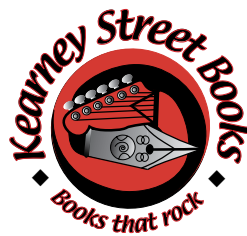


VERDIANA

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Written and Illustrated by:
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VERDIANA



In a far away world there was a horrible war between two empires. They were mad at each other because they had ran out of space to expand and they were not willing to share. So they fired missiles at each other until the world was completely engulfed in flames, and both empires were destroyed.

But it was not the end of the world. Although many creatures were gone forever, many plants and creatures survived. One of these creatures, half human and half fish, thought she was the last of her kind. Her name was Verdiana, but all her friends knew her as Verdy.

Verdy lived in a small bog near a ruined town. She was resourceful, using scraps and intact items from the ruined town to build her shack and fashion her clothes. The bog had a lot of algae, weeds, rotten fruit, and lilies in the water, which Verdy could ingest for nourishment. It seemed she had everything she needed.

But Verdy was very lonely. She would stare at her reflection, wishing there was another creature that had long flanged feet and fingers like hers, and blue wrinkled skin like hers, and a hairless head with long fins like hers. She recalled having a family before the world was engulfed in flames, but she didn't remember them very well.

Such loneliness was hard to handle, so she made up people to talk to. She made up Mr. Peppledale, a sturdy fella who was very stubborn and kind of mossy. He was a rock. She made up Ms. Twigsworth, a very caring lady who could also be a bit of a thorn when she nagged. She was a stick. She made up Violet, a doll made of rags that she pretended was her child. And finally, she had a real living pet, a hagfish named Haggy. Her friends all loved to talk to Verdy.

One day, Verdy set up her friends around near the edge of a lake close by the bog, so they could watch her swim. Verdy was a very graceful swimmer.





“I hope someday I can swim as well as you, Verdy,” said Violet.

“Just keep practicing, and someday you will, my child,” replied Verdy.

“That is, if Violet remembers to practice!” mumbled Mr. Peppledale.

“Oh hush, Mr. Peppledale!” Verdy whispered to him.

And then Verdy heard loud rustling from up in the thorny trees, followed by a voice bellowing, “I say who, WHO are you talking to?”

Verdy was confused; this voice was real, not one in her imagination.

“Oh, nevermind, nevermind,” the voice said quietly, and a two-beaked pterosaur, which had a beak on each end of its head, fluttered down from the trees.

Verdy was scared of the pterosaur; she hid away behind a tree.

“Now really!” the pterosaur whined. “I’m in no mood for hide and seek!”

Verdy peeked at the pterosaur from behind the tree and nervously said, “Is there something you would like from me, Mr. Pterosaur?”

The pterosaur giggled. "Oh, for Pete's sake, I'm only a quarter of your size! There's no need for fear."

Verdy stepped from behind the tree into the pterosaur's view.

"That's better." The pterosaur looked Verdy up and down, really studied her. "Sheesh. The other fish people weren't like this at all."

Verdy's eyes widened. "There's other fish people? Like me? Where did you see them?"

"If I recall, they were to the north of here in a little valley. A little family of three."

Verdy leaped with joy. Laughed uncontrollably. She was shouting, "YES! YES!" So happy!

Verdy's suddenness made the pterosaur very uncomfortable.

Slowly backing away, the pterosaur said, "I'll...just...be going...then." And he flew away.

It was few moments before Verdy finished her little celebration, and only then did she look for the pterosaur. "Hey!" she yelled. "Where did you go? Come back!"

But the pterosaur didn't answer; he was gone.

Ms. Twigsworth tried to comfort Verdy. "Don't worry," she said. "We'll go to the northern valley. You won't be lonely there."

So Verdy ran to her shack and began preparing to leave the bog. She tied a sack to the end of Ms. Twigsworth and placed Violet and Mr. Peppledale in the sack along with a few of her belongings. Then she walked to the bog and whistled for Haggy, who leaped out of the bog lake and slithered like a snake to his friend. Haggy purred, meowed, and brushed up against Verdy's leg.

"You ready for a trip, Haggy?" she asked, petting his cute, slimy head.

With Haggy's enthusiastic approval, Verdy began to follow the sun north. She walked across the swamp, her loped feet keeping her from sinking into the mud, Haggy at her heels. Eventually she came to the end of the swamp where the mud and trees stopped. The world beyond was dry dirt hills covered in very short grass seedlings. Verdy hesitated to go beyond this spot because she knew if she did there would be no going back. She decided to make up excuses not to go beyond the swamp.



