



Chapter 1: Beyond the fence

If Charlie had known what was ahead of him in the next twenty minutes, let alone in the hour that followed that—he would never EVER have gone under THAT Fence. But since he didn't (yet) have the ability to see into the future, Charlie went.

That morning he had been taking a leisurely walk through the woods when BAM! the smell of chocolate cake had almost knocked him off all six of his legs. Charlie was a sucker for anything chocolate.

Especially seven things chocolate.

After following the smell for what seemed like miles, Charlie had climbed atop an oak tree root to see seven different varieties of chocolate spread before him: chocolate jelly beans, suckers, cake, brownies, pudding, cookies and even a chocolate bar. Never had Charlie dreamed of such a feast.

The only problem was that it was located on the other side of The Fence.

Charlie had been warned ever since he was a larva never to go beyond The Fence. Beyond The Fence huge white and black balls flew about, giant flying saucers soared through the air often skidding over the ground, young Providers (ant slang for humans) chased these while other Providers ran in no particular direction and changed course often. Older Providers often followed them blowing on enormous metal objects which let out an incredibly shrill noise that could cause permanent hearing damage to any ants in the vicinity.

Beyond The Fence was truly what ants pictured The End of The World would look like. Beyond The Fence, of course, was the Fiercedale Middle School playground.

Charlie knew that the activities beyond The Fence did have some sort of schedule. The Ant Army had a

whole department devoted just to determining the timetable of activities beyond The Fence—apparently the activities were never completely predictable. The daytime activities were fairly regular but a few unscheduled nighttime sightings of Providers invariably occurred.

To some relief, it was mid-morning when Charlie discovered his dream feast, so he knew that the beyond The Fence activities could be somewhat predicted. Unfortunately, he just wasn't able to predict them himself. He really wished that his friend, Jessop, was there with him. Jessop was Charlie's Ant Army friend and the only reason Charlie knew any of this information, all of which was supposed to be highly classified.

Charlie rubbed his antennae together thoughtfully as he tried to remember the details of Jessop's stories. "Was it activity from 11:30 to 12:30 and then again from 12:45 to 1:45 or was it activity from 11:45 to 12:45 and then again at 1:00?" Charlie turned it over and over again in his mind but nothing seemed clear to him—except, of course, for the smell of all that chocolate. His stomach started to rumble.

Charlie eyed the distance carefully and then looked at his Chronopaw watch, a gift from his Uncle Jaxx, Charlie's hero. Ants were not supposed to carry watches, they were supposed to learn how to tell time from the sun, but his great Uncle Jaxx (not actually his uncle) always liked to give Charlie things that he wasn't supposed to have. Charlie thought this made Uncle Jaxx a whole lot of fun even though Uncle Jaxx's secret gifts had sometimes gotten Charlie into trouble. Just last month Uncle Jaxx had given Charlie a can of something called Silly String which Charlie accidentally discharged in his hole. It took Uncle Jaxx and seven of Charlie's friends 6 hours to clear it all out. Even so, Charlie then had to spend another 4 hours in his room as punishment because his mother didn't think Silly String was so silly after all.

But right now, Charlie was very happy for his Chronopaw. It told him that it was precisely 10:32 in the morning. *If I am at all correct, Charlie thought, and activity starts at 11:45, this means that I have at least 58 minutes to get from here to there, eat and get back again"*

Charlie thought it over a little more and re-checked his calculations. From his spot on the oak root, the terrain looked manageable: *I can definitely make it in less, which means even if the Providers come out at the earlier time of 11:30, I'll have time to spare, he thought.*

So even though Charlie had been warned a million times never to go beyond The Fence, and even though he knew he'd be tunneled (the ant equivalent of being grounded) for at least a month if his parents found out, Charlie took a last look over his shoulder to make sure no one was looking and headed out beyond The Fence.

The trip there took a little longer than Charlie had calculated but the feast was better than he had imagined. Never had Charlie been able to eat so many chocolate things at once. He took several bites of the brownie moved onto the cookies and then started on the cake which had a rich and sticky marshmallow icing. It tasted better than anything Charlie had ever eaten in his entire life. Charlie was in ant heaven, right there about 20 yards beyond The Fence—the place about which most ants had nightmares. Instead this was Charlie’s dream.

Which could be why Charlie failed to notice the sound of the door opening. Had he noticed the door he might have had enough time to make it back to The Fence.

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At the other end of the field, Professor Pethers’ 10:30 science class was making its way onto the grass.

