

A continuation into the stories pertaining to Those With Virtue with Violet Diamond and others she holds dear.

Those With Virtue Dream For Better Days

By Thomas R. Young

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13108.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



THOSE WITH
VIRTUE
DREAM FOR
BETTER DAYS

Witness the winding paths lived of those with virtue.

THOMAS R. YOUNG

Copyright © 2023 Thomas R. Young

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-958890-81-3

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-958890-82-0

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-579-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Young, Thomas R.

Those With Virtue Dream For Better Days by Thomas R. Young

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023916573

Table of Contents

Prologue.....	7
Chapter 1: Taking The Fall.....	9
Chapter 2: The Invitation.....	63
Chapter 3: The Party.....	104
Chapter 4: Wanted.....	140
Chapter 5: Crossroads And Reclamation	194
Chapter 6: Plans In Motion.....	227
Chapter 7: Crestfallen Island	261
Chapter 8: Filltroske	307
Chapter 9: Icy Reflections	334
Chapter 10: Truth Lies In Shadow	360
Chapter 11: Aftermath.....	374
Chapter 12: In The Public's Eye	420
Chapter 13: Silver And Gold.....	467
Chapter 14: What Is Love?.....	503
Chapter 15: Lone Wolf.....	544
Chapter 16: The Accursed	583

Chapter 1: Taking The Fall

Tavrend. An ever changing and expanding continent. Thanks to the trials and sacrifices of many, these lands have remained stable and prosperous. While names have changed, and leaderships swapped hands more than a few times, the nations that make up these great lands have stayed the same in most ways.

The once holy nation of the Sky Empyrean became a shell of its former self when the ‘god’, Lihara, was discovered to be fake. With this news, the nation quickly fell. From its ashes arose the ‘Empire of the Golden Sun’ or ‘The Golden Empire’ for short. The Empire focused itself not on celestial beings or ‘gods’ but on strength of arms and military might. The drive for self-sustained power became the nation’s goal, and they were willing to accomplish these goals by any means.

The nation of the frozen northwest, Syndicus, also went through many changes over the years. From the den of a ‘holy goddess’ to a kingdom of powerful sorcerers. Many great evils were said to originate from these snow-covered lands. From an evil devil bent on world destruction, the dark sorcerer King Rex, and even the ‘god of rebirth’ Pandora Black was said to have been birthed from these lands, either above or below ground. These days Syndicus goes by its new name, Frostilia, with its capital being the Puregloss Kingdom.

With the Mad king of old long gone, Trazicon had become a much more peaceful place than it once was. With a great migration from across the western oceans, the lands had become home to many animalia tribes: Kitsune, Lycan, Hare, so on and so forth. The migration from the continent, Animalonia, was most welcome if only to erase the country’s dark past. And thus, after this migration, the country’s name became Shipponia.

Lunaria, or as it’s known today, Veronome, at one time had cast the deadly shadows of war over its sister nation. It has now become a close ally to its once rival. Although how these wars started has been lost to time, it was said to have started between two godly sisters. But there are few remaining to confirm such history in the far distant past.

The Dragonlands remained unchanged. The most likely reason being that dragon kind remained isolated away from the world, therefore remaining intact against the tides of time.

The once grand nation of Ucoria suffered the worst of changes having become nothing more than a barren wasteland. History books cannot tell why, only that Mimics took control of the region before Queen Angelica’s kidnapping. Whatever happened to make a nation barren when it had been woodland, full of trees and life, only leads to frightening conclusions and paranoia it could be the same with the other nations sometime in the future. A fact every leader of the continent’s countries fully realize.

Last, but certainly not least, was the nation of Emilius, or Mezmaria, as it is currently known. It was written that after the long war with its sister nation Veronome (Lunaria), The Queen of Emilius used her authority to unjustly strip the power and wealth of the nobles. The Queen, who the nobles discovered was actually a demon, did unspeakable things. When all hope seemed lost, and the nation would fall to darkness, the new nobles came. Under the banner of a godly woman, and her somewhat clumsy sister, the combined strengths banished the evil Queen Lani. It was unknown where the godly woman came from to perform such a feat. Some said that she was born of a noble to right the wrongs. Others said the woman and her sister simply appeared one day in the snow lands of what was known as Syndicus. Whatever the case, the woman,

Angelica, was swiftly made the new Queen alongside her sister, Valentina. So, as not to repeat the mistakes made by the previous nobles and lords, the new nobles took it upon themselves to divide the reigns of the nation so that the new Queen could not be corrupted by power. These new nobles of Mezmaria and their new Queens, Angelica and Valentina, brought true prosperity and dignity to the nation and continent.

...If these words are to be believed unquestioningly.

Present Day

The usually quiet town of Vanillaville was now a bustling parade of streamers, confetti, balloons, and other celebratory items. For this day was Reclamation Day. A day to honor those who had served the Crown and for those lucky few to be released from that service. This was the day the heroes of Mezmaria, The Bearers of Virtue, would return the Stones of Virtue to safekeeping in the capital's vault via a tightly protected safe box. To the everyday citizens of Mezmaria, there was no greater honor than to serve the crown. For this reason, those who held the Stones of Virtue, battled against threats to the nation and its people, were seen as the greatest of heroes, save for the fear of such powerful artifacts existing.

The bustling crowds were dressed in their best as they awaited the holy ceremony to begin. There were many hoping beyond hope that the nation's nobility or queens would gaze upon them with blessed looks. Vanillaville even showcased dozens of the town's mascot, Mr. Krimples, swinging from various streetlights or dancing for the crowds providing laughter and entertainment for the masses. Oddly enough, one of the Mr. Krimples mascots was purely black and white in appearance. The stores of Vanillaville, especially the tailor shop belonging to the heroes, Violet Diamond, were jam packed.

Walking through the crowded streets, a member of the Heroes was spotted by some passersby. She was the young flyer, Hayley, who had a disheveled look and appearance heading into a nearby dress shop. Screams of surprise and horror erupted in the small shop before the girl reemerged having robbed the dress shop at knife point, seemingly unhinged emotionally, quickly moving through the crowd to lose any unwanted attention.

Hayley, Claire's former friend, was never the same after the events of Filltroske and Pandora Black when the queen needed to be rescued. Granted, many of the Heroes were no longer the same. It took a toll. There was only so much trauma one could handle before it changed them forever.

"Ugh, this is why I don't like this backwater town," one woman remarked to another having witnessed the robbery from outside, scoffing as Hayley pushed past.

"Indeed, such a wastrel place," the other woman agreed. "Their only use is the military. Our Queen made a fine choice to continuously recruit ones from this backwater town—Hey! Watch it!"

"Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt," a short energetic girl with a flowy light blue skirt pushed through the two trying to tail Hayley while holding some pudding cups.

Hayley's eyes shifted from side to side making sure no one was tailing her as she moved to the next store. She was trying to escape anyone and everyone especially those mentioning 'mimics'.

"Yoo-hoo!" the girl following Hayley waved from afar, catching the frantic one's attention. This girl was much faster than Hayley, quickly gaining ground until within arm's reach. "What are you doing?! That's not a good way to represent our small town! Would you like pudding to calm the nerves?!"

Hayley shrieked at the sudden approach and pointed the blade at her. "Who are you!? Are you a mimic!?"

The short girl's eyes widened holding both hands up, dropping the pudding cups to the ground. "Nope! Not a mimic! Relax! Don't do anything rash again! Claire is worried about you."

"C-claire? What does she want?" Hayley asked slowly in a quieter tone, breathing heavily, the blade disappearing into a sleeve.

"She definitely doesn't want my pudding, that's for sure," the short girl in the light blue skirt responded, hands on hips. "Anywho, Claire is worried, Hayley. You've been...acting more unusual as the days go on."

"Where is she now?" Hayley asked as her eyes surveyed the surroundings, twitching slightly as she spoke. "I'm not moving in with Willow or Violet or ANYONE! The mimics are out there! You got that!?"

"I got it. I got it. Don't want any help. Don't need any help. Same here. But Claire really is worried, and you need to start considering how what you do affects her, too." The short girl slowly lowered her hands, bending down to pick up her pudding cups. "She's at Violet's tailor shop right now with Vulpus and Eve. They're trying to deal with thousands of customers. I, for one, am doing really good on my pudding business sale's quota."

Hayley nodded lightly to herself then grabbed the short girl's hand and pulled her along. "Then we gotta go see her!"

The short girl allowed herself to be led so as to further monitor Hayley's actions, lamenting the pudding cups she had to leave behind. As the two walked through the crowds to the tailor shop, they passed a woman dressed entirely in black. A black trench coat, large black hat, and even a pair of sunglasses. As this woman dressed in black turned to walk down a separate road, the short girl in the skirt saw the woman had long lime-green hair. There was something off about her. There wasn't long to ponder the sight before Hayley pulled the short girl within view of the tailor's shop through the masses in the street.

The tailor shop itself, was bustling with a growing crowd of customers trying to look their best. The additional draw to this location was to see their nation's heroes in person before Reclamation Day hit a high note. This was particularly true in Claire Diamond's case for she was the nation's greatest healer whose healing magic surpassed all known mages in the land. The same could be said for Millie Ruby in terms of potion healing. Many accounts of the Filltroske/Pandora Black events attribute success to these two healers and their remarkable ability to even bring back the dead before the silver thread of mortality was cut.

Violet Diamond, the tailor of Vanillaville, manned a counter at the front, a bit overwhelmed by the numerous individuals perusing the store. She was sweating profusely due to stress. There were citizens that wanted to see her, too, but not in great numbers like Claire. She was more or less weird to them. In the citizens' eyes, the tailor running this small-town shop could hold her own but only barely, gossip arising

every now and then about her strange quirks. And that her role in the Filltroske/Pandora Black events was one of luck and being in good company.

The girl, once known as Claire Bot, stood at Violet's side calculating the various prices for her older sister, Violet. Not entirely related blood-wise but a deep bond shared that some would call lunacy at its finest in considering what was once a robot to now be a sister. She'd made many changes over the past weeks in the small town to distinguish herself from Claire. Dyeing her hair a raven black and even giving herself the new name, 'Eve'. Eve Diamond was to be her name from this point forward. And yet Violet still couldn't tell the difference between Eve and Claire considering both to be her sisters, always remembering Claire Bot when first found and loved at first sight. An oddity for sure. And this is one of the many reasons the Mezmarian citizens found Violet weird.

Claire was standing in the center of the tailor shop. Wondering why so many people were trying to talk to her. They were customers. They were to look at the clothes and not her. It would only make more sense, at least to her. Alas, they were flocking to the girl like moths to the flame, and it was weirding her out.

The red-headed young fox girl, Vulpus ~~Feneri~~ Diamond, was curled up in a ball atop a high shelf. She wore a fancy dress made by her adoptive mother, Violet, for the ceremony that was going to take place.

Violet appreciated Vulpus not setting anyone on fire this day. In her games of 'hot potato'. The tailor's eyes surveyed the busy shop best they could. She looked at Vulpus to make sure she was behaving, Claire, then Eve. Once again, the tailor's eyes glanced between Claire and Eve trying to tell the sisters apart despite it being obvious. A strange phenomenon indeed, but the tailor was a strange small-town girl.

"Come now, sister," Eve said with a chuckle after witnessing Violet's prolonged gaze. "Do we truly look the same, even after all the changes I've made? Shall I shave my head next?"

"Well, of course not, sweetheart," Violet gently smiled, looking at Eve. "I can tell the difference between you and Claire...you're not Claire, right?"

"She is," Claire joked, calling out from the center of the room surrounded by a mass of people.

"I am, too..." Vulpus said as she stretched out with a light yawn. "...What are we talking about?"