“I want to feel the moss here before I go,” Verdy told her friends. She sat on a log and felt the moss on it. The moss was so soft and squishy that she spent a long time stroking it. She was hesitant to continue on her journey, but at the same time she was drawn powerfully to the northern valley.

But rather than moving on, Verdy kept coming up with excuses. “I’ll go,” she said. “Right after I stroke the gills of these mushrooms.” And that’s how it went for a while: more fungi to pet, more swamp things to touch and smell one last time.

From inside the sack, Mr. Peppledale yelled, “Verdy! Come on! Get going!”

“Please,” Verdy pleaded, “just a little bit longer?”

“No, no, NO!” Mr. Peppledale admonished. “You’re going, and you’re going to go now! No excuses!” Quite apparently, Mr. Peppledale was not going to accept any excuses. “Get up! Get up! You have to do this!” At Mr. Peppledale’s cajoling and coaching, Verdy moved to the edge of the swamp.

But still she hesitated. Taking that first step out of the swamp was making her so very, very nervous. Slowly, she lifted one foot, but then dared not put it down.

“Come on, Verdy,” Mr. Peppledate cheered. “You can do it!”

Ever so carefully, Verdy touched the other side of the swamp with her foot. Then, still ever so carefully, she planted her foot and put took another step away from all she had known.

“I did it, Mr. Peppledale! I did it! Now we can go!”

But the rock said nothing back, which Verdy thought strange. Mr. Peppledale always had something to say; that he was now quiet unsettled Verdy. But maybe he was weary, taking a nap. He had worked really hard to get her to make that first step. So Verdy let him have his rest and walked onward towards the sun.

Haggy, getting a little tired himself, all that squirming he was having to do to keep up, leaped into the sack wrapped around Ms. Twigsworth.

Feeling happy, and liberated, Verdy ventured onward, stopping only to pet the beaked worms that crawled out of the dirt, or to watch the see-through bird-bugs fly in front of the sun, their life-giving viscera clearly visible.

“I wish I could be free with nothing to hide,” she thought. “Just like those lovely glass birds.” Eventually, she came to a thicket of thorny plants. There was no way around the thicket, so she would have to carefully navigate through it. Luckily, Verdy’s dark blue sweater was thick enough to stop a lot of the prickles from getting to her skin. As she carefully moved the thin thorny branches, she heard a shrill voice.



“Hey! Hey!” the voice cried. “Can you help me, please?”

Verdy followed the direction of the voice and saw a strange orange ostracod-headed jellyfish creature stuck on the thorns. Its eyes were large, all black, and very watery. Verdy wondered if it had been crying. Ever so carefully, she removed the thorns from the creature’s dress-like body. Then she gently sat it down on the ground.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!” the strange creature said. “M-m-my name’s Dimitri, and I’ve been stuck there for a long time. I thought I’d be stuck forever. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Once Dimitri stopped thanking her, Verdy said, “My name’s Verdiana. But I prefer just Verdy.”

“V-V-Verdy,” Dimitri stuttered, “w-w-what are doing out here so far from w-water?”

“I’m going north where all the other fish people are,” She explained. “Do you want to come?”

“Y-yes! Please, yes, please. Yes yes yes!” Dimitri hopped onto Verdy’s head without asking. “C-c-can I ride here? Or maybe you’d p-prefer if I ride on your h-h-hunch.”

Dimitri then hopped onto Verdy’s back.

“Well, I guess that would be okay,” Verdy said. “If you’re comfortable.”

“Oh, y-yes,” said Dimitri, and then on they continued, past the thorns and into the dark woods.

“Would you like to meet my friends?” Verdy asked Dimitri.

“S-s-sure,” replied Dimitri.

Verdy took Violet out of her bag.

“This is Violet,” Verdy said, showing the doll to Dimitri. “Say ‘hello’, Violet.”

And though Violet the doll did not say anything, Dimitri answered anyway. “H-hello, Violet. I’m Dimitri.”

Verdy was worried by the doll’s silence,

“She’s not normally this quiet,” Verdy explained.

“M-maybe she’s just n-n-nervous,” Dimitri replied.



Verdy thought maybe he was right, and put Violet back in the sack before she continued northward. As she walked, Verdy and her new friend, Dimitri, continued talking. Verdy was amazed that they had so much in common. For one thing, they were both swamp creatures. “And I read upside down,” she told him.

“I like that, too!” exclaimed Dimitri. “It feels like I’m reading a whole new book when I read it upside down!”

And they both loved the feel of moss and mushroom gills.

“I like s-s-scratching mushrooms gills when I’m lying and t-thinking and it makes me h-happy.”

