. Maybe he was just holding another ordinary puck that Billy Johnson dropped on the way home from hockey practice. His shoulders sagged, but he didn't have time to worry about it now. His parents were pulling on him, urging him to start heading home.

Charlie put the stone in his jacket pocket, and they hurried back home. They were all a little worried about Grok. If he tried to leave the bathroom and explore the kitchen some more, maybe even to look in the knife drawer, Otter wouldn't be able to stop him.

When they opened the front door, they expected Otter to greet them like he always did, but the house appeared to be completely empty. Charlie held his breath as they walked through the living room to the kitchen. Otter was still there by the door to the tiny bathroom. He raised his head when they entered the kitchen, but he didn't get up.

Charlie walked over and reached down to stroke the top of Otter's head. "You're a great dog, Otter."

Otter pushed his forehead into Charlie's hand, and then sniffed at the crack below the door to make sure Grok was still in there. There was still no humming, but Charlie could hear something that sounded like burps.

"I think he's crying," he said.

He gently tapped on the door, and then turned the knob. Otter sat up and moved just enough so Charlie could pull the door open about a foot. The light from the kitchen streamed into the bathroom so he could see Grok sitting on the toilet, surrounded by small wadded-up balls of white paper. The toilet paper roll was empty. Grok looked smaller, as if he'd deflated a little while they were gone.

Grok's big eyes swiveled up to look at Charlie, but then looked sadly away. One hand reached for a ball of paper on the floor, and he squeezed and scrunched it, making it even smaller. As he did this, his upper body swayed back and forth.

Mom and Dad were now crowded right behind Charlie so they could see inside the bathroom, too. Charlie looked back and gave them a worried look. "What if it isn't the right rock?" he asked.

"Show it to him," Mom said. "At least he'll know you tried."

Charlie nodded, and reached into his jacket pocket. The rock felt lighter than it had in the alley. In fact, it felt small and insignificant and totally useless. With a heavy heart, Charlie brought it out of his pocket, and as Dad pulled the door open wider, Charlie held the rock out so Grok could see it.

Grok saw the puck-shaped stone, but the area where he should have shoulders slumped even more, and he turned his head away.

"Maybe he thinks it's the real puck," Charlie said. He squeezed into the tiny bathroom and held the stone closer to Grok. Grok turned his head area even more, to get away from it.

Charlie put the stone against Grok's chest area, and held it there.

Grok's head swung back around. "Em mee. Em mee." he said, quietly. Each time he said "em" it sounded almost the same as his purring hum. He took the stone from Charlie and moved it slightly to another place on his chest, while singing "Em mee, em mee," over and over again.

A smile slowly spread across his face, and he started to get larger, like a balloon that was getting blown up. Charlie backed out of the bathroom.

Grok was getting so wide that Charlie was afraid they wouldn't be able to get him through the bathroom door. He took one of the hands that Grok wasn't using for his stone, and pulled. Grok stood up on all four feet, but stopped when he got to the door.

Charlie backed up and looked around for something they could use to pry him out of the bathroom, but when he look back again, Grok was sliding through the door by making himself taller and thinner.

"That's how octopuses get through small holes," Dad said. "I've seen them do that on the nature channel."

"That must be how he got under my bed," Charlie said. "I couldn't figure that out before."

Mom said "Let's get him up to bed. I think we'll all sleep well tonight."

"I know I will," Dad said. "I have a feeling that something good is going to happen tomorrow. I can't explain why, but I just feel it."

"Me, too," Charlie said, although he wasn't sure he believed it. So much weird stuff had happened in the last few days that he couldn't even think clearly any more. He took one of Grok's free hands and led him to the stairs and up to his bedroom, with Grok's bunny slippers slapping against the floor. Otter followed close behind.

When Grok and Charlie crawled into bed, Charlie fell asleep almost instantly, lulled into slumber by Grok's almost hypnotic "Em mee, em mee," tune.

Chapter Nine

"YAK MA! YAK MA!"

Charlie woke up in a start and looked around. Grok was at the window, looking down into the back yard. Charlie threw the blankets off and rushed to the window and looked out.

Grok kept yelling. The sun was just starting to come up, so it was light enough for Charlie to see a strange contraption behind the house. It was almost as tall as the house, and shaped like a tall skinny cereal box. A colored pattern on the metal surface kept moving around like a light show.

Grok's multiple hands were searching for a way to open the window so he could get out. Otter was barking.