"Hardy-har-har. I'm sure I could tell the difference. Let me flip a coin to make sure," Violet mentioned, picking up a coin and tossing it into the air, letting it land in her palm. "...Wait, I forgot to decide what heads and tails would be..."

"Ooh, I can help!" Vulpus stretched again, rubbing her left eye, then suddenly turned into Claire. A kitsune trick they could perform in using their magic to become others for disguise purposes.

"Claire, climb down from up there this instant and help with the customers," Violet wagged her finger after looking upward.

"Shall I take your temperature again, sister? Are you well?" Eve asked with a serious tone looking at Violet.

The tailor realized it was actually Vulpus after Eve's words, wiping sweat from her brow. "...No...no...I'm just a bit tired, darling."

Eve was about to ask further questions before Hayley burst into the tailoring shop, shoving through noisy customers, pulling along the short girl in the skirt.

The tailor, Violet, glanced over to Hayley and the other girl catching a glimpse of them in the boutique's crowd. "Oh no, what's this about?"

Hayley released the captive girl before rushing to her friend. "Claire, I came as soon as I could!"

"Are you alright, Hayley?" Claire asked with concern, seeing the disheveled and wild look of her friend.

"I'm fine. Am I fine? I'm better. Better than—Something happen? Did someone do something to you? Do I need to cut one of these mimics?!" Hayley spoke in a tone that was seemingly getting more erratic with each word eyeing the customers.

"Nothing happened. Hayley, relax," Claire gestured for her friend to calm down. "Violet seems to be having a good day. These people keep talking to me and won't buy clothes. Really weird. But it seems okay so fa—"

Without warning, the reverberating sound of a unique train whistle blew. The sounds echoed throughout Vanillaville. The crowds, inside stores and walking the streets, quickly froze in place at the well-known sound.

The royal train had finally arrived. The Mezmarian nobility was here at last.

The customers inside the tailor shop began rushing out the door to witness the train's approach. There was rapid commotion in the movement then an odd silence that followed as the shop emptied out. Violet wiped the sweat from her brow, finding a moment to relax. Silence finally filled the tailor shop once again like it had many days prior as is the nature of small-town living. That is until Hayley broke the silence with another one of her antics.

"Claire, want to see my new dress?" Hayley asked pulling out a dress from a bag on her side. "Look at what I just got to wear for the town's event thingy for today. Isn't it nice?"

"You have to show me it on first before I can really say," Claire pointed out.

"Oh, I'm waaaaay ahead of you~" Hayley grinned and started to undress.

"Not in the middle of the store," Claire blinked as Violet tried to hiss whispered words of 'stop doing that'.

"Why?" Hayley asked in confusion.

Claire didn't say anything further. These actions of Hayley's were expected at this point. She simply started to push her friend into a nearby dressing room.

Violet froze on the spot looking around as the train whistle sounded off again. "...Is it that time already?! We need to go! Girls, be on your best behavior!"

"Oh no! The ceremony show is starting!" Vulpus gasped.

"No worries, sister. That is simply the royal train arriving," Eve remarked calmly. "The Reclamation Ceremony, itself, does not start for at least two hours. I have the time clocked in and set. Would you like a reminder of when it starts?"

A bead of cold sweat formed on Violet's brow as she leaned against the counter with both hands placed upon it, looking downward. "Yes...Eve...please let me know when the two hours have passed."

"I will do so, Violet," Eve nodded lightly.

Hayley came out of the dressing room after a few minutes with a very long dress on. It certainly wasn't made for a child. "How do I look?"

"Very good?" the short girl said, raising an eyebrow at Hayley's apparel choices.

"It's a bit big on you," Claire spoke in a straight tone, getting the feeling Hayley is likely to trip in the dress.

"It fits just right~" Hayley smiled, spinning in a circle then promptly tripping over the dress and landing face first into the ground. Claire blinked and went to make sure her friend was okay, helping her up.

Violet headed over to the tailor boutique's front window to peer outside in curiosity as roaming masses moved north of the town's center. She saw crowds begin to form around the train station at the small town's north end, far in the distance, as they awaited the doors to open.

The tailor couldn't see that far from inside the shop as to who was on the train. However, the crowds surrounding the train were privy to witness the Mezmarian nobility taking their first steps into Vanillaville. As the train car doors opened, the royal guards went about getting into protective formation. A hush fell over the crowd as they waited in anticipation for the Mezmarian Queen to make her appearance alongside the nobility.

The regal train's opening had a foot appear at its entrance. The crowd started to cheer in hasty reverence but, to the onlookers' slight disappointment, the first to step out was not the Mezmarian Queen but a different woman. The woman walked with a cane although it was clearly only for show. A top hat sat atop her head as she made her way off. A few in the crowd began to clap and whistle, but it was clear she wasn't the one they were expecting to come out first.

This noble in a top hat took a few steps away from the train and tapped her cane upon the ground. As she did this, Mezmarian news journalists flocked around her taking pictures with microphones and video telecommunications at the ready.

“Lady Silver!” someone called out in the crowd right behind the press. “What’s going on?!”

“All will be explained in good time,” the woman in the top hat, Lady Silver, said with a gentle smile.

“Lady Silver, are the rumors true that Queen Angelica’s sister has had several children while in the forest maze, Filltroske, while in pursuit of Pandora Black with the Virtue Bearers?” one of the news journalists promptly asked, notepad at the ready to write down the response.

“At the moment, I cannot give an answer to that,” Lady Silver said without batting an eye, head held high.

“Lady Silver! Lady Silver!” another journalist reporter called out. “Will Queen Angelica be overseeing the Reclamation Ceremony?”

“I’m afraid the Mezmarian Queen is caught up in many important things right now following the events of Filltroske and will sadly not be able to attend the ceremony. But don’t you fret, the Nobles of Mezmaria have been given the Royal Seal of Approval to oversee this event,” Lady Silver said. Her smile never wavering.

The woman waved a hand in a broad dramatic gesture to her side as she looked to the other royal train cars now opening their own doors. One by one, several men and women, their guards following, came out. Each Mezmarian noble was dressed similarly to Lady Silver in the highest of fashion.

“The Mezmarian Queen apologizes for her absence,” Lady Silver bowed slightly in front of the journalists, not enough to be below their chins. “But I hope this will not taint the celebration.”

A near dozen other members of the Mezmarian nobility moved to Lady Silver’s side. One of which moved past her and stretched his hands outward to the crowd watching in awe. “We hope to see the Stones of Virtue returned in glory, and the Heroes of Mezmaria held up high for their brave endeavors! So let us all celebrate these outstanding citizens, and their actions in saving our Queen!”

A hush had fallen over the crowd as they listened to the man’s words before erupting in cheers and rounds of applause. The other nobles gritted their teeth but tried not to show it.

“Seems Lord Amethyst still knows how ‘wow’ a crowd,” one noble whispered to another in the back near the train cars.

“You’d think with the rumors that spread around about his son would have hurt his credibility a little. Such a shame,” another noble whispered in response, frowning.

“At least he knew better to distance himself from his son...unlike a certain *other* noble,” a third noble whispered in a deeper voice. “Lord Gold could learn a thing or two from Lord Amethyst.”

The three nobles turned their eyes to an older man dressed in black with his arms folded who had initially refused to exit the train car. The pinstripe suit he wore had golden trimming and an emblem of a raven or possibly a crow. These three nobles looked at one another with a knowing look but not wanting to risk mouthing a word about what was on their mind concerning this other royal member, at least not right now.

The noble that had addressed the crowd with outstretched arms, Lord Amethyst or, as he normally preferred to be addressed, Mr. Amethyst, waved to the crowds as he led the other nobles down the streets away from the train and towards the center of Vanillaville where the Reclamation Ceremony would be held. The crowds parted for the nobility and followed along, royal guards, too.

A royal guard approached Mr. Amethyst and informed him that the Reclamation Ceremony stage had been prepared with national media present to broadcast the event live. The noble was very pleased to hear this news as the sound of quick footsteps joined his side. Mr. Amethyst turned his gaze to Lady Silver as she took command at the noble's side, holding her head high to wrest the spotlight as much as she could to herself.

"Amazing speech as always, Mr. Amethyst," Lady Silver said as the group walked. "It's no wonder you're the speaker of the Mezmarian senate. You always know just what to say."

Mr. Amethyst chuckled softly to himself as they walked. The nobles, and he too, waved to the crowds as they walked. "Right now, the people have to be given some form of comfort after what transpired. And we shall provide it to them."

"Of course," Lady Silver smiled.

"I've heard some...interesting things about these 'heroes'," Mr. Amethyst said as he looked around.

"Yes..." Lady Silver said slowly with slight contempt in her tone. "Interesting indeed..."

Mr. Amethyst turned his eyes to Lady Silver in curiosity while, back at the tailor boutique, Violet and the others were readying themselves for the ceremony.

"By the way, Violet, there is one hour and forty-five minutes until the ceremony begins," Eve reported. Claire was now wondering if the other girl's going to tell them every fifteen minutes what time transpired. Indeed, the once-robot Eve would do so. Hayley walked back to Violet and the others with the dress dragging behind her, most assuredly not a good fit.

Violet reached for a handkerchief and dabbed her forehead as beads of nervous sweat formed. "Yes, yes, it's getting closer. Breathe, Violet. It'll be alright. Nothing bad is going to happen."

Vulpus wrapped a tail around Violet. "It'll be okay, mom. Cause you're strong and stuff!"

"It's just following some ceremony, right? Shouldn't be too hard," Claire mentioned with a shrug.

Violet smiled at Vulpus and Claire. "Certainly, it's but a simple event. No need to fret over it too much."

“This ceremony is a tradition that the nation of Mezmaria holds dear. It is considered a holy tradition,” Eve informed the others in the boutique, seemingly wanting to do yet another information spiel. “With the Stones of Virtues’ increased powers over the years, a ceremony must be performed, and spell cast upon them to separate the stones from the Bearers. This process is of the utmost importance and even a single word spoken during it could disturb the proceedings. The Stones of Virtue are then put into a special containment box and Mezmarian vault for safekeeping for they are considered weapons of war, wholly dangerous and to only be used as needed, whereby the ceremony indicates the end of that need for a time of coming peace. By the way, there is one hour and thirty minutes remaining.”

"You're going to give me anxiety with those time warnings, sister," Violet sighed then noticed Hayley's dress, rushing over, pulling her into the dressing room to fix it up. "Goodness no! Not like that! If you're going to steal clothing, do so with what fits properly!"

Hayley whimpered and struggled as she was pulled into the room but did resign to Violet performing emergency tailoring to the dress, the best she could do with it at least. Vulpus rested her head on Claire as the latter girl wondered if she didn't have to wear a dress considered Violet was preoccupied.

"I've got mine on already!" Vulpus smiled, lifting her head from Claire, snapping her fingers. A dress suddenly appeared on the red-headed kitsune's figure, and she showed off the dress Violet made for her.

"You look good," Claire simply noted.

"So do you!" Vulpus said happily albeit Claire hadn't changed her clothing, yet.

"Thank you?" Claire tilted her head.

"Soooooo, hot potato?" Vulpus asked slowly, wanting to have fun.

"Not now," Claire simply stated.

"No 'hot potato!'" Violet shouted, emerging with Hayley in a quickly tailored dress. "Claire! In the dressing room, please!"

"Okay, okay. No 'hot potato'," Vulpus nodded. "...For now."

Claire had an idea and tried to push Eve into the dressing room instead. Eve tilted her head then grinned and winked at Claire. Violet seemingly accepted this exchange while not initially looking, putting Claire's dress on Eve.

"Thank you, sister. By the way, there's one hour until the ceremony," Eve informed.

