

LEGENDS OF VERDEN: THE SHATTERED REFLECTION

Chapter 3

"What were you thinking!?" Derli asked in pure shock as they headed back through Gordby. "Frolli, the look on your face: it was like nothing I've ever seen before! I was convinced you were going to try to actually attack Fieldmaster Fane!" Then, as if suddenly aware of the volume of his voice, he adjusted to a quieter tone and continued, "I mean, *attacking* the Fieldmaster? Have you lost all your sense?"

Genuinely and just as surprised as Derli, Frolli hung his head in shame. "I'm not really sure my own self. He's always so frustrating, and insulting, and *degrading*, I just- oh, so thickheaded, he is!" Frolli harrumphed, not making much of a point beyond the obvious.

"Of course he is, he's the Fieldmaster. The Fieldmaster is supposed to be a pain, at least as much as I see it. Old Dalin himself wasn't much better, far as my folks say."

"Well, the position of Fieldmaster isn't a monarchy, and it seems to me it's the Fanes who are all stubborn about things. Everybody knows Tokka got where he is thanks to his uncle more than anything else. And I'm for certain I'm not the only one who's put thought toward clawing at him, rude as he is. It's not

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fair, and if anybody else talked to you that way, you'd be perfectly right to think about tussling him over it."

"Sure, but Frolli, folks think things all the time, and I was there: you were about to do a sight more than *think* about it. You can't go off like that, not on Rottan bigger than you, and certainly not on the Fieldmaster."

"I've fought boys bigger than me!" Frolli protested. "Bigger than me and done just fine, thank you very much."

"Yes, but Tokka's no boy. And he's a Fane, at that. All other things aside, it'd still be a perfectly stupid thing to do, nipping at a Fane."

"You're one to talk!" Frolli responded. He shoved Derli on the shoulder. "We wouldn't have been in this mess, you hadn't taken a Fane's seeds!"

"That's different," Derli replied rather complacently.

"Different? Different how, I'm wondering? Go on, enlighten me."

"Well, I was hungry," he said innocently.

"Oh, you're insufferable sometimes, I do swear!"

They walked on toward the Venn residence: a bin erected over a middlesized shop. The Venns rented out storage space to farmers and other merchants and sold their goods from the frontage; their payment was, instead of a percentage of the profits, a small apportion of the very goods and wares that were sold, which kept them well-stocked in whatever they needed. The shop was located well, just off the main square, and saw lots of business.

As they rounded the corner, Frolli said quietly, "Sorry for losing my temper with the Fieldmaster. And for dragging you into all this."

"S'okay," Derli shrugged noncommittally. "But what do we do now? I mean, if we tell anybody about Stufford Tokka'll have our hides."

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"I don't know about you, but my hide is worth it. I wasn't just talking it up: people are missing and at least a few are dead, Derli! I certainly can't just sit by and pretend I didn't see what I saw, whether the Fieldmaster believes me or not."

Derli sighed, knowing he wasn't going to win any ground in the long run. "Alright, then who do we go to?"

"Well, I can't conjure the notion that my Mam and Pap'll listen to what I have to say, but I figure yours might."

"Mine?" Derli said as he bounded up the single stair leading to his parents' shop and reached for the door. "I don't know if that's the best idea, Frolli -- I mean, I'd rather not get them involved if I can help it."

The door practically burst from its hinges as Lerra Venn slammed it open. "Boys!" she cried out. "Oh, I'm ever so glad to see you: I was worried sick about you; have been all night. Set to shivering, I was. Where the world had you gotten off to?"

Before either of them could reply she was pulling them roughly inside and launching into one of her fevered harangues. "You must be half-starved by now; we must get some food in you. Oh, my- but don't you know how dangerous it is to be out all night? I'm sure we've told you as much before, and if we haven't, let me tell you now: it is dangerous to be out all night, boys! What if there had been a Ganger attack, or a storm, or a fire? Oh, we had no idea where you'd gone, and I feared the worst, I did. I mean, what if you had tripped and broken an ankle, and then fallen into a ditch, unable to crawl out, with nobody to hear your cries for help? Oh, terrifies me, just to picture it!"