Now, Mr. Pethers was a small man but not of small mind. In fact he was probably the best biology teacher in all of Truman County who just happened to grow award winning pumpkins in his spare time. Last year’s entry in the great Truman Pumpkin festival (all 457 pounds) won him top prize and he was secretly hoping to top that in the coming fall festival.

Professor Pethers had a smooth bald head with just a touch of hair still left at the sides and his blue eyes sparkled with a touch of mischief. In fact, Professor Pethers rarely got upset with any of the pranks that went on in his classes and there were even rumors that he secretly took part in some of them.

Today, however, no mischief was intended when Professor Pethers led his class out to the Fiercedale Middle School field. He instructed his class as follows:

“Today my dear students, you are to gather as many insects as you can in your glass jars. Remember to be extra careful when placing them in your jars as you do not wish to harm or injure them in any way. Insects are much more fascinating to us alive and they will be easier to identify if kept intact. Also, do not forget that insects eat insects so you may do best to keep different insects in different jars. You must also stay within Fiercedale’s main borders to collect your samples and that is a rule, not a recommendation, my lovely students. Be back here in 20 minutes, at 10:55, no exceptions and no reptiles please. Happy hunting and off you go!”

At this the Trixie triplets scrunched up their noses, disgusted that they would actually have to touch

bugs, Spencer Bluecraft III immediately put on his protective gloves and mouth cover (not required or even recommended) and the rest of the class pretty much just got on with the task at hand by running off in various directions.

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It was the running that finally alerted Charlie. Just as he was licking his front two legs to remove a sticky bit of marshmallow cream, he thought he felt the ground shake. He paused briefly and glanced at his Chronopaw, *Only 10:36*, he thought, *it couldn't be any...* And just then he felt it again—and again, and again. The ground was shaking and not just shaking a little, it was shaking a lot.

Charlie could hardly think of what to do. He gnawed desperately at the marshmallow still stuck to his front right paw. He needed to get it off if he was ever going to stand a chance at getting back under The Fence. Every ant knows that a glump of sticky goo on anyone of your legs, especially the front ones, will slow you down a good deal.

Charlie started to run as best he could on his five remaining legs while he worked hard at getting the goo off his leg and into his mouth. It was a running disaster. Charlie felt like he was in a nine legged ant race—he stumbled so often. With a final hard pull, he finally managed to get the goo off, although the force of his pull almost knocked him to the ground.

Charlie could feel the earth shaking even more now. He even heard voices and knew for certain that there were at least 15 different Providers in the vicinity. Some of them had been laughing, others shouting, and some whispering but it all combined into a deafening alarm for Charlie—he had to make it back under that Fence.

He ran as fast as he possibly could and probably faster than he ever had. In and out of grass blades he swerved and then ducked under several sprawling weeds. He tried to keep cover as best he could but also knew that he would make the best time in wide open spaces. It was far easier to run on hard packed dirt than to crawl through thick grass.

Charlie had been running now for a good 8 minutes and knew that The Fence had to be getting close. He prayed it was getting close. He was sweating profusely and had developed a horrible cramp in his back right leg. He was beginning to wish he had never tried the cake, as good as it had been, because now it was jogging up and down in his stomach and making him feel quite ill.

All of a sudden, Charlie broke through a clump of grass and there, in the distance, across a wide open

patch of dirt was The Fence. Charlie never thought he'd be so happy to see it but there it was probably just 20 feet away. Twenty more feet and he was home free.

This gave Charlie a huge burst of energy. Without hesitating a moment, he drove out across the dirt, straight for The Fence, never thinking about the danger he might be putting himself in by going out into the open. But he was focused, focused on that Fence.

Just then there was a tremendous earthquake and Charlie was thrown off balance. He heard a loud "There's one!" and Charlie could tell that there was a Provider close at hand. He didn't dare look around him to waste time.

"Please, please, please," he whispered to himself, "Please let me make to the Fence and I'll never go into a prohibited area ever again." He was getting so close. Freedom was just a... and then it happened.

As Charlie was running full steam ahead across the dirt field, he suddenly seemed to have entered into a tunnel. It was long and narrow and a bit dark inside—though at the end of the tunnel Charlie believed that he could still see The Fence in a haze of light. Then, Charlie felt as if he was floating upwards. He had stopped running by now and stood dazed staring down towards the light in disbelief—*Oh, my. I... I can't believe it. It's the light... at the end of the tunnel. I didn't make it. I must be {gulp}... DEAD.*

And just then, while Charlie started to wrestle with the idea that he was indeed dead, he felt himself begin to slide. Worse yet, he felt himself begin to slide backwards, away from the light! This was the worst possible thing he could possibly imagine. Here he was dead and now it seemed as if he wasn't ever going to make it to the light. He was going to be punished in the afterlife for ever having gone beyond The Fence (as if dying were not enough)!