"Don't remind me!" Violet freaked out a bit, dabbing her forehead again with the handkerchief. The tailor then waved Claire over. "Eve! Your turn now! Hurry! We mustn't dilly-dally when so close to the event!"

"Aww..." Claire sighed as she didn't escape dressing up.

Violet hurriedly put Eve's dress on Claire. The younger sibling flailed as the older sister dressed her. Most certainly did not make dress up easy as per tradition.

"Hold still!" Violet shouted.

"How am I supposed to move in this trap!?" Claire shouted, flailing more.

"It's fashion, sister, not gymnastics. Maneuverability is a second thought to it," Violet stated in the struggle.

"It feels weird. Is it supposed to be this itchy?" Claire asked, emerging from the dressing room, followed by her older sister.

"It looks good," the girl who Hayley had dragged into the shop nodded.

"Thank you for the compliments, Megan," Violet nodded to the girl then turned an eye to her younger sister. "No, Claire, it's not supposed to be itchy. Not unless it's infested with lice."

"It's not, right?" Claire asked with concern.

"Last time I checked, five days ago, before pulling it out of the attic...no," Violet pondered the mentioning of lice. "It was either this or the mold-covered ones in the basement."

Claire was now very concerned about trying to take it off. Hayley frowned, looking around for a moment while tapping her foot. Her head tilted for a moment, then she darted forward into, and through, a window.

"Bye guys!" Hayley said quickly as she ran off leaving a trail of broken glass.

"Hayley! Stop breaking my windows!" Violet shouted outside, then turned to Claire. "You keep that dress on, missy."

"But...bugs..." Claire frowned.

"Just one day, okay? Then you can take it off and forget all about it," Violet waved her hand.

"It would seem that Hayley has fled," Eve said slowly. "Oh, and there's fifteen minutes until the ceremony."

"Can I help, too, mom?" Vulpus said from the counter. "I can burn up the bugs! Just take that off and I'll help, Claire!"

Claire was about to agree with Vulpus to burn the dress when Violet clasped both hands to her cheeks with a high shrilled squeak.

"Fifteen minutes!?" Violet gasped, breathing heavily, hands clasped to her face. "No! Don't burn anything! Or anyone! Please, just behave all of you! We need to get out there! The Reclamation Ceremony is going to start without us!"

Vulpus snapped her fingers making a flame start to rise from them in an attempt to show how much she could help.

"I said no, honey!" Violet reached for a glass of water on the front counter that was labeled, 'Not-Hot Potato', tossing its contents on the new flame.

Vulpus yelped as the water hit her hand. "Aww..."

Megan slowly edged out of the shop. "...Crazy..."

Eve strolled out of the shop soon afterward. "I'll be waiting, sisters, at the ceremony ground."

"Girls, we need to get outside. No more fretting or setting things on fire," Violet addressed both Claire and Vulpus, wiping sweat from her forehead. "We do not need the nobility of Perfelot to see that. They despise us enough as it is..."

Claire agreed, just wanting the ceremony over with as Vulpus nodded enthusiastically. The three headed out of the shop with the fox girl taking lead while on all fours. A means of kitsune movement to go faster but knew it wasn't proper. This was prompted by some scolding from Violet to express proper manners.

As was Violet's tendency to lecture others for lengthy periods of time to correct behaviors, the three arrived at the small town's center for the Reclamation Ceremony sooner than expected. Sooner as expected because Claire and Vulpus were trying to escape Violet's lecture.

The three were met at the small town's center with a large gathered crowd. People all over Mezmaria had gathered to watch the ceremony unfold. Violet's lecturing words were cut short with an almost silent 'oh my...' looking around to so many that had come to the event. There was a sizable, raised stage set at town center, plenty of media coverage from regional newscasters announcing the last minutes to the ceremony's beginning.

Violet didn't have too long, however, to take in the bewildering sights before armed Perfelot royal guards in extravagant attire jabbed armored fingers at the three directing them promptly to the stage at Vanillaville's center. The jabbing hurt, but the three started to move through the innumerable crowded people that parted slightly to make way for them.

As Claire, Vulpus, and Violet climbed the stage's stairs, they found the other members of their old group awaiting. The 'Heroes of Filltroske' as dubbed by the Mezmarian people after the defeat of Pandora Black and the rescue of Queen Angelica. The Bearers of Virtue stood in front of the small grouping upon the stage as directed by the royal guards with more finger jabbing. These were the seven that directly held the Stones of Virtue in the Filltroske conflict: Josie, Avril, Willow, Paige, Claire, Princess Rebecca, and Violet.

The tailor of Vanillaville, Violet Diamond, took a stand with the other seven upon that center stage. Vulpus moved slightly backward to be beside those that also had virtue and were heroic in the deadly forest's conflict: Hayley, Millie, Eve, and Vivian. Most certainly not everyone had been there, oddly enough. Violet was sure of that when trying to glance backward.

Upon the raised stage, on the right side, were select royal individuals promptly seated on their own higher section of the stage. The Mezmarian Nobility, seated upon velvety leather of the finest quality. The same individuals that had departed the train cars earlier for this occasion. The tailor gazed upon them after glancing backward to find one particular noble staring back, Lady Silver. A harsh stare that made Violet quickly turn her eyes forward to the gathered crowd once more, wiping sweat from her brow.

As the ceremony began, the mayor of Vanillaville, a kindly woman, approached the stage from the left side waving to everyone.

"Hello everyone!" the woman said as she made it to the center of the stage. A spotlight went on her as the crowd cheered for a good while and, when they quieted down, she continued. "It is a great pleasure to be with you all on this fine, fine, day! The Reclamation Ceremony for the Heroes of Filltroske!"

There were more cheers from the crowd as the mayor of Vanillaville readied her next words.

"There are few days I can say are as big as this one," the mayor said as she called out to a young boy who sheepishly made his own way onto the stage. The mayor promptly pulled the boy close to her for the crowd to see, an arm around his shoulder. "For me, the most important day was when I had my little boy here! They said I'd never have a kid but boooooom! Here he is! And I couldn't be prouder of him!"

The crowd became silent and not sure how to respond to this. That was until Megan whistled in the crowd and made cat calls to the boy. The boy blushed and squirmed in his mother's arm. The Mezmarian Nobles looked down from their special seats with confused and somewhat angry faces.

It took one glance of the mayor's eyes to the nation's nobility before she redirected her introductory speech to the ceremony. "A-anyways...! S-sorry about that! Um...let's turn our attention to the heroes! The ones who hold our greatest treasure!"

"We want the boy! I do, actually!" Megan called out. "He'll be *my* greatest treasure! Mine!"

Lady Silver stood up from her seat gesturing with a dismissive hand to the disruptive one in the crowd who promptly had royal guards forcibly move Megan further back from the stage so none could hear anything further from the girl. The noble woman then turned her gaze to the mayor approaching a nearby microphone next to the seats of nobility.

"That will be all, Mayor Jade," was all it took to be said before the mayor nervously nodded and rushed from the stage with her son.

Violet took this moment to pull Claire, Vulpus, and Eve close. "Girls...whatever happens, I love you, okay?"

Vivian Moonlight, who had overheard these words, slowly shook her head. “Why does those words not fill me with confidence...?”

“Huh?” Eve blinked.

Vulpus snuggled into Violet. “I love you, too!”

"Whatever happens? Are you dying, Violet?" Claire was now concerned.

"I am dying—now dying—not dying-! Ugh-! My nerves-!" Violet stammered with a startled response, sweating a bit.

Claire slowly raised her wand to magically begin healing Violet.

Lady Silver, Lord Gold, Lord (Mr.) Amethyst, and the other nobles each stood up from their chairs. Mr. Amethyst was the first to speak into the microphone, promptly cutting off an irritated Lady Silver.

“I’d like to both welcome and heartfully thank these fine people for their services. These... Heroes of Filltroske who saved our world, defeated the dreaded Pandora Black, and saved our heavenly Queen Angelica from certain death. Today, you all are to be honored by The Nobility of Mezmaria.” Mr. Amethyst beamed at the crowd, the heroes on the stage, then turned to the other nobles with an outstretched hand. “Today, is Reclamation Day! The day we relieve you of your duty!”

The crowd cheered, the nobility clapped, and the heroes upon the stage watched as confetti blasted into the air covering the area. The media covering the event were eating up the attentive and passionate display before Lady Silver pointed her cane at the heroes while speaking into the microphone. “Now then, Bearers of Virtue, come up to the front and let the people of this great nation see you all more properly in the spotlight.”

Begrudgingly, Princess Rebecca was the first of the seven to come forward to the front into the spotlight. Looking at the ground with sunken eyes, as though not having slept for many days, the princess was glad to get rid of the stone. Avril followed next in a short burst of flight landing beside Rebecca, trying to whisper words of encouragement and that nothing was going to happen to her daughter. Paige, the baker, was next wielding Harold, the axe, over her shoulder. Josie soon followed Paige exhibiting an aura of pride in her countenance, flicking her cowboy hat. Violet, sighed, taking her turn to follow the others, looking back to Claire right behind her. The tailor then noticed Willow slowly coming forward still covered in scars from their 'adventure'.

“Here they are! The Bearers of Virtue! The Heroes of Filltroske! The Heroes of Mezmaria!” Lady Silver enthusiastically spoke, spinning her cane for dramatics. “These normal small town everyday citizens of this great nation took up arms and defended these lands from the evil Pandora Black and her vile mimics! Heroes of Mezmaria, you are to present your Stones of Virtue so that this ceremony may begin!”

One by one, each holder of the Stones of Virtue began to bring the round objects out into the open, seemingly hidden within their body before that moment. The crowd watched in hushed attentiveness witnessing what appeared to be regular round stones appear before their very eyes. Apprehension and tension

began to hang in the air. These Stones of Virtue were Mezmara's greatest treasure, the nation's greatest weapon. They were dangerous. Each and every citizen knew it. The holders of the stones were heroes, indeed, but also feared. The nation's citizens looked on with fear, hidden by admiration. Violet could see it very clearly written in their expressions. The tailor didn't like the way she and the others were observed like that.

A dozen or so robed scholars climbed onto the stage each wielding a magic staff. Violet eyed the approach of these scholars, and their staffs, her eyes shifting to the surrounding media coverage of the event. The newscasters, too, were hushed. A heavy surreal silence hung in the air as though fear of death was rife but hidden. Lady Silver finally broke the heavy silence when the robed scholars surrounded the seven holders of the stones.

"The ceremony will now begin. For the next two minutes, we would ask everyone to remain silent. The spell these fine men and women are about to perform requires the utmost concentration," Lady Silver instructed the proceedings then slammed her cane into the floor taking a seat once more as did the other nobles.

Once the nobility were seated, the robed scholars extended the tips of their staffs toward the seven wielders of the stones. A low chanting could be heard, and a circle of magic began to form around the heroes.

Violet watched the robed scholars silently for a few moments then turned her eyes to Lady Silver. The tailor pondered the ceremony's proceedings. Queen Angelica wasn't here to preside over the ceremony, and it was a real shame. The state of the country in present times was seen in a different light to Violet as shown by Erika. She looked around her at Claire, to Princess Rebecca, Josie, Avril, Willow, and Paige. The tailor's eyes turned to the broadcasted nature of this ceremony providing media coverage for the crowd and beyond.

Something needed to change. She knew as did the other tailor of old. And, so, Violet took action. Reckless action.

Pulling the stone in close to her chest, as the robed scholars' magic enveloped her and the others, Violet moved in front of her family and friends remembering when they joined her in that terrible forest witnessing tragedy and tortures the likes of which presumably none, or few, in this crowd had seen, themselves. The crowd gathered to view the ceremony were unlikely to have understood the chaotic mess that unfolded in the forest, a surreal nightmare relived in everyday trauma the days after when peace should have been known. Willow's scars upon her body were a testament to this truth. Violet wanted to make do on her plan to share to this crowd the emotion of what she'd learned.