All Derli could manage in the short gap before the next inevitable rush was, "Why would we both break our ankles at the same time?" but this went unheard.

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Lerra saw them anew, as though for the first time, and took stock of them, even as she was pulling a pot of leftovers out and dishing it into serving cups. Some sort of carrot bisque, by the smell of it. The overprotective lecture was going to unfold no matter what, they both knew, so they took their cups and began to eat. Might as well get fed while they waited for her to run her course.

"Frolli, goodness, no, what have you done? Oh, my, just look at you: covered in scratches, you are! Have you boys been out in the grasses? Darling, you know how sensitive your bare skin is, and those blades are sharp as razors to somebody in your condition! Not for nothing they call them 'blades,' after all! Oh, I'll get some aloe; I only hope it's not too late to keep you from scarring!"

"Missus Venn, it's no worry," Frolli said through a mouthful of bisque: disinterestedly, as he knew it would do no good; indeed, she was already gone to the medicinals closet and still carrying on from the other room. "Don't see why everybody's always got to make a fuss," he grumbled to himself. "Just scratches..."

By the time she returned she had already switched to a new subject. "Derli, your father is not going to have a greatly kind word to say once he gets home, which by my reckoning should be any moment now, and I've half a mind to tell him you've only just now returned home, 'stead of covering for you and saying you got in sometime in the wee morning, like I did the last time."

As she spoke she grabbed Frolli by the scruff. He let out a startled squeak, although he shouldn't have been too surprised, really - she had done exactly this more than once before. She began to rub the chunk of aloe along Frolli's skin. "Missus Venn, really, that's not

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necessary-" he struggled, but in vain, and she held him fast.

"Mam," Derli tried to cut in on his behalf, "he's fine. You needn't-"

But she continued unimpeded: "And what is this business I hear about Dalin Fane's prized pumpkinseeds, hm? Those are prizewinning seeds, you know; that is why they call them his prized pumpkinseeds. Very valuable, for you to go taking some; haven't we told you that it's wrong to take what isn't yours? Well, if not, let me tell you now: it's quite wrong to go taking things that aren't yours, boys. I know you get hungry sometimes, but you must learn not to give in to temptation."

She went on.

Most Rottan had half a dozen children at least, but the Venns were young and Derli their first and only. It was rare for a child to be born alone; groups of three or more were the norm, but for whatever reason Derli had come into the world by himself, and perhaps for a similar reason the Venns had been a long time in conceiving again. It was only recently that they announced their intentions for another attempt, but Lerra still had plenty of excess energy to dote on Derli. To say he was loved would be quite an understatement.

Frolli, on the other hand, was saddled with his alleged curse. For two hardworking, nose-to-the-ground, curly-haired Rottan to have a boy so markedly different, in both appearance and personality, was nigh on scandalous, and they had never been quick to let him forget it. That he, like Derli, was the only one born in his litter wasn't just an oddity, it was an insult. In their eyes he was a disappointment, and that disappointment spread among the other Rottan, too. Frolli had very few friends and the odds were not in his favor.

But from the very beginning things had been different with Missus Venn. She had immediately

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devoted the care and attention which would normally have been reserved for her other children to Frolli instead, fussing and fawning over him in equal measure. She quickly became his surrogate mother, and she was more of one to him than his own ever could be.

But that meant a fair bit of this overprotectiveness to contend with.

