

## **Friend or Foe**

Amongst the trees at the bottom of the garden between the flower beds, where the butterflies fluttered, and the cabbage patch, where the caterpillars nibbled, there was a large compost heap.

Deep down inside the compost heap, where it was damp, warm and very dark, surrounded by rotting vegetable peelings and leaf mould, existed a world of tiny creatures: some were enemies, some were friends; but just who could be trusted was not always clear. It was a case of survive or be eaten if you misjudged your neighbour.

One day a stranger appeared at the bottom-most dwelling and begged to be allowed to enter. It was a hot day and the stranger was exhausted and becoming ever more dehydrated after its long trek from the potting shed at the top of the garden. It yearned for somewhere dark and damp to lay its little body and to munch on a morsel of decaying matter.

“Please let me in,” it sobbed. “I’m lost and so alone.”

There was a scuffling and a bustling as three hundred and fifty or more tiny feet scrambled deeper into the darkness and hid, small and silently, under the leaf mould and bark.

“What are you?” a brave voice finally dared to ask.

“I don’t know,” the stranger responded sadly.

“How do you not know what you are?”

“My mother never told me,” it sniffed. “Now I’ll never know. She told us to stay close to her. She said it was a dangerous world out there but I so wanted to explore outside; as soon as I got my last pair of legs I escaped. I was only going out for a little while but now I don’t know how to get home. I wish I’d listened to her.”

“Oh that’s upsetting. Let it in. Perhaps we can help” a kindly voice instructed.

There was a loud rustling and the sound of scraping as the tiny creatures inside began removing decaying matter from the entrance.

“Hang on a moment,” a loud booming voice called out. “Put that down, all of you! How do we know if it’s a friend? It might be hungry for our bodies - a crunching monster with needle sharp teeth, ready to suck all the our life juices from us.”

“Oh do be quiet, you’re frightening the babies. Come here my darlings, don’t be afraid. No-one will hurt you while I’m here,” the kindly voice cooed.

The stranger waited hopefully, struggling to get as close to the damp dark wood as it was able; listening as hard as it could for any movement or to hear what was being said inside the cosy leaf mould home. Apart from the sound of tiny little sobs from the babies and very quiet whispering from the larger creatures, there was little movement. Suddenly the firm and brave voice shouted out: "All right then, you'd better answer some questions so we can identify if you're friend or foe before we consider letting you in.

First question - Do you have legs?"

"Yes"

"Well that's really helpful, I must say!" a new voice said sarcastically.

"I was just checking it's not one of those slimy slug things...or even a worm. If it is, it'll bring the prickly monster with that twitching nose and that will be the end of all of us," came the explanation.

"Fair enough. We don't want that munching monster mooching around here. Carry on."

"Next question. Do you have 6 legs?"

"No!"

"Thank goodness...not a beetle then!" Sounds of agreement echoed around.

"Oh hang on there, what if it's got 8 legs! Do you have 8 legs?" A cold, icy fear spread around the colony as they awaited the response.

"No, I definitely have way more than 8 legs!" It said confidently looking at all its fine limbs. A collective sigh of relief came from inside the heap. "Phew! Not a spider then!" one of the little voices said out loud. Things were beginning to look more positive for the stranger.

"Are you sure you don't know what you are?"

"Sorry, no. My mother was saying something when I left but I wasn't really listening. I was too excited about my new legs and the adventure I was going on. Wish I'd listened now."

Another tiny voice called out. "I have a really good question to ask, let me ask my question, please, please, please, it's really good."

"Oh bless. Sweetheart what is your question?" the kindly voice encouraged.

"Do you have feathers?" tiny voice said proudly.

"What? Have you ever seen a bird with 8 legs or more? Really! I've told you before think carefully about the questions you ask," an angry voice boomed in exasperation.

"But it is a good question but for another time perhaps, not when we're discussing legs," the kindly voice tried to encourage and comfort the now sobbing creature.

"Hope it's not a centipede, that's got lots of legs," another voice called out, bringing again a deathly hush to the heap. It continued, making smacking noises with its lips, "and likes

to make us into tasty snacks. Yum. That's what happened to my uncle. Thought he could outrun it. Haha! With all those legs, didn't stand a chance!"

There was a sound of twigs and leaves being pushed tighter against the entrance again.

"I do have one more question which will eliminate all thoughts of centipedes from your heads. Do you have a grey and oval shaped body?" There was a sharp intake of breath as three hundred and fifty or more legs crossed tightly, waiting and hoping.

"I don't know, I can't see what I look like!" came the response from the stranger.

Someone pushed a small piece of shiny glass under a twig. "Take a look at yourself in this."

The stranger peered into the makeshift mirror. It could make out legs (7 pairs, in fact), 2 antennae and a body that was an oval shape and sort of grey in colour.

"Yes I do!"

"Oh wow!" came the response from inside.

"That means it must be a woodlouse just like us....but what kind, is it one of those show off roly poly ones?"

"Well that will be another set of questions. Which I don't have time to think about now," came the response. "Let's just accept that it is a friendly woodlouse."

"But at least it won't eat us!" one of the tiny woodlice shouted.

"As long as you're not moulting my little one - better hide out of the way, just in case. It must be a little bit hungry by now!"

Then with a collective tug at twigs and composting vegetation from inside the heap, the entrance hole appeared and a little head poked out just to check that the stranger had answered all the questions honestly.

"Friend! Welcome to the home of the woodlice who live at the bottom of the compost heap. Come in young woodlouse and tonight you can eat with my family"

The stranger crawled inside. How happy and safe it felt seeing all the creatures that reminded it of its own family under the woodpile near the potting shed.