The crowd, heroes, and nobility watched this odd movement from the tailor with curious looks and silence. Some began to glare, some looked on with fearful eyes, and others with simple curiosity wondering if this was part of the ceremony. In front of her family and friends, Violet cleared her throat and began to sing. As soft as the robed scholars chanted, then becoming louder as a certain desperate tone for change was heard in her voice. A pitch soon attained higher than she thought possible, much louder than the chanting, singing the same words Erika did so long ago. As the robed scholars and their chants wrapped magic around her, Violet sang her heart out in desperation for something better with a song from long, long ago.

*If you don't ask
You'll still receive
A cursed cruel life
No room to breathe*

*It began with deep pain
Followed by hateful rain
Viciously torn apart
That's only the start*

*Be strong, they'll teach you and say
Be perfect, expectations won't go away
Forever dragged on at the world's whims
Trying not to take on the same sins
Hold onto the virtues within*

*Don't give in and do not take
In chaos, defend another's sake
It will seem like you're alone
But your ties to others are shown*

*Please wake up, and put a stop to this
Come to agony's end, we can establish bliss
You can do it
We can do it
Help us with a peaceful end*

Claire's eyes widened in surprise gesturing for her older sibling to stop. Princess Rebecca and Avril were trying to get the tailor to stop, too. The circle of magic rippled and soon exploded throwing the robed scholars onto their backs. The staffs they used were blown apart as the spell became unstable. The crowd was silent for a moment then confusion started to set in. An entire spectacle caught on video and narrated through national media outlets.

The Mezmarian Nobility jumped to their feet, some looking aghast, while others looked quite enraged. Lady Silver didn't smile nor outwardly express anger, but the cane in her hand snapped in two from the pressure she was putting on it.

Princess Rebecca rushed at Violet shoving her hand over the tailor's mouth apologizing profusely to the nobles. The tailor bit the princess's hand and tried to sing more with the two soon physically wrestling. The seven heroes except Willow became involved in a physical struggle, trying to calm things before everything was made worse. Hayley shouted, 'Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!'

Claire glanced between the involved parties changing gears to heal the robed scholars in case they got hurt in the unstable magic. Willow slowly backed away from the unfolding chaos. Princess Rebecca, Paige, Avril, and Josie were trying to wrestle Violet and make her stop. Vulpus gasped and scurried to help her

mother wrapping herself around Rebecca to try and stop the woman. Eve put a hand to her chin deciding on the best course of action.

"Do you not want to get rid of this...this thing!? What is wrong with you!?" Princess Rebecca screamed catching everyone's attention, now fighting Violet *and* Vulpus with Avril's help, physically striking the tailor when able to.

"Giving up will not help your daughter, Rebecca!" Violet gritted her teeth before getting slapped across the face by the princess.

Austin, Rebecca's butler, had been in the crowd chaperoning the princess's daughter, Sandra. He blinked a few times in surprise witnessing the violence on stage covering the princess's daughter's eyes. Princess Rebecca knew her daughter was watching, but anger was boiling over toward the tailor's actions. She wanted nothing to do with the stones anymore after what happened in the forest.

The media newscasters started to frantically narrate what was happening on stage as the gathered crowd began vocalizing their own opposition to the interruption. Items started to be thrown at the stage by the crowd occasionally hitting someone on stage.

"Guards! Stop them all, at once!" A noble screamed from their seating area. "They're ruining the ceremony!"

"The Reclamation Ceremony is already ruined," Lady Silver said as she looked over the chaos.

"Ah, fer one didn' do nothin' wrong," Josie chuckled, flicking her hat upward, looking at the nobles. "This here is everyday living in Vanillaville. It's ta be expected."

"Barbaric nonsense," one noble seethed in response. "This small town and its populace once again prove the trash it is."

"That there is a bit rude," Josie tilted her head at the noble's comment.

The royal guards had joined the fighting on stage, quickly restraining the main instigator, Violet Diamond.

"Good people of Vanillaville," Mr. Amethyst spoke up as Violet was restrained in attempt to calm the crowd and media. "I'm afraid today's ceremony will have to be postponed."

The crowd grew restless despite Mr. Amethyst's words.

"Why'd she do that?! Is that how this town behaves in front of nobility!? Some heroes they are...!" Someone shouted in the crowd.

"They ruined the event! They should be punished!" another person shouted. "Especially the tailor and her trashy ways!"

The crowd's shouting started to override Mr. Amethyst. Violet and Princess Rebecca both panted as they were pulled away from one another following another physical confrontation when the princess tried to attack the one restrained. The tailor heard the jeers looking to the crowd moments before fruit hit her on the side of the head, wincing from it. This wasn't what she was going for.

Claire stooped down to pick up the fruit and throw it back at the one that threw it. "You were weirdly prepared for this!"

"Traitors! Traitors! Traitors!" Some in the crowd start chanting, more in the gathering joining in as seconds passed. A few of the nobles chanted along with the crowd.

The royal guards quickly began to escort the 'heroes' away from the crowds before it got worse by Mr. Amethyst's swift order. Those on stage were hurriedly moved from it toward the back, away from the crowd, Violet getting the roughest treatment by the royal guards. Once a good distance was covered between the ceremony's grounds and the group being shoved by guards, they were released but surrounded by security measures.

Eve looked to Violet as both were trying to catch their breaths. "That could have...gone better...huh?"

Violet looked disheveled sporting a few wounds as she nodded. "Thought...it would turn out differently..."

Claire went about healing her older sibling once the movement by the royal guards ended. Violet thanked Claire, hugging her. As Princess Rebecca glared at Violet, her butler pushed past some of the royal guards to check on the princess, daughter in his hold.

"Where'd they even get fruit during the ceremony. Weirdos..." Claire noted, brushing dirt off Violet.

Eve hugged the tailor. "It's alright...it'll probably blow over by tomorrow, right? Although, the likelihood is slim at best."

"Those people are sooo mean," Vulpus pouted. "It's just a little song. Why are they so mad?"

"Why were they mad!?" Princess Rebecca scoffed. "You all just wanted to ruin everything! Especially you, Violet! If I knew how much you were meaning to ruin my release of the cursed stones, I'd have restrained you before this point! That's why they're so mad—why I'm so mad! I wanted to be rid of the stone! To raise my daughter properly without the insanity we'd had to endure thus far!"

"Be rid of the stone by wrestling on camera? Weird way to go about it," Claire said. She, herself, wanted the stone gone, too, so could understand that piece.

"By performing the ceremony as it was intended! But, no! You all never want to abide by the rules!" Princess Rebecca shouted.

"Really dumb, guys," Avril rolled her eyes. "Not cool."

"Ah fer one liked the wrestling," Josie chuckled.

"Think! Use your brains for once! We're not in the f***** forest anymore and can fool around!" Princess Rebecca angrily tapped her pointer to the side of her head getting near Violet, who had been quiet. "F*****! Think!"

Vulpus hissed at Rebecca but then looked back at Violet. The tailor had a deeply apologetic look on her face though the kitsune girl had a question certain to snap her out of silence. "Mom, that word she just used. What does it mean?"

Eve opened her mouth to start to explain the process of the literal meaning.

Violet waved her hands frantically trying to shush Eve. "Nothing, Vulpus, sweetheart. Just a bad word the princess shouldn't be using."

"Come on, aren't we friends here?" Paige asked with a sigh. "Just one day where we can simply talk and hang out...that's all I want."

"The forest...is still affecting us..." Willow whispered, rubbing her arm.

"Perhaps we should all head home for now when able to?" Eve suggested. "We will likely not be in the right state of minds. It's best we clear our heads."

"I agree with Eve. We should head home," Violet sighed while Rebecca started to shake her fist at the tailor. "Claire, I was trying to...spur something...I don't know. A change for something better. It's like walking on eggshells these days. Can't do anything right. Everything feels wrong. Feels like we didn't accomplish anything. I mean...does anyone even think of the mimics like I do? That they simply don't exist anymore? They were living beings, too. I remember what happened...and it bothers me to no end..."

"I can't forget because you won't let my daughter and I do so!" Rebecca shouted at such a high pitch that her voice cracked slightly, eyes tearing up. "I want to forget! I'm trying to forget, Violet! You think I enjoy hearing the screams in the middle of the night!? Feel the agony every time the stone touches my hand!? I want to leave it behind! Why...why won't you just let it...?"

"Would agree it's kind of impossible to forget," Claire admitted.

"...I can't forget either..." Willow shyly whimpered, holding her scarred arm. Paige, Josie, and Avril were silent, looking off to the side.

Vulpus nuzzled into Violet then Claire. To comfort them.

Eve put a hand to her chin. "It was quite the ordeal for sure. A difficult thing to forget. Especially for me as I was more or less born there."

"Ah sure am glad you're here, that's fer sure," Josie placed a hand on Eve's shoulder. "Yer quite welcome to mah farm, anytime, alright?"

Eve nodded to Josie. "Thank you for that."

Millie rushed in pulling her sister away as the royal guards signaled the 'heroes' could return to their homes now as the nobility gave orders in the distance. "We'd better go...ah mean...probably best to go home now, right?"

Claire agreed that home sounded nice.

"Yah, ah agree lil' sis'. Best be headin' out," Josie nodded, letting her little sister take lead.

Princess Rebecca angrily followed after the farmer, oddly holding back sobs, pulling her daughter along. Austin, her butler, started to follow. He passed by Violet then turned, abruptly pushing a ring into her hand then closing it up with his own. "This. This is why I can't trust you...or us...don't ask again..."

Violet tried to look at the butler's eyes with a pleading gaze, catching a glimpse of a stern look before he left after the princess.

"What was that, mom?" Vulpus asked, looking to what was in tailor's hand and instinctively curling around her mother in the process.

"Broken dreams, honey," Violet said with a tinge of deep sadness putting the item away, agreeing with Claire that they should head back.

"Maybe we should go," Claire spoke, glancing away. Together, they started heading back.

Avril remarked one more time how dumb they were, especially Violet, before taking off into the sky. Paige soon left, too, with Harold, her axe, and a disappointed look. Willow slowly moved away with head lowered.

The Nobles of Mezmaria sat around a large table at the center of Mayor Jade's office in Vanillaville's Town Hall. The mayor, herself, had been kicked from her own room so the nobles could have their 'very important' meeting. Mrs. Jade sat beside her son, hands covering the woman's face. The boy grimaced, not quite understanding what all the fuss was about.

"I don't understand..." the boy said. "All she did was sing..."

"I don't quite get it either, pumpkin," Mrs. Jade sighed. "All I know is...they are not happy..."

Mrs. Jade went to a nearby phone to call Josie Ruby to see if the mayor's son could stay the night. She wasn't going to be able to leave anytime soon and wanted her child to stay with someone.

Inside the mayor's office, a noble banged her fist onto the table in anger. "This treachery cannot go unpunished!"

"The song! You heard it, right!? It was *that* song!" another noble said quickly. "The Song of Defiance!"

“Yes...” Lady Silver said softly. “We’ve all read the secret diaries of the past monarch. This is...indeed troubling.”

“Immediate action must be taken! Hang the Diamond!” a noble said as they shot up from their seat.

“Exactly!” another shot up. “The traitor must be punished as soon as possible!”

“And what would you have us do, again, exactly? Hanging? Really?” Mr. Amethyst said with crossed arms. “A public execution for the Heroes of Mezmaria because one of them sang a song?”