"Oh, the ruckus he rose last night, coming 'round here asking if I knew where you were. I could have trounced him; the shame of knocking on somebody's door like that when there's work to be done for both of us." She had switched from chastising them to defending them, and also from coating Frolli in aloë to picking burrs out of her son's fur. Derli stared grumpily into his draining bowl. "Lucky your father wasn't in, at that. Didn't even have the decency to say what he was about; why, not until this morning did I even know what he really wanted, when he went and roused the Fieldmaster. Now, Derli, I'm not so sure I can hide a visit from Tokka Fane from your father; that's a tall order. You may just have to answer for that yet."

The boys endured Lerra's solicitudes for a time longer before she finally retired to chores, wondering aloud what was keeping Mister Venn this morning. Derli said he was probably just running behind; escorting convoys in always took longer than expected, the way the merchants jumped at every rock and shadow, and not to worry, but she commenced to doing just that and at great length, so the two quietly excused themselves without ever having had an opening to bring up what they had seen.

Derli walked Frolli to the door. "Well, I'd better stay by at any rate; if I'm not here when Pap does get back, that really will be the end of me."

Frolli sighed. Mister Venn was the more level-minded and reasonable of the two, or at least the quieter, and there was nearly as little chance of being heard on

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the issue of Stufford with Lerra as with Tokka. The instant they explained, she would miss the bushes for the twigs and carry on about how dangerous it was to build a bridge over a river of stohv, probably for hours unending, and that was before they got anywhere near the part where they'd watched somebody die. He knew that anything he might say was going to have to wait, regardless.

How frustrating, being so small, so ignored! Rottan, for their magnificently large ears, seemed entirely unable to listen, and the alleged curse with which young Frolli was burdened was certainly of no help. Of course he might have been able to tolerate having only one or two confidants as a result of his appearance, if only those one or two were inclined to pay him any mind whenever he could get in a word. Adults, especially his own parents, mostly ignored whatever he said, if they chose to acknowledge his existence at all, and his peers spent all their time taunting and teasing, nevermind that he had disproved their misguided opinions on his fighting prowess, bravery, intelligence, wit, or half a dozen other subjects of scorn, and half a dozen times over, every one.

And worst yet was that all of it could be written off as the norm if this was just some normal occurrence to be concerned over. But something quite awful clearly had happened, and Frolli's hands were tied by mere circumstance. Were the lives of other Rottan going to be cast away because of some narrow-minded social stigma?

Frolli bit down on his swelling sense of aggravation and with a calming breath summoned up some patience. "Yeah, I understand," he nodded. "But promise me, Derli, that the moment he gets home, you'll tell him about Stufford. We can't just slide out from under this one. We're responsible for helping those poor people."

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Derli, rendered less argumentative perhaps by mere exhaustion, also nodded. "Don't worry, Frolli. I get it. Besides, if I tried to hide it, I'm sure the whole thing would come into the light soon or late, and they'd all have my tail for it."

"Okay," Frolli said, a little reluctantly. "So long as you promise."

"I promise, Frolli, I promise."

They clasped hands and with that Frolli was off. He had dawdled long enough; now it was time to face his own parents, who if they wouldn't be perturbed by his misadventures would certainly be upset at his shaming them before the Fieldmaster. That was always the primary concern with the Helters, at least where Frolli was concerned: not his safety or well-being, but the family's reputation, which his very birth had already damaged beyond apparent repair.

They had decided long before that nothing he was going to ever do would be good enough. They always found his fault in any matter, his failing, despite whatever success he might have been enjoying beforehand. Excelled in school? Could have done better, and what did he want for being a good student, a reward? All the times he acted out, argued with the teachers, and got into fights outweighed his few moments of merit. Got his chores done early? Why was he quitting early, if he still had time to get more work done? Did absolutely nothing noteworthy at all and drew no attention to himself nor risked potentially dishonoring his family name? Why wasn't he aspiring to do something meaningful; what was the point of being alive if he wasn't going to amount to anything worthwhile?

With considerable disdain Frolli crossed Gordby toward Dandelion Dale, which lay in a great blanket over the hills and glens to the east of town. The Helter family owned a small and unimpressive claim close to

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the village, which due to its proximity to the more populated area had less growth than surrounding steads.