"No, Grok!" Charlie shouted. He pushed himself between Grok and the window. "We have to use the stairs!" he said, but Grok kept yelling "YAK MA! YAK MA!" while trying to push his way around Charlie to get to the window. Otter was still barking.

The door came crashing open and Mom and Dad rushed in to see what was going on.

"There's a thing outside," Charlie yelled to be heard over Grok's noise and Otter's barking. "Grok's trying to climb out the window - we have to get him downstairs."

Mom grabbed two of Grok's hands, and Dad grabbed the other two. They pulled him backwards towards the door while Charlie pushed on Grok's chest. They tried to turn him around, but he struggled too hard in his attempt to get back to the window.

Otter had his front paws on the window sill, barking and looking at the thing in the back yard. Then he jumped down from the window, ran around Grok, through the bedroom door and down the stairs.

When Grok saw Otter going that way, he stopped yelling and struggling, and turned to follow the dog. Now Dad and Charlie and Mom had to slow him down so he wouldn't end up in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. They were able to convince him to turn and scramble down the stairs, fat tail first.

Then he ran through the living room, through the kitchen, and came to a halt at the kitchen door.

He struggled to open the door, but it was locked. Dad reached around him and turned the bolt. The door swung open, and Otter flew through it. Grok rushed after him, and almost made it down the three stairs from the porch. He tripped over one of his bunny slippers, but did a somersault, but quickly scrambled back up and ran a few more feet towards the huge metal box.

Then he stopped and looked up at it, waiting. Charlie and his parents came down the stairs and stood behind him, looking at the big thing in their back yard. The lower part

was screened from the neighbor's house by a tall hedge, but they all hoped the Smith's were still sleeping so they wouldn't look out their bedroom windows.

Charlie's bare feet were really cold. He looked sideways at Mom and Dad's feet - they weren't wearing slippers, either.

Otter thought about going up to the metal contraption to check it out, but then he reconsidered. He turned around, came back to Grok, and sat quietly beside him.

They all waited, but Grok was the only one who knew what they were waiting for.

The moving lights on the huge metal box came together into a tall yellow and blue rectangle, and then a crack formed around the edges. The lights moved from inside the rectangle and started playfully pulsing around the outside edges of the box, leaving the area inside the rectangle so black that it no longer looked like metal. It looked like - pure, empty blackness, like the way Charlie thought outer space must look if there were no stars nearby.

The black rectangle started to open outward from the top, swinging down to create a drawbridge leading from the box to the ground. The end of the door hit the ground gently just a foot in front of Grok.

Two very tall white creatures were standing in the open doorway, with smiles so wide their faces were almost cut in two. The creatures were too large and tall to get through the opening side by side, but they did it anyway by squishing through the door like Grok had done the night before when he left the bathroom.

They ran down the drawbridge as Grok ran up towards them, meeting halfway. Grok's parents both reached down to grab him, pulling him up so he dangled against them with his feet at least eight feet off the ground.

"They only have two arms," Charlie said. "And two legs. And no tail."

The tall creatures started to hum while they held Grok as close to them as they could. While they hummed, Grok happily chattered to them in his strange language. He proudly showed them the Band Aid on his tail, and the bunny slippers that were still on two of his feet.

"Like tadpoles, maybe," Mom said, sleepily. "Tadpoles lose their tails when they get older, too."

"Yeah," Dad said, in a muffled voice, as if he was dreaming.

Charlie looked up. Dad's eyes were closed, and he was swaying slightly from left to right and back again. Charlie turned and looked at Mom, who was doing the same thing. They were still standing, but ...

"They're asleep," Charlie thought, as he turned back to see what Grok and his parents were doing. "The humming put them to sleep. But why didn't I ..."

He stopped thinking because one of the big creatures was coming towards him. He, or she, (or it?), was very large. Charlie knew he shouldn't be scared, but he was, so he held very still and stopped breathing. He really wished his mom and dad were awake.

The big white creature (Grok's mom? His dad?) came up to Charlie and looked down with his big happy eyes and his huge, happy grin. He held something that looked like Grok's puck-shaped rock in one of his hands. He leaned towards Charlie and held it out.

Charlie carefully reached out with two hands and took the puck, being very careful to not drop it. That wasn't easy to do, because he was shaking so hard.

Grok's parental unit was still humming. He reached down to stroke Otter's head. Then he turned and walked back up the drawbridge. The colors moving along the side now matched the colors of the sunrise, orange and red and dark blue.

Grok had already disappeared inside the box with his other parent. Now this one went inside, too, and the drawbridge slowly rose. It closed with a quiet, almost musical clank, and the crack around it disappeared.