The noble clenched their fist before taking a seat once more. They pointed to Mr. Amethyst. “This...This is why nothing happens in these meetings. The mouths of nobility never agree with the body when action is necessary.”

“Acting rash is not something we can exactly afford to do right now. Punishing the heroes who saved the Queen would only reflect badly on us,” Mr. Amethyst said with a hand to his head. “Surely you understand this, Mr. Steel. Don’t make it a case of your word against mine. Think of the bigger picture.”

A silence fell over the room as the nobles looked between one another. The man dressed in a golden trimmed suit at the furthest seat took in a breath before speaking.

“I...have to agree with Mr. Amethyst.” The man, Mr. Gold, said with a sigh.

“Oh, Mr. Gold speaks,” a female noble scoffed. “I thought someone had taken your tongue.”

“How can you...you of all people agree with him on this one!?” Mr. Steel said quickly to Mr. Gold. “Those people...they killed...”

“You don’t...have to remind me,” Mr. Gold spoke as he looked away. “I agree with him but only begrudgingly...”

“What say you on this, Lady Silver? Surely you can’t agree with this, right,” Mr. Steel asked the noble woman seeking another to be on his side.

“Now, now, calm yourselves,” Lady Silver said lightly. “I also agree with Mr. Amethyst. Not fully, of course, but I do agree with him. Mrs. Cobalt, I assure you they will face punishment but one very different. Please refrain from further outbursts.”

The nobles tilted their heads as Mrs. Cobalt, the woman who had stood, resigned to agree with Lady Silver. “A different punishment, you say?”

“I have, right here, plans,” Lady Silver spoke confidently, pulling out a large rolled up paper and slowly unraveled it. “Plans for a way to keep check on them and any other who may pose a threat to our great nation.”

Violet headed to her room to lay down, turning to face the green shard on her nightstand that belonged to a dear friend long ago. "...I do remember them, Rebecca. I remember what was taken from some of them."

As the night grew darker, a storm had set in. The rain fell heavily against the roof of Violet's house. Aside from the rain, the building was quite quiet. Violet listened to the rain falling, feeling a bit out of it.

A loud crash of lightning rang out making the fox girl, Vulpus, jump from her bed. She looked around with a grimace before creeping into Violet's room to hide from the thunder. Before the fox could make it to the room, a second streak of lightning ran across the sky and was quickly followed by another crash of thunder. Vulpus hid behind her tail for a moment before lifting an ear upward hearing a loud knock at the boutique's main door.

"Mom!" Vulpus called out. "Someone's knocking at the door!"

"I'll get it, honey!" Violet responded, slowly rising from the bed, heading downstairs, then moving for the door. "Stay inside, Vulpus, where it's warm and dry!"

Claire shrieked hearing Vulpus's yelling and the thunder as it woke her up. Vulpus peeked into the girl's room, blushed, and apologized.

On the other side of the door were two kids from Claire's school. The one knocking was named Albert, the mayor of Vanillaville's son who was also a classmate of Claire's. Behind the boy, but quickly moving to the sides of him in rapid succession to look him over was Megan 'Minty' Mica, a short girl in a flowy skirt seen earlier in the boutique. The girl's speed was quick enough to match even the fastest of harpies or other fliers. It's one of the reasons she caught Hayley before the Reclamation ceremony had started.

"Mrs. Violet," Albert said quickly. "Please...you have to help us..."

Megan saluted the tailor as Albert spoke.

"I'm not married. Anyway...what is it, sweetheart? What's happened?" Violet asked with concern.

"W-we were staying over at Millie's house," the boy said pointing to Megan then himself. "Then...um...stuff happened. Millie was showing us this scroll or something then Hayley jumped through a window screaming about mimics...and...and then the scroll did a thing. It was crazy!"

"To be quite frank, that sounds normal. Hayley does those things. She broke my window earlier...which is bringing in water as I speak. Slipped my mind to board that up before laying down..." Violet slowly looked over her shoulder to the broken window. Sure enough, rainwater was passing through into the building.

"Yeah, I know that...but then Millie went crazy and, like, this black smoke or something was around her and she started attacking Avril who was also there for some reason." Albert rubbed the back of his neck.

"I kept telling her to put that scroll down but, nooooo, don't listen to Violet. She doesn't know what she's talking about, ever," Violet groaned, looking back at the two. "Be that as it may, you two come inside. It's

chilly, wet, and all manners of things that will give you a cold. Extra blankets are in the cupboard to your left on the wall. I'll get ready and head over to see what the fuss is about."

The tailor moved away from the door to gather her immediate belongings with some rain gear. Vulpus zipped down the stairs to see what was happening. Violet relayed what was said to the kitsune girl, Eve, and then Claire. Together, the four would head over to Josie's farmhouse to investigate.

Albert sighed as he moved inside to take a rest. Megan rushed to rest with him.

Vulpus looked around then outside and shivered. "Bleh, water. I'll put a raincoat on."

"Today is just full of problems," Violet slowly shook her head putting boots on then getting the others some clothes to wear in the rain. "I'm going to go crazy from it all."

"Are we crazy, too?" Claire asked with curiosity.

"Maybe we are, sister. I'm not sure anymore," Violet noted.

"First Hayley breaks the shop's window. I was made to wear dresses again. The rain is still pouring in. Something to do with Millie's scroll. Everyone slowly started to unwind after the ceremony fallout until this and...there's a stone rolling on the floor. Why is it here rolling on the floor? I thought the point of today was to fix that?" Claire's eyes were peering at her Stone of Virtue rolling about on the ground. And now Claire was laying on the floor. "I wore a dress for nothing!!!"

Eve was on the ground beside her soon after. "bool agree = true; —Um, I agree I mean."

"One doesn't wear a dress for nothing you two, even when nothing is happening...Doesn't make sense now that I say that out loud," Violet pondered.

"You just say that because you like them," Claire spoke in a glum tone.

Eve nodded. "That she does."

"I won't deny that nor admit to it," Violet noted.

Vulpus put on a heavy raincoat and ran to the others. "I'm ready to go!"

"What do we do about this...thing?" Claire pointed to the stone rolling around then decided to take matters into her own hands, throwing it out the broken window. "There...no plan is a plan."

Eve blinked at the logic trying to process it. Claire was disappointed, though, to hear the stone rolling onto the main door's step, passing through the unlocked door with some rolling. Claire went to throw it again. Witnessing this action, Megan found it interesting that the stone bearers could play catch with themselves.

Violet realized she only had one umbrella handing it to Vulpus. "Here, honey. You're more liable to get hurt in the rain than us."

When Claire, Eve, and Vulpus were ready, the tailor led the way out of the boutique glancing up and down the street, arm raised above her head, trying to look past the falling rain. To the south down Vanilla's main dirt road was the direction they were heading. Josie's farmhouse was resting upon the land the Ruby family had tended for generations.

A flash of lightning streaked in the sky over their heads as they arrived at the farmhouse. An ominous sign that caused the four to jump a bit. Approaching Josie's main door, the building was oddly silent, and all the lights were off inside.

"Josie?! Darling?! Are you in there?!" Violet called out after knocking on the door noting the odd silence and lights off, sputtering a little as rainwater got in her mouth.

"Are you guys, okay?" Claire called out, too.

Eve pointed out two broken windows. Likely both were from Hayley. The girl wondered if she should knock but then thought maybe the door was unlocked. As fate would have it with Eve's strength, she incidentally pulled the door from its hinges on accident. Claire and Vulpus were surprised.

Violet grimaced seeing the door pulled from its hinges. "Knocking doesn't involve pulling, sweetheart..."

"Sorry, an error has occurred," Eve blushed. "I don't know my own strength sometimes."

Violet began to lead the others inside to investigate the farmhouse's interior. Stepping inside, they found the main room to be in utter disarray. The tables broken or tossed aside, the furniture ripped, and what looked like puddles of crimson everywhere. A strong familiar metallic smell hung in the air.

"Well...did Hayley kill someone again?" Claire nonchalantly asked.

"Oh my..." Violet brought a hand to her lips, a bit shocked at the farmhouse interior. "...She might have finally did it, Claire..."

"Who? Hayley?" Vulpus grimaced.

"Hard to say what the cause of this blood is from," Eve said as she bent down to help Claire inspect the crimson puddles.

The four observed the main room of the farmhouse, noticing a pile of boxes in the corner of the room with a pool of blood under them. They went over to search underneath them, finding Josie in a half-conscious state missing a leg and an arm. Claire immediately went about providing first aid with her magic, pulling her wand.

Violet was a bit shocked beyond words at first then immediately looked around for more clues. Vulpus sniffed around trying to find a scent. Suddenly, the four heard rumbling from upstairs. The tailor armed herself with wand at the ready taking point at the base of the stairs peering upward.

Vulpus gulped and made a flame, levitating it above her hand. "U-upstairs huh? I smell more blood up there."

"Hayley?! Millie?! You up there?!" Violet called out observing what little she could upstairs. The darkness concealed the rumbling noise's source. Eve decided to stay downstairs and protect Claire.

"Girls, stay here. I'm going up," Violet said, keeping her eyes on the stairs.

Vulpus whimpered wanting to go with her mom for protection.

"Be careful. We don't know what the danger is here," Eve whispered loudly enough that the tailor and the fire kitsune could hear.

Violet nodded but took this moment to remain silent. Each step taken on the stairs was careful to avoid as much noise as possible albeit an old farmhouse's floorboards creaked, nonetheless.

Closing in on the top of the stairs, peering into the room on the left, Violet found a horrifying sight. Hayley was in a corner stabbing her blade into a severed arm over and over. The girl's eyes wide and a gleeful smile spread across her face. She was gone, her mind completely lost, more so than it had ever been before. Violet had hoped she'd never see this day and, yet a tragedy unfolded. The tailor stared for a while longer then her eyes drifted slowly to the right catching sight of Millie Ruby, shadowy, dark, and malevolent in the center of the room.

"Alright, Violet...no one's coming to help. We have to confront this ourselves...as always," the tailor whispered to herself readying the nerves. She knew that Vanillaville had little to no law enforcement. The Mezmarian funds were never set aside for such a small town. Each citizen was to look after one another. The true kicker was that everyone came to the Bearers for protection. So, in this situation, Violet and the others *were* the law enforcement. The tailor, being the adult, was a call to action she couldn't ignore. And, so, Violet took that fateful step into the darkened farmhouse room to confront a changed Hayley and Millie, Vulpus watching from the doorway, Claire and Eve tending to Josie downstairs.

A black smoke surrounded Millie Ruby. Violet could see it more clearly on approach, wand at the ready. Looking closely, the girl appeared as if her body was made from a living black flame. Then there was Millie's eyes. They were glowing an unnatural red. Under the girl was a charred husk of what looked to be a person, a woman.

"This is certainly not how one goes about a slumber party, girls. It cost an arm and a leg," Violet spoke with surprising confidence that gained Millie's red-eyed gaze. The tailor was trying to get a better look at the charred remains. She was having a hard time processing this. "...Who is that under you, Millie...?"

Millie slammed her fists into the body, repeatedly, quickly, and with such ferocity that it caught Violet and Vulpus off guard. Each hit seemed to cause the husk to crack slightly. It was clear the person's body was wholly charcoal at this point yet becoming more brittle with each hit.

"Who?" Millie asked, her voice echoey and distorted, unconcerned of her actions in that moment.

The tailor was starting to break out in a cold sweat at what looked like a nightmare. This was unnatural just like what happened in the forest. Violet started to back up and head for the stairs slowly having second thoughts after taking another look at Hayley and Millie, what they've become. "No...I don't...want any of...whatever this is..."