Frolli's existence was responsible for the lackluster farmland, as well, or so it was said.

The Helter residence was little more than a barn: a large box with oversized archways instead of doors, stalls flanking either side instead of rooms, and a loft for sleeping. He approached it sullenly, as he always did, never happy to be returning and this time no exception.

A large shift of cloth, big enough to coat the entire ground floor of the edifice, was bunched up and crumpled in the entryway, half of it splayed out on the ground in front of the house. Frolli sighed, then removed his hat and pack and snuggled into the rumpled sheet.

"How many times have I told you, Mynt, not to tug our blanket outside like this?" Frolli asked.

From elsewhere within the bundle, his sister's voice indignantly rang, "And what was I supposed to do: listen to Mam and Pap carry on all morning while you were out doing who knows what? I don't see why I'm always the one who has to suffer whenever you run off, you know."

"Oh, as though I don't suffer enough when I get back!" Frolli argued.

"That's as may be, but meanwhile I'm the one who gets to listen to all their whinging while you're gone, and then I have to hear it all over again alongside you. You know, brother, if I must be punished so, you may as well just take me along."

"Oh, no," Frolli snorted. "I've said 'no' to that more times than I've told you to leave the blanket inside, I'm sure of it. You're not old enough."

"I'm old enough!" she protested. "I'm old enough, and brave enough, and I'm smart enough, too! Moreso than Derli, that's for certain!"

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"The grasses are no place for a girl!" Frolli said sharply.

She gasped. "Oh! You're so rude, Frolli Helter!" she declared, then wriggled out of the nest of cloth. "You'll see, brother; I'm just as grown up as you. You just haven't got the class and wit to realize it yet, is all." She glared down at him from outside the blanket, and he poked a head out. Short and stocky, still carrying nestling fat, Mynt couldn't quite cut the imposing figure she wanted to. They both knew he was mostly right; the grasses really were no place for young Mynt, but they weren't suited to Frolli himself, either, and that hypocrisy was what gave her the ground to stand on when it came to arguing with her not-much-older brother. "What have you got to say, Frolli? You look as if you might have something clever, for once."

He stared at her and silence lay between them. There was the matter of Stafford and what had happened there; if he told her the whole town had been wiped out or taken, that would send her cowering. But to tell her would invite trouble: she couldn't keep her mouth shut. She put her hands on her hips demandingly. "Are you going to move this back inside?" he finally chirped.

"Ugh!" she groaned, then stalked inside and disappeared from view.

After a moment, Frolli called, "Well?"

The sheet untangled as Mynt pulled on it from within, spilling Frolli out into the dirt as she yanked the whole of it inside. Pyrrhic, but still a victory on his part. He took a little comfort in it: she was ever being a pain, though she couldn't fully be blamed for that. She was saddled with the same curse as he, though for different reasons, and whatever patience the Helters might have had in dealing with their son, when their daughter came out alone and disfigured it was a death knell for the children. Mynt's self-righteousness and confrontational

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attitude, worse than her brother's by no small measure, didn't help matters.

That, Frolli often wondered, presented some quandary. The siblings were perfectly functional Rottan, perfectly able to get along with others, perfectly able to do work: yet, here were they, burdened with an unfair and intangible curse since birth. Frolli suspected their rebellious natures came as a result of being appended with such foreboding condemnations, retroactively, rather than some naturally defiant inclination. They made poor Rottan in the eyes of others because the others all told them they were poor Rottan, and how else would one react to that kind of treatment?

In any case, their parents looked down on them, disdainfully, even contemptuously, because of something that was out of the children's control. In fact it had probably been more within their parents' control anyway, though it really didn't matter. There was some camaraderie between Mynt and Frolli, as a result, though in the generally irritable and sometimes hostile household the two siblings got on one another's nerves frequently enough.