They both loved chair-racing.

“I love to race on my chair,” said Verdy. “Although it really tires your arms, doesn’t it?”

And they both liked to tear up fallen leaves.

Dimitri said, “D-doesn’t it m-make you feel p-powerful?”

Then from a tree dropped a green squid, blocking their way.

“Hello there, little fish girl,” said the green squid in a hissing voice. “I’m Adverto and I’d like your attention, you see.”

Verdy whimpered with worry. “What? My attention? What does that mean?”

“Why the sad face? I’m here to help you,” Adverto explained. “To set you in the right direction, to tell you what you need, and what makes you happy.”

Verdy could only stand mute. Adverto had an overpowering vibe to him.

Uncoiling his tentacles to reveal stacks and stacks of metal cogs, Adverto said, “I have here the most awesome, radical, exciting game ever.” He held one up. “I call them COGS!”

Verdy blinked, unsure of what to make of these ‘Cogs’.

“They come in all shapes and sizes,” Adverto explained. “These gears were once used by the one-eyed empires to create powerful, magical machines. Now I’m selling these powerful relics to you!”

Verdy scratched her head. “I don’t understand how these could make me happy.”

“Don’t you see? Just look at all the different cogs! Everyone of them is unique! Look, I have gold and silver ones!” Adverto gave her an exuberant look. “Think about if you had all these gears, what a collection you would have! You would be the master of cogs! And it can be all yours if you give me all your food.”

Verdy pointed to her sack with Violet, Haggy, Twigsworth, and Peppledale in it. “But I already have a collection.”

Adverto



“But those aren’t special!” Adverto hissed. “Those aren’t *worth* anything! Those are things you can find lying on the ground! They don’t have any powers or anything.”

“W-what a horrible thing to s-say!” It was Dimitri, who had been quiet up to that point. “T-those are her most prized possessions!” he yelled. “T-they are most special to h-her! W-who are you to judge what’s worthless and w-what isn’t?”

Scoffing at Dimitri with his squidy eyes, Adverto turned back to Verdy. “Well, fishgirl. Do you want these shiny, shiny, SHINY cogs and be happy, or do you just want to keep wandering aimlessly through life?”

“Let’s just ignore him, Verdy,” Dimitri whispered.

Verdy took Dimitri’s advice. She stepped around Adverto and began walking quickly. The green squid’s hissy admonitions that she would never be happy

without cogs began fading in the distance.

* * *



Her friends resting comfortably in their sack, Verdy kept walking through the woods. After a while, she encountered a mangrove filled with strange creatures.

There were spiders, insects, fish, birds, and creatures that didn’t have any names at all. A large horn-turtle mother bared her scary fangs at Verdy, but kept her distance. Her babies close by, the horn-turtle just took a sip of water. Some gliding crocodiles swooped down and frightened Verdy for a moment, until she realized they were only after the tiny bugs floating near her. Then Verdy saw a really strange-looking old lady: she had a spider head and, sort of like a centaur, two bodies, froglet

and humanoid. She was walking in the opposite direction, but waved when she saw Verdy. Nervously, Verdy waved back.

Verdy saw many more strange creatures, some with no eyes, some all eyes, some with no legs, some with many legs, tails, tailless, one head, six heads, two heads, feathers, skin, slime, scales, fur, horns, boney parts, beaks, muzzles, faces, and jaws, some in pants, some in fancy hats. None were ashamed of their forms.

Verdy saw how the weird, creepy creatures made the beauty of the world, and she was at ease. She realized that all creatures take different paths in their evolution; even within groups of creatures, individuals took different paths in their talents and personalities.

Verdy walked and walked, eventually arriving at a vast chasm. She could see no way across; well, almost no way across. There was that ill-looking bat-camel over there, its veiny, pupil-less white eyes staring right through Verdy. The bat-camel sniffled and made sad backwards talking sounds. Verdy walked up to the bat-camel and sat next to it. The bat-camel turned to Verdy and gazed at her briefly then laid its head on the ground and made a long quiet sound as if sighing. Verdy slowly and gently stroked the bat-camel. Finally, the bat-camel rose and used the thumbs on its wings to dig through one of its skin-pockets and pull out a picture: it was the bat-camel itself hugging a paper bag.





Gently, Verdy said, “You miss your baggy friend, don’t you?”

The bat-camel nodded and made a sniffing sound then it started drooling uncontrollably.

“D-d-drooling in bat-camels in a sign of g-g-great depression and sorrow!” Dimitri explained. “I read it in my b-b-books.”