The darkness that was Millie's face cracked into a smile. The girl approached slowly, her feet barely touching the ground. It seemed like she was floating. Violet caught sight of what looked like strings on Millie's appendages, dark strings. The tailor didn't have long to comprehend this sight before the shadowy girl hissed then charged at her.

Violet saw the advance, immediately putting up a barrier around herself and firing a blast of holy magic at Millie with her wand. The girl flew backwards, hurtling through the air, hissing as she hit and rolled across the floor.

"Mom, what was that!?" Vulpus yelled from the stairwell.

"Vulpus, honey! Get in here and help me!" Violet called out. "Please?!"

Vulpus gasped, rushing into the room. Claire and Eve could hear the commotion upstairs but not seeing the threat yet. Millie floated back to her feet then flew forward attempting to grab and slam the fire kitsune but missed as Vulpus dodged it narrowly.

Violet sent forth another blast of holy magic from her wand at Millie as Vulpus screamed then pointed at the shadowy girl while looking to Hayley stabbing an arm. An idea had crossed the tailor's mind. "Hayley! Millie is a mimic! Take her out!"

Hayley snapped out her trance. Her hatred of mimics was something Violet knew very well. The manic girl screamed out in rage toward mimic kind rushing at Millie, slapping the girl across the face with the severed arm. Hayley was then sent flying across the room as Millie hit the girl with tremendous force.

"Mom, can I use fire?" Vulpus asked.

"Since you asked nicely like a good girl, that is a yes," Violet nodded. The tailor was gaining a bit of confidence now overriding stress.

Vulpus flicked her fingers and threw out a ball of fire. Millie was seemingly pulled upward suddenly, avoiding the flames. The shadowy girl's hands started turning into long dagger-like claws.

As a loud crash of thunder and lightning spooked Vulpus, Millie rushed forward slashing at both of them. Violet dodged the claws, but the distracted fire kitsune was slashed and thrown backward. With the girl so

close, Violet could see the strings of darkness around each of Millie's limbs, leading into the air. Looking up, the tailor found the scroll she so despised. The one Millie would never get rid of. It was black as night at this point.

Violet pointed upward. "Vulpus, help me burn that blasted scroll!"

It took a while for Vulpus to see the scroll but, when she did, the fire kitsune threw a couple of fireballs at it. The scroll was hit and one of the strings burned away. Millie's right arm fell limp at her side.

"Good going, honey!" Violet beamed. She tried to follow up the attack, throwing a sewing needle at a string but missed.

Millie reached upward with her left arm making a ball of darkness appear above the group and slammed it into the floor. A rippling effect was felt by Violet and Vulpus and, before they knew it, the floor gave way and collapsed out from underneath them.

Claire and Eve could now see the chaos as Violet and Vulpus hit the ground hard a few feet away. Millie began floating down from the upper floor through the new hole.

Violet coughed, turning her eyes to Millie and the scroll, determination filling her being, getting up and firing another blast of holy magic at the floating parchment. However, it drifted to the side this time to avoid the hit.

"W-what is going on?" Claire asked in a worried tone.

"Bad stuff," Vulpus said from the ground.

"Dark magic on Millie! Attack the scroll!" Violet shouted.

"The scroll? Um, okay," Claire simply responded looking up then seeing the target. She went about siphoning magic from it then altering it into a strike on the cursed item. Vulpus shakily stood up and fired three blasts of flames at the scroll. The scroll evaded Vulpus's attempt to hit it but not Claire's.

"My turn," Eve said as her eyes began to glow red. She fired a beam of energy from them hitting the scroll. Another one of the strings burned away and Millie's left leg went limp.

Millie was pulled forward attempting to roundhouse kick Claire and Violet. She struck the younger sibling in the chest and broke the older one's barrier.

Violet wiped sweat from her brow and aimed another blast of holy magic at the scroll. At the same moment, Claire went to siphon more of the cursed item's power altering it to strength. The combined attack snapped another one of the strings making Millie's left arm go limp.

The group on the main floor of the farmhouse suddenly heard hissing from the scroll. "Away with you! Must burn it all!"

"Snakes," Claire gasped looking for the reptile. The young girl did see the scroll as a pile of snakes at one moment which disturbed her.

Violet sniped the scroll with a subsequent holy magic attack blowing a massive hole through it. The group could hear dozens of snakes crying out as one before the scroll imploded into itself. A follow up explosion came the scroll shaking the farmhouse to its very foundation. With no strings attached anymore, Millie was then thrown violently across the room and through a window. As the room occupants contemplated what happened, they saw the girl outside get up and disappear, running into the rainy night.

The tailor ran to the window trying to find Millie calling out for her. Violet caught a glimpse of the fleeing girl for only a moment. The black mist of an evil curse still surrounding her. Millie ran off disappearing into the endlessly swaying trees.

"T-that was really weird," Claire blinked.

"Yeah, it was," Vulpus grimaced. "What was that all about?"

"A flying snake ball?" Claire pondered.

"Snake ball?" Eve asked, confused.

"So, I'm the only one that saw that?" Claire inquired.

"Whatcha see?" Vulpus tilted her head on approach.

"Snakes...in a ball," Claire pointed out her original inquiry.

"Oh no!" Vulpus gasped thinking about snakes now.

"Makes sense to me," Eve nodded.

The tailor slowly turned to the others with not much of an answer, herself, about what happened.

"I heard snakes...not exactly sure if I saw them..." Violet noted, moving to find the charred body that was upstairs to inspect it. It had fallen to the main floor in the fight. But, as the tailor approached the body, Hayley distracted her, bursting out of the rubble.

"MIMIC!" Hayley shouted in pure rage, first crawling toward the window then leaping through it.

"Mimics were wiped out long ago, sweetheart!" Violet called out. "Stop the nonsense already!"

"Easy test. Anyone who attacks Violet is a mimic," Claire said with conviction.

Eve moved to accompany Violet with investigating the charred body. Claire went about healing the wounded. Vulpus asked for help from Claire with puppy dog eyes getting a few pats with the heals.

As Violet and Eve investigated the charred body, the latter girl's eyes began to glow for a moment. "Hmm, judging from the outlines, I'd say this was a woman...one with wings."

Eve pointed to the side of the body.

"Wings?" Violet took a closer look. "Hmm, could be someone...someone familiar...who has wings, Eve? Maybe Mrs. Jade?"

"Mrs. Jade never had wings," Eve blinked at the words. "Avril does, though. Wasn't she also here?"

Eve said this as she looked from the body to Violet. The tailor expressed a look of shock. "Avril?! My, that...that...well, that does make sense. Are we being hunted?"

"I...don't know," Eve said slowly. "I would hope not...can't rule that out now, can we? Either way, we should get Josie out of here. We don't know if Millie, or even Hayley, are still dangerous."

Claire and Vulpus were well on the way to lifting Josie up to carry outside. Violet took a moment to place a hand on the charred remains of her once lively friend saying a few parting words then got up slowly to rejoin Claire and Vulpus. The tailor pondered the girl that kept talking of 'mimics' as Eve joined in leaving the farmhouse. "Hayley is only a danger to herself these days. She has not actually hurt anyone, Eve. I don't believe it."

"Understood," Eve nodded as she grabbed the severed arm. "Maybe this can be returned to Josie?"

Vulpus looked outside, gulping a little as the rain continued to fall.

"Oh, you found her arm. Now she has a spare," Claire said looking back.

"I did," Eve nodded. "Do you need it?"

"Think we got it," Claire nodded, her magical capabilities having regrown Josie's limbs. A feat that no others known in the lands of Mezmaria could pull off. Likewise in parallel to Millie's use of potions. Indeed, Claire was renowned in the nation for these unique capabilities.

"Alrighty then," Eve responded in simple tone.

"Alright girls, we need to head back to the boutique. Pretend this didn't happen," Violet spoke to the others as they started to leave the farmhouse.

"Pretty sure it happened," a voice said from behind them.

Looking back, they found Richard Cross and several royal guards approaching the building.

"Care to explain exactly what's happened?" Richard asked, folding his arms with a displeased look.

Violet slowly turned around then grimaced. "...Richard, it's not what it looks like..."

“What does it look like exactly? I’m listening,” Richard spoke in a stern tone.

Violet nervously flailed her right arm as though waving things off in hope. "A-all I can say is dark magic caused Millie to...do bad things, Richard."

“I saw Hayley with a leg wound when we captured her. Was that her knife? Did she stab herself?” Richard looked at Violet growing agitated. “Dark magic? Fine, I’ll bite. Where’d that come from?”

"The scroll, Richard. You know which one. You were there when she got it. Millie’s been holding onto it ever since," Violet sighed observing the armed man.

"The leg wound might be from when the ceiling came down," Claire interjected. “No idea what happened before that moment, up there, though."

Claire went about bringing Richard up to speed on what happened as he was more willing to listen to the younger sibling. The two coming to them in the middle of the night, finding Josie, healing Josie as Violet went upstairs, Violet screaming, the ceiling coming down, and snakes. Also that Claire would like to get back to bed soon.

A second man pushed forward recognized by Violet to be captain of the guards. He had a smug grin on his face as he approached. “A dark scroll, demon snakes, and a crazed child. Oh, this is very interesting. Interesting indeed.”

"Not interesting. Tragic," Violet glared at the captain of the guard.

Richard frowned hearing this exchange. It was obvious he didn’t look well as memories of the forest flooded his mind.

"...Nice to see someone having fun I guess," Claire shrugged.

“And where pray tell did this child gain this scroll? Why’d she have it in the first place?” The captain of the guard smirked.

Claire likely didn’t remember anymore, especially when tired and wanting to go to bed.

"From Deathscythe's castle in Filltroske. We woke up one day to her simply having it in her hold," Violet noted.

“Why do you guys have someone’s arm? What dark magic are you going to invoke with that?” the captain of the guard asked, pointing to what Eve was holding.

“Simon, that’s enough,” Richard spoke up, extending an arm.

"I didn't know where her arm was when healing her. So, looks like we have extras," Claire responded.

“Just extra limbs, huh?” the captain of the guard, Simon, asked curiously.

"Better than no arms," Claire noted.

"I said enough. It's fine...it's fine," Richard said, looking more agitated as time went on.

"Dark magic at a stronger level is invoked with souls, not arms. Read a book," Violet raised an eyebrow.

"What book, exactly? We'll need your dark spell books as evidence for the trials later," Simon said as he pointed to the guards.

Vulpus lowered her ears slightly, not liking how the situation was turning out.

"Trial?" Claire tilted her head.

"Disregarding your 'dark spell books' inference to one such as I that mainly casts holy magic, what trial?" Violet raised her eyebrow even further.

"Oh, yes. A trial. After all the trouble you all have caused at the ceremony and now this *little incident*," Simon gestured to the farmhouse.

"Sir, we have a burned person in here!" a guard called out from the farmhouse's interior.

"Oh? Another charge, huh?" Simon beamed looking over the group, especially Violet.

"Richard, talk some sense into your coworker," Violet pleaded.

"What happened, Violet?" Richard asked, offering no help.

"I just said it was dark magic from Millie's scroll," Violet spoke more hurriedly this time.

"That cursed forest brings only pain and suffering," Richard stated in a lighter tone. "Nothing should ever have been taken from that place. Nothing at all..."

Simon put his hands to his side chuckling a little. "I'm Simon Grayson, captain of Lady Silver's private guard. My orders come from the nobles themselves. Even Richard is under me right now. Know your place in this situation, Miss Diamond~"

"I don't care who you are. I will not be talked down to like I'm an imbecile," Violet began to stare in growing anger toward the captain.

"Gonna burn me up, too?" Simon asked with a smug grin.

"You and your smug grin are why this nation never gets any better," Violet said while gritting her teeth.