Charlie next felt himself sliding backwards ever more quickly and then "Swoosh!" he felt himself FALLING! He closed his eyes tightly, he couldn't bare to think about where he was going to end up now that he was dead.

He landed moments later with a large thump and, just as he expected, whatever was beneath him was hard and cold and uncomfortable. He sat there motionless, afraid to open his eyes and wallowing in his misery. *I can't believe my luck. I'm dead and I'm not even in heaven. One! Just one time beyond The Fence and I am being punished for all eternity!*

He put his face in his hands and might have begun to cry right then, but suddenly he thought he heard

the sound of someone eating. He perked up his ears and waited. Sure enough, there it was again. Very slowly and leisurely, someone was eating— “Schmunch, schmunch, schmunch.”

Charlie was in shock. Who could be eating here? Now? He took a deep breath and decided to open one eye.

What he saw amazed him. So much so that he had to rub his eyes again just to make sure they were working properly and that he wasn't hallucinating. Not two inches away from where he was sitting (or slumping as others might say), was a great big, fat, round, black, white and yellow (almost orange) caterpillar. He was sitting on a long thin twig, that had been perched on an angle, and he was eating, sure as day, a nice big hunk of leaf.

Charlie couldn't believe his luck! *I must still be alive!* he thought. Everyone knew that caterpillars and ants didn't wind up in the same place when they were dead and even beyond that—if you weren't in heaven, you certainly weren't going to be given a nice slice of fresh leaf to chomp on while you waited.

Charlie stood up slowly and looked around in amazement. If he wasn't dead, then where could he possibly be? What had happened? What about the light and the tunnel and his falling? How did he get here?

He started to survey his surroundings. In front of him, as told before, was a caterpillar about two full inches in length sitting rather nonplussed on his twig and apparently enjoying his leaf fully as if nothing was odd about their situation at all. Beneath him, Charlie discovered that he was standing on some kind of see through flooring while the ground appeared to be about 4 feet beneath them. He tapped on the floor with his legs. *Smooth, hard, see-through. Wow, I must be in some sort of glass bottle,* Charlie thought.

He looked up from the floor and started to look at the walls—see-through too. He looked straight up and quickly determined, however, that this bottle was not going to be easy to get out of—it had some sort of fine mesh cloth covering the large opening.

Charlie decided to look around and see if he could find another way out. *Maybe,* he thought, *it has a couple of smaller openings as well!* Charlie started to gaze at the thick glass walls ahead of him but he saw nothing but the now unreachable Fence in the distance. He peered ever more closely at the glass and slowly started to move his gaze across the glass looking for something, anything...

“Ahhh!” Charlie screamed. All of a sudden, Charlie was looking straight into the biggest, largest, most

gargantuan single eye he had ever seen, right there, not even an inch away from him on the other side of the glass! It was humongous and it was apparently focused right on Charlie.

Right then and there, Charlie fainted.

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. Charlie loves chocolate—every kind of chocolate. What is your favorite sweet treat?
2. Charlie gets the timing wrong for the activities beyond The Fence. Have you ever gotten the time wrong for something and shown up too early or too late? What happened? How do you keep yourself from being late for things (or are you still working that out)?
3. Charlie breaks the rules and goes beyond the Fence. Do you think he should have? Why do you think those rules were in place? What purpose do rules serve? Why are they made? Can they ever be wrong or not helpful? What do you do if you don't agree with a rule? Are there rules in your house that you don't like? What are they? Why do you think the rules are what they are?
4. Professor Pethers is a really popular teacher at Fiercedale Middle School. Who is your favorite teacher? Why is he/she your favorite?
5. Professor Peters grows pumpkins as a hobby. Do you have a hobby? What is it? How did you discover your hobby (become interested in it)?
6. When running with the goo on his front leg/hand, Charlie felt like he was in a 9 legged ant race. Have you ever run in a three legged race? When? Who was your partner? If not, try it tomorrow (or today if you can!).
7. The caterpillar was eating a leaf. What leaves do you eat? Name them or at least name the leaves other people eat if you don't like them!
8. Charlie fell a long way into the Jar. Have you ever fallen from something high? Did you get hurt? What happened?
9. How would you have felt if you found yourself trapped like Charlie? What would you do to keep yourself calm?
10. Charlie ends up staring into the biggest eye he has ever seen. What color eyes do you have? Name the color eyes of everyone in your family. Who has the biggest eyes? The longest lashes? Does anyone wear glasses?