Now green lights flashed across the front of the box, then yellow.

Then the metal box disappeared.

It was gone. It didn't fly away. It didn't shoot up into the sky. It was just gone. No longer there. As if it had never been there at all.

Charlie looked up in the sky and all around, but he didn't see even a smidgen of smoke that might have been left behind. Otter slowly moved towards the place where his friend Grok had disappeared, and he sniffed the ground. There was nothing there - not even the tiniest scent to prove that anything had ever been there.

Charlie felt something wet on his cheek, and wiped it off. He didn't think he was crying, but maybe he was, just a little bit. He missed Grok already, even though he'd only been gone for a few seconds. He wished Grok could stay, but even if he couldn't it would have been really great if he could have seen inside that boxy contraption that took him

away. Now he'd never know where Grok came from, or who he really was. Or *what* he really was ..,

Charlie's mom and dad started to wake up.

"What are we doing out here?" mom asked, groggily. "Have I been sleepwalking?"

She looked down at her pajamas and realized that she was outside in the back yard without even a bathrobe or slippers. Her toes were starting to turn blue. "What on earth...?" She turned and ran back inside.

Dad was looking around, wondering the same thing. "What's going on?" he said, as he watched Otter sniffing the dried grass where the big metal box had been. "Did Otter wake us up? Why can't I remember?" He shook his head, and then turned and walked back in the house, stopping to wipe his bare feet on the doormat before entering the kitchen through the back door.

When they were gone, Charlie looked down at the black stone he was holding. It didn't look special in any way. It was just flat and round, like a puck. It wasn't shiny, it didn't have any sparkly stuff on it. There were no buttons, no place to plug in a cord so it could be recharged. It didn't make any noise. Charlie knew that because he held it up to his ear. Then he held it to his chest, like Grok had done, but nothing happened.

Otter gave up sniffing the ground and came up to him.

"Do you remember Grok?" Charlie asked his dog.

Otter's ears picked up. He ran back to the place where the metal box had been, then ran back and forth again, his nose to the ground. There was still nothing there, so he gave up again and came back to Charlie, and sat down. Charlie stroked the top of Otter's head, and then rubbed the dog's left ear, just the way he liked it. Otter made a quiet humming sound that reminded Charlie of Grok.

Charlie felt his eyes getting wet, so he brushed them with the sleeve of his pajamas.

"We may be the only ones who remember him," Charlie said to Otter. He put the puck in the pocket of his pajamas. It was kind of heavy so it should have made his pocket sag, but it didn't. He followed Otter back to the house, remembering to wipe his cold bare feet before he went into the kitchen.

His parents were sitting at the kitchen counter, drinking coffee.

"Do you want some orange juice?" his mom asked, as if nothing strange had happened that morning.

"Sure," Charlie said. He climbed onto the stool beside his dad.

Dad pointed at the pile of sporting equipment that was still scattered over the floor in front of the open pantry door. "I keep telling you to organize your stuff better," he said to Charlie. "It must have fallen out while we were sleeping. Be sure to pick it up right after breakfast. And put it back more carefully this time, OK?"

"Sure, Dad," Charlie said. "Right after breakfast."

He patted his pajama pocket to make sure the puck-shaped gift he received from Grok's parent was still there. Then he reminded himself to put it in a very secret place, and to do it before he cleaned up the mess on the kitchen floor. He wouldn't want it to get mixed up with the real puck, because he wasn't sure he'd be able to tell them apart.

Mom put a glass of orange juice on the counter for Charlie. He picked it up and took a sip, while putting one cold bare foot over the other one on the bar of the stool. He wished he was drinking hot chocolate instead of cold orange juice, and that he still had his bunny slippers.

Then he immediately felt guilty for the stingy thought. Grok loved those slippers. Besides, Grandma would get Charlie a new pair in a couple of months, anyway. She gave him a new pair every Christmas.

"Maybe the bunny slippers will help Grok remember me," Charlie thought. "I should have grabbed the picture Amy made so Grok so he could have that, too." Grok would have enjoyed showing it to his parents and his friends back home.

"Where *is* Grok's home?" Charlie wondered. He brushed a wet spot off his cheek with the palm of his hand. He was really going to miss his lumpy, bumpy friend, but he could never tell someone about him. Who would believe him?.

He looked at Otter, who was sitting beside his stool with his chin resting on Charlie's thigh. "Otter remembers Grok," Charlie thought. "Maybe Ian and Amy will remember him, too."

The End

(or is it?)