"Listen, if you're all innocent and all that, then you have nothing to worry about, am I right?" Simon asked, getting smugger by the moment, pointing a finger at the tailor. "You Mezmara 'heroes' have an image to uphold. So, you'll obviously come quietly, right?"

"As trained weapons of the Perfelot army, we've never had a choice in the matter so, yes, we'll come quietly," Violet noted. "You'll have to carry Claire, though. She's very tired. And, if you drop her, I will burn you alive. Vulpus will, but I'll give the order."

"Fine, fine," Simon said, waving a dismissive hand then ordered a guard to pick up Claire and carry the sleepy child.

"Why does nothing make sense anymore?" Claire asked, wondering why a guard is going to carry her. Vulpus wanted to wrap around the younger sibling like a blanket.

Eve watched this all before shrugging. "I wish I knew."

Violet stood in between the guard and Claire, challenging Simon this time. "No, I said the captain will do it."

"You don't give orders around here," Simon spoke this time in anger, rushing up to get in Violet's face.

"At times I do give the orders," Violet said not backing down but meeting the captain's angered stare. "It's how I got by."

"I'll remember those words," Simon sneered, heading over to pick Claire up personally and plopped her across his shoulder. "Happy?"

"Yes, thank you, Simon. Most helpful," Violet smiled.

Simon stared at the tailor for a moment then to his guards ordering them to march.

Eve put both hands behind her back following Violet's lead. "Never a dull moment."

Richard took up the rear to make sure the four didn't escape capture, marching to Vanillaville, straight to a train that would head directly to Perfelot, capital of Mezmaria.

The following day, Violet, the living members of the Heroes of Virtue, her sisters, and her daughter were brought to Perfelot, the capital of Mezmaria. There were no crowds, no fanfare of any kind. No news of what had transpired on that rainy night in Vanillaville. It was clear that the nobility wanted this to be hush.

The group were given some dwellings to stay in while the nobles and their royal guards investigated. Guards left no stone unturned as they dug up anything they could to incriminate the group. While the group and their activities were investigated, they were not allowed to leave their dwelling or interact with anyone. Two weeks went by in this manner of captivity and investigation.

It had finally come. The day of the trial. Through secretive means of transportation, the group were taken to the Manor of Law, a large courthouse used strictly and directly overseen by the nobility and Queen Angelica, herself. Once taken inside this courthouse, each member was brought to a different room to wait

for the trial's start. Claire, Eve, Princess Rebecca's daughter, and Vulpus were given their own room to wait within. The younger ones were treated to various cakes, ice creams, and other delights by orders of Queen Angelica, herself.

As Violet sat in her room, she heard a gentle knock upon the door. The tailor went to answer the door but found no one to be there. Just the guards at either side of the doors. One guard motioning for the tailor to get back inside. As Violet closed the door and turned around, she found herself face-to-face with Mezmara's Queen Angelica standing directly behind her. Violet jolted backward hitting the doorframe seeing Queen Angelica behind her like that. The tailor screamed in shock but quickly covered her mouth out of embarrassment.

"Hello, Violet," Queen Angelica said in a gentle voice taking a seat at a small table within the room. "I hope you don't mind me coming to visit?"

"Y-you scared the beejeezus out of me-!" Violet stammered.

"Sorry," the Queen chuckled lightly.

Holding a hand over her chest and lightly panting, the tailor slowly calmed down. "W-what do I owe the pleasure of this appearance?"

"I wanted to hear it straight from you," Queen Angelica spoke with an utmost serious tone as she looked Violet in the eyes. "Why did you sing the Song of Defiance? Also, I heard you and your sister did some...things at the Ruby farmhouse and tried to cover it up?"

"I, uh..." Violet looked Queen Angelica in the eyes for a while feeling her mouth get dry. Swallowing was a bit hard at that moment. "See, it's, uh...how could I say it? ...I'm seeing things differently..."

"Differently isn't a bad thing. I know that for sure," Queen Angelica remarked meaning to prod further. "The Mezmarian Nobility see things one way. And you see it another way?"

"...I see evil...everywhere. Nonstop. It... never ended after the events in the forest..." Violet took a step to the side feeling a cold sweat forming upon her brow again. "...Nothing is getting better. No one is changing for the better. Simply going to die and have the world not be any different than the way it is now. Avril is dead. It is as Deathscythe said of the dead children in that forest's graveyard. That they never did die for a good reason. Who does die for a good reason? Do things ever get better? How am I to ensure my family and friends are safe when evil is all I ever see? It's happened again. The forest is following me—us. Those endlessly swaying trees. Avril is dead, Josie is hurt beyond bodily injury, Paige's depression is deepening everyday feeling herself to be alone, Willow never moved past what was done to her, Rebecca is not in her right mind, Hayley never got better after the cockatrice attack, Claire remembers too much that it causes nightmares, and Millie recently ran away after being consumed by that evil scroll. I see evil, Queen Angelica. Everywhere. All the time. It never stops, needing good to stop it but only temporarily. Erika was strong...I am not...but the expectation is there to make things better. And I most certainly desire things to be better. That is why I sang the song. Now, evil is hunting us as is expected."

Angelica took all of this in, considering the implications. A few minutes passed by before her thoughts on the matter could be accurately articulated. "That forest took a lot from us all. I know that for sure. I, too, have been...a little hesitant to make appearances since that forest. But that being said...you did save me. There is good in this world, Violet. It's difficult to find. I know that. But it's something we must strive for. Nothing is ever easy. It's the reason I'm here today. I've been a shut-in for a while, but this was far too important to not be a part of."

Violet wasn't sure how to respond, slowly folding her arms to think about the matter.

Queen Angelica paused a moment thinking about something the tailor mentioned. "Erika? How is it you know that name?"

Violet wiped at her brow, hesitating with a quivering lip, then responded. "...I...took a look at what the stones were willing to show before the ceremony. Learned of Erika and the original bearers of the stones..."

"A rare power indeed. Most don't get wholly attached to the stones. Dangerous tactic," Queen Angelica said.

"Well, I most certainly can see the reason why. I feel like seeing those memories is driving me crazy!" Violet suddenly shouted.

"Too much knowledge isn't always a good thing it would seem." The Queen slowly stood up, moving past the tailor to the doorway. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. "

"Wait, Queen Angelica. I have a question," Violet abruptly turned around to catch the Queen's attention. "Do you...think the mimics deserved their fate?"

"Hard to say," the Queen said as she paused a moment, hand on the doorknob. "Personally, I'd say yes...but I don't know. They almost seemed robotic outside of the elemental mimics and those were humans transformed into mimic kind."

"Yes, they could only imitate emotion but never understand it," Violet pondered for a moment. "...Makes me wonder. Do we even know what happiness, love, and good moral actually is? Or are we mimicking that like they did in our own way?"

"One can't explain emotion. The deeper you think about them, the deeper the rabbit hole goes. Let me ask you something, Violet." Queen Angelica peered over her shoulder back at the tailor. "If Claire, or any of your loved ones, were in danger you'd fight tooth and nail to help them, correct? Love is a strong emotion. It pulls us through the darkest of times. Oh, and, um, they are totally going to use Pandora Black's son and King Rex's daughter against you guys...just a heads up."

"Great, even more evidence against me. This is going to be one-sided," Violet sighed. "Hope Virtuous and Sunny are doing okay."

With that the Queen slipped out the door not wanting to answer that one. Violet crossed her arms and tapped her foot trying to think ahead on what's going to go down at the trial. This was going to be rough.

In Claire's room, the younger sibling wondered why they were in different room. Despite this, Vulpus routinely used her kitsune magic to teleport into the girl's room with a snap of her fingers each day of the week. But not long enough to arouse suspicion from the guards once Vulpus figured out their routines and checkups.

"Is mom gonna be, okay?" Vulpus asked, suddenly appearing next to Claire causing the younger sibling to have a look of surprise.

"I don't think they'd be happy that you're sneaking into other's rooms, Vulpus," Claire stated.

Vulpus went closer to Claire, nuzzling the girl. "I'm a sneaky fox~"

Claire giggled a bit as the two rested near one another. "Can't really do much right now."

"I wish I could beat up all these noble guys," Vulpus pouted.

"Sounds like a bad idea and would cause more harm than good," Claire replied.

"You think?" Vulpus tilted her head, seemingly unable to comprehend the consequences.

"Pretty sure," Claire simply stated.

"We'd get in more trouble?" Vulpus asked.

"Definitely," Claire responded again.

"Whatcha think is gonna happen?" Vulpus asked curiously.

"I don't know," Claire replied without much enthusiasm one way or the other. She started to hear movement outside. "Vulpus, get back to your room. The guards are coming."

Vulpus yiped, immediately snapping her fingers and disappearing, wondering why the routine checkup schedule changed. This time was different, assuredly. Guards with official judicial insignias had arrived at Claire's door when opening it. They had gone to the other group members and their rooms, too. The trial was about to commence with the investigation complete.

The group was escorted promptly from their rooms whether ready or not. The judicial guards additionally escorted Claire and the other children to the courtroom. A very large courtroom was laid out before the group members as they entered it. Expressive and oppressive with no sunlight entering the area, yet still well-lit by various glowing light.

Towering over them, on one side of the room, were multiple pillars with the tops bearing a judge's stand. Upon each stand, sat a man or woman dressed in black with an odd wig atop their heads. Each pillar sat a different Mezmarian Noble. However, the three center pillars were the most important.

Atop the middle pillar, sat the Queen of Mezmaria, Angelica, herself, who did not have on a wig or black cloak like the surrounding nobility. Nonetheless her regal wear shimmered brilliantly and brightly in the room, her angelic wings flexing through slits in the outfit slightly when desired. To the Queen's right was a young woman with a cane in hand after fixing it. This was Lady Silver, the head of the Mezmarian Nobility. To the left of the Queen was a young man of charismatic prominence. This regal person was the spokesman and honored statesman of the nobility, Lord Amethyst.

"Today, in the presence of her highness, Queen Angelica, we hold this court." The young man, Lord Amethyst said, addressing the bewildered group members as they were brought into the courtroom and seated in an aggressive manner. However, his voice was much deeper and more gravely than his appearance would suggest. This time the group members could see a seriousness in his expressions not witnessed before. It made Violet and the others that much more worried.

"Yes," Queen Angelica said lightly, joining in the introduction. "This will be a trial held in fairness, but the implications will hold those accountable this day to a strict degree."

"Of course," Lady Silver nodded lightly in agreement. The woman stood up from her seat to start the proceedings. "The accused here today are on trial for various crimes and misdemeanors that we overlooked because of your status as Mezmaria's Heroes."

Violet silently looked up at the three. The tailor could feel a heavy weight upon her heart. A growing anxiety making her more nervous each passing second.

"Princess Rebecca Wolfe, please come to the front," a noble said from the group's left as Lady Silver took her seat once more.

Princess Rebecca did so, promptly heading to the front, ascending a center stand with a bright light shining upon it to put an accused 'on-the-spot' in a way. A bit of anger was written on the princess's face while moving forward, shooting a glare at Violet, Claire, Eve, and Vulpus. There was a momentary pause as the princess stood at the center stand, light shining upon her, before the nobility addressed the woman.

"As 'leader' of the Mezmarian Heroes, I'm afraid that the brunt of the allegations will fall on you, Princess Rebecca Wolfe. Your crimes will be shared by the other members here but even more so," Lady Silver spoke in a stern tone.

"Charge number one! Treasonous affiliations! First infraction!" a noble shouted from Rebecca's right before she could even dare to say something. The princess's eyes widened as Lady Silver began to read over something written down.