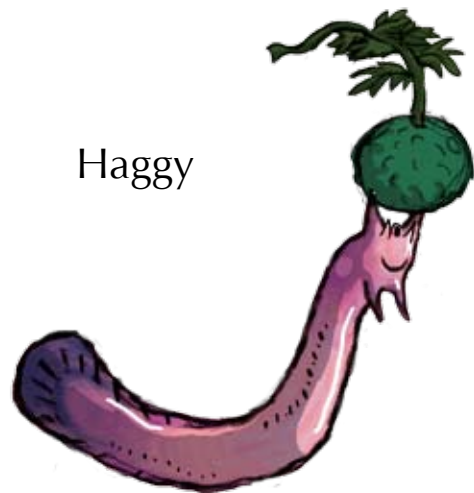
“What should we do to help?” asked Verdy.

“W-well, we should try to get the b-b-bat-camel active and m-moving.”

“Oh, that’d be a gingerbread idea!” Verdy said. “Wonderful!”

Then for some reason Haggy leaped out of Verdy’s bag and slithered into the woods. Verdy called after him, but Haggy disappeared, only to come back after a few minutes balancing a bouncy fruit on its head.

Rolling the fruit to the bat-camel, Haggy said, “Meow.”



Haggy

The bat-camel bounced the fruit back with its head, and Haggy returned serve. Playing roll-the-bouncy fruit seemed to make the bat-camel happier, but soon the play therapy wore off and the bat-camel sat down again—noticeably less sad.

Verdy got up and sat down next to the bat-camel again. She opened her sack. “Would you like to meet my friends?” she asked the bat-camel. The bat-camel barely nodded.

“This is Mr. Peppledale,” Verdy explained, “but he’s sleepy right now. This is Violet, who’s also sleeping. And this is Ms. Twigsworth. She’s still awake.

“It makes me sad to see you depressed,” Verdy told the bat-camel.

Then speaking in her special Ms. Twigsworth’s voice, she said, “I’d give up the word biscuits to see you happy.” That seemed to capture the bat-camel’s interest. Verdy handed Ms. Twigsworth to the bat-camel to hold for a little while. Then the bat-camel handed Ms. Twigsworth back to Verdy and pointed to its heart. Verdy cocked her head to one side in confusion. The bat-camel covered its heart with both thumbs and then let its thumbs droop down to the ground. And then Verdy understood.

Still speaking as Ms. Twigsworth, Verdy said, “Your heart isn’t empty, you still have your bag.”

When the bat-camel looked a little confused, Verdy held Ms. Twigsworth up, as if the stick was speaking directly to it. “You have a bag in your soul in which to carry new friends. Come on! Spread your wings!”

The bat-camel spread its wings and jumped into the air. It soared high and dived all over the sunset. Then it hovered, as if it had seen something. The bat-camel did a long dive and went out of sight, then it flew back up into view with something in its claws. It landed near Verdy and her friends and showed them its paper bag!

In unison, Verdy and Dimitri cried, “Oh, you’ve found it!” The bat-camel was overjoyed.

“We’re on a journey north,” Verdy told the bat-camel. “Do you think you can carry us across?” The bat-camel nodded and flattened itself so they could climb on. Verdy put Haggy and her imaginary friends back into her sack and crawled onto the bat-camel’s back, as did Dimitri.

In a big rush of energy and lift, the bat-camel began flying across the chasm. It was more than a little scary to Verdy, but she tried to be brave. Dimitri, however, just let it all out: he screamed and panicked. Verdy held onto Dimitri tightly so he wouldn’t blow away.

Everyone was glad when it was all over and they were on the other side.

“That was quite a ride, wasn’t it, Ms. Twigsworth?” Verdy asked, but the stick remained silent. “Ms. Twigsworth?” Verdy asked again, but still no response.

“I-is she not speaking, too?” Dimitri asked Verdy.

“I guess not.” Verdy fidgeted with worry, but then caught the bat-camel’s gaze. “Oh, goodbye friend. I hope we see each other again.” Verdy waved and the bat-camel nuzzled its bag and purred. This made Verdy even sadder because it reminded her of her imaginary friends. But Verdy slowly trudged on. After a while, she walked out of the forest and into a ruined town. It was starting to get dark and foggy. Verdy kept thinking about her friends and how silent they were. Her thoughts overwhelmed her and she could not go on. She sat down right where she was.

At this point, Dimitri was ahead of Verdy. “A-aren’t you c-coming?” he asked her.

“I’m going to stay here in this town for a while,” Verdy replied.

“B-but we’re r-r-really close!”

Verdy sighed. “You can move on ahead.”