Frolli's inconsequential victory was cut short. His father seemed to coalesce from nearby, probably having watched the boy's approach in its entirety, judging what he saw and working up a general displeasure about it. He was nowhere near the Fieldmaster's size and not at all as frightening a figure: average of height and weight, middle of age, just about as stubborn of disposition. He did, however, possess thick, brown, curly hair, so that his entire body appeared covered in wiry brushstrokes, as did his mate. Curly fur was rare and quite prized, which was yet another reason the odd-looking offspring of two elegantly coated Rottan so offended people's good sensibilities.

"I hope you have a good reason for heaping all this trouble on my head," his father announced

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unceremoniously. He stood in the doorway as the last bit of cloth was pulled inside: waiting, as if to deny entry.

Frolli rarely bothered defending himself with his parents. They heard what they wanted, and no matter what he did they always blamed him. Today especially, with something very vital at stake, and with what seemed like hostility greeting him at all sides – indeed, argument seemed the preferred mode of interaction this day – he was in a particularly disagreeable mood. Frolli was not likely to have much patience to begin with when confronting his father; now he had less than none.

He responded dryly, “None that you will hear. So, to speed things along, I’ll just admit what you’ll eventually conclude anyway: I do these things because I am selfish. I do them to spite you. And also, you don’t deserve them because you’re entirely without fault, somehow.”

Branci Helter adopted an air of willful ignorance and laid the sarcasm on thickly: “Even so I know you’re no thief, boy. You didn’t really steal Dalin Fane’s pumpkinseeds and run off into the grasses, did you?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I did. It was my initial intent; a caper I have been planning for weeks. It even had a name: The Great Pumpkinseed Pilfering. There were charts and maps, even. I thought, ‘how best can I show everybody how much I hate authority, and the rules?’ and built the whole escapade from that.”

“Stop it, Frolli. Now you’re just being ridiculous,” Branci sighed dully.

“You’re right. What I was really thinking was, ‘how best can I shame and embarrass my father?’ So, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll go inside now and be punished, and later, I’ll work tirelessly and repentantly to repay Old Dalin for what Derli and I took, and at no point will I leave to try to find somebody who will listen to what I have to say about what happened in Stufford.”

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"Stufford?" Branci stared in surprise. "Nobody told me you'd gone all the way to Stufford."

"Nobody knew," Frolli muttered pontifically. He stalked past his father, who offered no resistance as the boy slid past. Under his breath he added, "Too busy worrying about some chewed-up seeds to worry about the lives of Rottan."

This caught Branci's attention and he stormed after Frolli, who was heading to his sleeping quarters to sit for a spell. "Lives? Frolli, what's this you're on about? What's happened in Stufford?"

"Oh, it won't matter if I tell you; you'll do nothing about it!" Frolli spat over his shoulder, aggravated.

"Hmph. Then clearly it's of no consequence. Just as I suspected, Frolli: you waste time out in the grasses all night with the Venn boy and come back with wild imaginings and exaggerations, and when pressed, when you're shown an ounce of trust and belief, the whole misadventure collapses. You keep your head in the clouds, this is the result. Time and again, I tell you."

"Glad we could reach a conclusion so quickly for once. I'm going to sleep," was all Frolli bothered returning.

"Fine. Rest well, because you'll have double chores until the next full moon!"

Frolli tugged up some of the sheet and made himself a little bed in his stall. "Whatever."

When Branci went clambering back up the ladder to the loft he left behind him a last growled insult: "Chew it all; I hope your tail falls off."

This instantly boiled Frolli's blood, and he sparked upright, his teeth gnashing, but it was too late to say anything else. He looked over at Mynt, who sat sullenly in the middle of the blanket, eyes wide, ears back. She gazed down at nothing as if ashamed. "I'm

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sorry, Mynt. He didn't mean... Well, he's a fool at any rate. Ignore him."

After a moment longer she came over and sulkily curled into a ball next to Frolli, and they went to sleep.