1.

WHO ARE YOU, STRANGER?

It was a hot summer day in July. The agricultural lands of central California were fertile with various crops. Even in the absence of the wind, there was a movement in the wheat fields. Something was moving on the ground that caused the wheat crops to move back and forth. A rodent who had been living there for many years sensed that and sniffed the air. He smelled something different; well, he had been exposed to a similar kind of odor before, but this time it was a little unusual.

"What could it be?" the rodent said to himself. "This seems to be something foreign."

He sniffed the air again. That time the smell was much stronger than the previous time. That meant only one thing: the source of the smell was closer. A sense of panic gripped the rodent, and he began to grab the wheat grains in a hurry. He did not want to wait very long and wanted to head back to his home.

Suddenly, there was no movement at all. The whole place was very quiet. The rodent stood frozen. All he could hear was his loud heart beat.



Pyinbya eager to meet Rodney

"Hello there!" somebody called him. The loudness of the call showed that whoever called him was very close.

The rodent remembered what his parents had taught him: "Never make a sudden movement when you are in an unfamiliar place. The jumpier you are, the more trouble you will get yourself in to."

Slowly the rodent turned his head. He saw a long but bulky creature eagerly waiting for his reply a few feet behind him. The rodent tiptoed a few more feet away, turned back, and asked the creature, "Hi ... who are you?"

Sensing some friendliness in the air, the creature moved a little closer, much to the fear of the rodent, and introduced himself. "Hello there. I am Pyinbya. How about you?"

The name sounded very strange to the rodent. Pyinbya resembled the rodent's archenemy, Fang Diamond of the Rattler clan, who had long been settled there even before the rodent's ancestors came over, but he seemed a lot less scary.

"Hello, stranger," said the rodent. "I am Rodney Punxatawney. Are you lost?"

"I don't know," said Pyinbya. "I was born only a few days back, and all of a sudden I don't see my mom at all. She was there with me, but now I am all alone."

Still not sure of the newcomer, Rodney said with caution, "Perhaps, she is looking for you by now. I always sniff my way to my house. Even in the darkness, I know the direction to my home. Is that the same with you?"

There was no reply from Pyinbya. He was sobbing. Rodney thought it might be that he was missing his mom.

"Pyinbya ... Pyinbya," Rodney called him. Something in Rodney told him not to approach too close to the stranger. Rodney thought anybody who looked like Fang Diamond could be rude like him as well.

"I want to go home," cried Pyinbya. "I want to see my mom. I want to see my brothers and sisters."

Rodney wanted to help him. He wanted to take Pyinbya home and introduce him to his parents. He thought his parents might have some information on how to get Pyinbya back to his mom.

"Are you hungry? Do you want some grains?" asked Rodney.

"I can't eat grains. I can eat only the food I can grab on to," said Pyinbya, "like the frogs and the small birds."

When Rodney heard the word *birds*, a sudden sense of fear gripped him. Birds were tasty delicacies for Fang Diamond too. Was Pyinbya a distant cousin of some sort to Fang? Was he acting to become friends with Rodney, so as to scar Rodney's whole family? Rodney was not sure.

"Did you say birds?" asked Rodney. "My parents have told me that anybody who preys on birds might prey on me too."

Pyinbya did not respond. In his short stay with his mom, he had seen his mom gobbling a creature that looked a lot like Rodney. He was not sure whether only his mom would do that. He liked Rodney a lot. Even though he had known him only for a few minutes, he saw a true friend in him.

"Are you afraid of me, Rodney?" asked Pyinbya in a concerned voice. "I promise I won't do any harm to you. I don't have anyone here. Could you ask your parents to let me stay with you until I find a place for myself? Please?"

"*No!*" Rodney shouted. He was surprised at his own reaction. The fear in him made him react like that.

With a sorry face, Pyinbya said, "Rodney, I am sorry if I have offended you. I am sorry to have invited myself."

Meanwhile, voices were heard a little way from them. It looked like a few others were on a search. Moments later, one of them came face-to-face with Rodney.

"Rodney! Rodney! What are you doing all by yourself? Don't you know how long it has been since you left our colony?" asked a lady rodent. There was a look of relief on her face at having found Rodney.

"Sorry, Mother. I was trying to help a friend," said Rodney.

"*A friend?*" asked the lady rodent, looking confused. "Where is your friend?" she asked. "What is that smell? It smells foreign to me."

"That would be from me," said Pyinbya, who until that time was silently listening to the lady rodent. "I am Pyinbya. I am new to this place. You must be Rodney's mom."

Suddenly hearing a new voice, she jumped in shock. She looked at Pyinbya and with suspicion asked, "Boy, you look a lot like Fang Diamond. Who are you?"

"Fang Diamond? Ma'am, who would that be?" asked Pyinbya.

"Address me as Mrs. Punxatawney," she said. "Fang and his evil clan are responsible for causing us a lot of problems." With a stern voice, she asked, "Are you one of them?"

"Mrs. Punxatawney, I have no idea what you are asking me about. I was born only a few days back and I am very hungry. Could you please help me get back to my mom? She must be searching for me," said Pyinbya.

Mrs. Punxatawney looked at the other lady rodent who had come looking for Rodney with her. The other lady rodent whispered something to Mrs. Punxatawney, and she nodded in approval.

"Boy, what is your name, again?" Mrs. Punxatawney asked.

"Pyinbya."

"Mrs. Bandicoot tells me to take you to our colony historian, Dr. Moss Mosquito, to find out about your parents. I understand you are too young to know much about your family. Honestly, I have been here for many years and not even once have I come across anyone like you. Not even in my bedtime stories from my grandpa or grandma have I heard about anyone like you," said Mrs. Punxatawney.

Even though Mrs. Punxatawney's suggestion seemed logical, Pyinbya expected a little more warmth from her. "I feel very cold at night. I don't think I will ever get used to the cold weather," said Pyinbya.

"Mom, please, Mom. Just one night please," said Rodney. He did not want to leave his friend in distress. But his mom had other worries that kept on increasing whenever Mrs. Bandicoot told her something.

"Let us see Dr. Mosquito first. I want to know about you first, son, before I let you inside my house. More than that, I have to ask our colony members, too. By the way, do you have some place to stay, just in case?" she asked.

"I will just coil myself under a sheath of grass or hay. Don't worry about me," said Pyinbya.

Mrs. Punxatawney turned toward Mrs. Bandicoot and asked, "Barbara, would Dr. Mosquito be at his home now? Or would he be on his rounds for the evening? That man is so relentless. Every day he collects so many blood samples and does his research. What an incredible man!"

Hearing about Dr. Mosquito made Pyinbya a little more cheerful. He hoped that with Dr. Mosquito's help he would be able to find out about himself and eventually get back to his mom.

"Mom, do you know where to find Dr. Mosquito?" asked Rodney. He was worried about his new friend Pyinbya.

"Yes, dear," she said. "He usually does his rounds within a small distance from his home. Don't worry, he will find us by himself. He has such a good sense of smell."

Both Mrs. Punxatawney and Mrs. Bandicoot escorted Rodney and Pyinbya toward Dr. Mosquito's house to get some information about Pyinbya.