Dimitri was hesitant to leave Verdy, but he also really wanted to reach his destination. Reluctantly, he slowly hopped onward, periodically looking back to Verdy until he vanished into the mist.

“Why?” Verdy asked her imaginary friends. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

“Meooow,” Haggy whimpered sadly.

Verdy burst into tears; she could not hold them back. She felt as empty as the bat-camel had. She was even more lonely than when she had begun her journey.

It had become very dark, so Verdy curled up and closed her eyes. But after a little while she felt a presence and when she opened her eyes again there was a strange figure hovering near her. She blinked and then there were two figures!

Verdy was scared to death.

The figures floated a little closer. Verdy could see they wore long ropes and crowns. Each had only had one giant eye, one figure's was red and the other was blue.

Blue Eye whispered, "Don't be afraid."

Red Eye said, "We are the ghost of the emperors who used to rule this land."

Blue Eye said, "Now the land belongs to everyone."

Red Eye said, "I am Id."

"And I am Ego," said Blue Eye.

Id said, "In life, we could not see in depth the consequences of our actions. For we only saw with one eye."

Ego said, "We had very poor introspection. We did not think of why we wanted so much power. We never thought about ourselves and our personality,



only what we wanted. We both hated each other. For we saw ourselves with only one eye.”

“In life we were separate.”

“In death we are united.”

In unison, Id and Ego said, “Now we can see with two eyes.”

Verdy was stunned. She had no idea what to say.

Still speaking as one, Id and Ego said, “Your imaginary friends are aspects of your personality. Mr. Peppledale represents self-motivation and courage. Violet represents empathy and friendship. Ms. Twigsworth represents intuition and compassion.

“They will never leave you,” the two eyes went on. “The only reason they stopped talking is because you no longer need these objects to speak for you.

“But,” they added, “they will still be with you: in your art, your creations, your stories. In whatever form your self-expression takes.”

“You see,” said Id, “imaginary friends never really go away.”

“Keep those objects safe,” Ego urged. “They are treasures of memory.”

“The mind is complicated,” said Id. “Hard to understand. But imaginary friends can help you understand yourself. Knowing oneself is key to unlocking true happiness and making the world a better place.”

Then the two eye figures began to fade. “Don’t make the mistake we did!” they called. “Look inward! Look inward! Look inward...” And the ghostly emperors disappeared.

Slowly, Verdy stood up. She looked at her friends.

In return, Haggy looked at Verdy. “Mew?”

Verdy turned to the north. “I think I know what I need now, Haggy.”

The moon had risen and Verdy could see well enough to move on. She placed Haggy in her sack and started to run. She ran through the ruins, trying not to step on anything sharp. She raced through the mist and up hills out of the ruins. She leaped across rivers with all the grace of a water spirit. She ran so fast that she dashed across a pond without falling in—like a basilisk lizard! The sun began to come up.

Finally she came to a heavily-vined grove of trees. She pushed the vines aside and saw behind them a large lake, its surface completely covered in water lilies,

duckweed, algae and other tasty treats. There was a single, humble house on the water's edge, overgrown with plants. Verdy saw a small blue tadpole in the water peering up at her. The tadpole swam out of the water and ran into the house with it's tiny legs.

Verdy heard some talking coming from inside the house. She got a little nervous. But then the tadpole and two tall fish-people stepped out. They looked a lot like Verdy!

The fish-lady gasped. "Verdiana? My Verdiana?"

"M-m-mommy?" Verdy cried.

"The daughter we lost years ago!" the fish-man said in disbelief.

"Daddy!" Verdy ran up to her parents and they embraced her for the first time.

Jumping out of the lake, Dimitri said, "I w-w-was wondering when you'd c-come." Dimitri jumped out of the water.



Verdy waved to him. "Oh, hello there Dimitri!"

"I didn't know I had a sister." The tadpole was very surprised.

"Well, I didn't know I had a younger brother," Verdy said to the tadpole.

"We have so many years to catch up on," said Verdy's mother. "What have you been doing? Who are those little guys you have in your sack there?"

"These are the characters I created," Verdy explained. "I have a lot of stories about them."

"Meow!" Haggy purred and slithered into the house. Verdy, her family, Dimitri, and her cast of characters soon followed.

Verdy never lost her imaginary friends. As she discovered the creative power within her, they only changed into something greater, treasures she could share with everyone, treasures that made her life more fulfilling and her swimming skills more graceful.

Fin





Fallon Parker-McKinney is an American author, illustrator and screenplay writer. She was born in Bellingham, Washington in 1991 where she continues to live with her family and cat, Shadow.