"It has come to our attention that the son of Pandora Black, a 'Virtuous Love', was not only spared by the group but also brought back to our society. This dangerous individual is a very powerful and serious threat to our great nation. A sole surviving Mimic of despicable origins that our nation has been trying to wipe out since the wars began many years ago," Lady Silver read aloud. "We have been told by the Queen, herself, that this Mimic was spared as he had allied with the group in the forest, but such an individual is still a grave threat. These are treasonous allegations not without warrant."

“Charge number two! Treasonous affiliations! Infraction two!” a female noble shouted from Rebecca’s left, known to the princess as Lady (Mrs.) Cobalt. The princess was desperately trying to think on what to do as these allegations were read aloud.

“It has also come to our attention that the daughter of The Dark Sorcerer, King Rex, a ‘Sunny Sympathy’ was also spared and taken back to our society by the group,” Lady Silver read aloud. “This charge had been pardoned, for the most part, by the royal Princess Aria North of Puregloss Kingdom and the wandering holy man, Silver Cross, as they have spoken for the woman in question. However, this woman staying and residing in our nation’s borders is outside of Frostilia’s jurisdiction, and we deem the residency of such a dangerous individual to be treasonous for the group to give shelter to our past’s longtime enemy.”

“Charge number three! Treasonous actions! Infraction one!” another noble proclaimed from Rebecca’s right and then awaiting Lady Silver to read aloud this allegation.

“During the Reclamation Ceremony held a few weeks ago, you, had been appointed leader of this group, was not able to quell your subordinates and allowed one of them to sing a song. A treasonous song, the Song of Defiance. Even going so far as to engage in a brawl with said individual in public, and on national stage, forever captured in media coverage. This is most unbecoming of a princess and public figure.” Lady Silver paused for a moment to stare Princess Rebecca down from atop the pillar. “Do you have anything to say on these ground?”

As Claire, Vulpus, Eve, Josie, and the others looked at one another confused how Violet learned a treasonous song, the tailor tried her best to not meet their gaze wiping cold sweat from her brow with a shaky hand. Vulpus really hoped none of the other songs she knew could get her into this much trouble.

Rebecca clenched her fists and teeth but then closed her eyes taking a breath, then bowing to the individuals before her. "First and foremost, I would like to greatly apologize for the misgivings of a few in our group. I am not sure what has gotten into them. Addressing Virtuous Love, I have not seen him in a quite a while, but I believe his care in Princess Aria and Richard Cross's care has been adequate to safe harboring and away from national security concerns. He is one of the last mimics of his kind and we...took it upon our own hasty decision to harbor him with good will after the tragedy that befell his kind. Sunny Sympathy has not come out of her house in a while in Vanillaville, and Silver Cross has been busy in his visitations to Puregloss Kingdom. She is...mentally unstable, yes, but kept under watch when outside that house, I assure you. As for the treasonous song, it will not happen again. You have my word."

“There’s a few other charges, but the court feel these are better suited for a different individual,” Lady Silver nodded in response to Princess Rebecca’s words. “Princess Rebecca Wolfe of Mezmaria, as agreed upon by the nobility and Queen Angelica, you will relinquish the Stone of Virtue in your hold posthaste as will the rest of your group, and your status as princess along with it. From there on, you will serve your time in the Puregloss Kingdom with your daughter and butler to live in the peace you requested. After the two-year sentence, of course. With that said, you may sit in the back while the other members are judged.”

"Yes, Lady Silver," Rebecca, no longer a princess, bowed once more then headed to sit in the back whispering hate in Violet's direction, the tailor trying to avoid her spiteful gaze.

One by one, the members of the group stepped up to the podium to be given their sentences. For the crimes listed earlier, each member was given a month or more in public services.

For Willow, it was discovered that the woman had large quantities of narcotics in her dwelling, however. An investigative finding that surprised everyone in the group, even Willow, herself. It made the woman burst out in tears trying to apologize and that she didn't know where they came from.

"Willow Dawn, it has come to our attention that the forest had many dire effects on you, both physically and mentally. That being said, you are a public figure and, as such, a crime like this will only hurt our reputation. As such you will be taken to a detoxication center for as long as needed and, afterward, up to a year in a minimal security center. You may be seated," Lady Silver read the verdict to the bawling woman, ignoring the pain clearly written on the accused's face. The guards had to forcibly remove Willow as she started to pull out her own hair, and hit herself in a nervous breakdown, scratching her already scarred body. Violet and the others grimaced witnessing this. Lady Silver paid this no mind moving onto the next accused member.

"Miss Paige Peridot, as far as this court can see, you, yourself, have not committed crimes beyond the ones your group has already been accused. We did discover some odd pudding in your household, but we cannot find connections from them to you so you may also take a seat in the back."

Paige saluted the nobles then went to go sit down. "Yeah, I don't get why that pudding was there, either."

"Pudding sounds good right about now," Queen Angelica muttered to herself, garnering an odd look from the two nobles sitting on both sides of her.

"We now call Josie Ruby to the stand," Lady Silver called out.

Vulpus rested against Claire, having fallen asleep. Eve bit her lip. "Violet will be next then."

Josie steadily made her way to the stand flicking her hat with a finger. "Howdy~"

"Miss Ruby, this court knows the pain you have suffered but, even so, we find that these additional charges must be handed down and you face the consequences of these actions, too," Lady Silver stated looking down at the farmer woman.

"Ah get ya. Let's hear 'em," Josie spoke with confidence, hands on both hips.

"Charge number one! Child endangerment!" a noble on Josie's right called out before Lady Silver read it aloud.

"We have discovered that your dau-" Lady Silver paused, looking the paper over. "Forgive me...your sister had, in her possession, a scroll taken from a lich's castle that had resided within Filltroske. A scroll of unknown and untested power. A cursed item, no less. And this child had been allowed to handle it. This is a gross case of criminal negligence. A negligence that cost the life of one and possibly another, your own sister, as she was never found."

"Who 'ere ya sayin' is negli...nigli...whatever them words mean?" Josie raised an eyebrow.

"It means you let your sister hold onto a dangerous item that may very well have been the end of her as well," Lady Silver informed, unamused.

"Now see 'ere, missy. Ah ain't one ta be bargain' into mah sister's affairs. She can rightly hold her own. Not gonna say ah know what happened that night with the chaos rustlin' 'bout, but ah trust mah sister had somethin' 'appen ta her. And they best not ever 'ave me find out cause..." Josie chuckled a bit. "...Ah don' need no scroll or stone ta whoop someone."

"One should not leave a loaded pistol out while children are around. That is negligence," Lady Silver nodded. "The same is true of dark magics."

"Ya do know Millie and ah are trained soldiers, righ'? A fuss was made 'bout her potion makin' that she and ah were wanted so badly for these battles ta defend the...how was it put...? 'Nation's best interests'? Sounds 'bout right if memory served. Y'all makin' it sound like she's a toddler that never done shot no animals in a good hunt or fought in real combat," Josie folded her arms with a confused look.

"Hmm..." Lady Silver contemplated the words spoken tapping the paper before her. "Well, in any case, a dark spell such as that should have been turned over to the proper authorities. This is not a discussion of trained soldiers wielding a weapon they are accustomed to. This is about a dark magic scroll of unknown origins and its apparent usage to murder another."

"Look, ah would 'ave turned it over ta y'all...but the scroll it, uh, let Millie see our dead parents every now and then. Ah...couldn' get her to stop from breakin' down after the events in the forest. That there scroll was like her...counselor or somethin'. That might sound like crazy talk, but ah mahself didn' 'ave good experiences in that there forest. Was kinda dead fer a while and...um...yah..." Josie trailed off, lowering her eyes to the ground, reliving bad memories in her head.

Lady Silver nodded slightly. "The court understands such sentiments but, still, a life was lost and a child missing, presumed dead from the curse."

"...Maybe ah shoulda taken that scroll a long time ago..." Josie sighed, looking at the ground.

"Miss Josie, you are sentenced to two years of house arrest," Lady Silver spoke in her stern voice once again. "A lesser sentence than we had in mind but, considering the circumstances, and the mercy of the Queen, your sentence was lessened."

"Well, ah guess it gives me time ta fix 'er up a bit. The house ah mean," Josie tilted her head while staring at the ground.

"Miss Ruby, you may step down now," Mr. Steel said from the side, annoyed by the farmer's continued presence on the stand. Josie looked down when she left the front, moving to sit in the back with arms folded and head lowered. The farmer had her hat covering both eyes now.

“Finally, we call upon Miss Violet...” Lady Silver looked her papers over. “I don’t...never mind. If you would, Miss Violet Diamond, come up to the front and take the stand.”

Violet took in a breath then stood up, heading to the front. The tailor could feel countless others staring at her stepping into the spotlight. A light that made it ever more evident how much she’d been sweating.

“Miss Violet Diamond, the court knows much of what you’ve done. I would consider you to be the true leader of the Mezmarian Heroes and the Stones of Virtue. You pulled the disbanded group together after your leader was lost in the forest of Filltroske when seeking to rescue Queen Angelica. A commendable feat indeed...” Lady Silver said while staring down Violet.

"Yes, ma'am," Violet nodded, returning the stare.

“Be that as it may, there are charges against you, too, and their judicial weight cannot be ignored,” Lady Silver spoke in the same stern voice toward Violet below.

“Charge number one! Conceal and falsify evidence!” a noble shouted from Violet’s left. Noticeably louder than the nobility had done for the other members in the trial. The tailor felt there was a certain aggressiveness lingering in the air more so against her from these individuals.

“On the night of the dark magic crime that took place only a few weeks ago, it was heard by several members of the royal guard, as well as the guard captain, that you wished to cover up the crime in question. One that led to a death and missing child, now presumed dead. A criminal offence of serious implications in concealing and falsifying evidence. Why would you try to cover this up exactly?” Lady Silver asked with an odd grin forming that the tailor found ominous. “The court would like to hear this from you.”

"Because...uh... well..." Violet turned a bit red.

“The court wishes to know.” Lady Silver spoke in a slow stern manner. A heavy silence filling the courtroom.

Violet fidgeted a little, twiddling her thumbs. "If I were to say that I felt guilty, would that be a bad response or...?"

“To say you’re guilty of something in a court of law? Is that what you’re saying?” Lady Silver blinked at the response. “If that’s how you want it, then that’s fine by-”

"-No, no. Guilty of being afraid from a past experience. Anywho, I deny the charge," Violet waved both hands then lowered them. Lady Silver was a bit irritated at being cut off mid-sentence as the tailor continued. "No disrespect, but I'm not even sure what the charge is about. I said, 'let's forget this ever happened' because, well, I wanted to. So, I deny the charge."

Rebecca Wolfe uttered a noise of disgust at the incompetence, arms folded.

“Forget? A life was lost. A child missing. You would deny this? And simply forget it?” Lady Silver asked in confusion.

"Why, yes, darling. Simply forget it happened. Too many bad experiences in the past. Look at Rebecca, Willow, and Paige. They never forgot, and the whole forest experience has been eating them up alive. I'm a tailor, darling." Violet placed a hand against her chest. "Not some master conspirator, manipulator, or anything of the sort. After witnessing yet another tragedy, I simply want to forget it. I said my words to Avril's corpse, even if she might not hear them. Not to mention I've realized all my cold sweats are from remembering...goodness, it's terrible. Look at the perspiration I've gained just by being up here. Simply terrible, darling."

The nobles looked from one another. Some weren't sure what to make of this.

"An odd defense," Lady Silver tilted her head. "A life without remembering anything, and having nothing to care for, would be a blissful life. Ignorant but blissful."

"Too blissful, I know. I wish to forget but, alas, I cannot. Even in this trial, I'm not allowed to forget," Violet sighed. Claire watched as the others in the group did, feeling the tailor was onto something there.

"There's also charges of resisting arrest, intimidating an officer, and...threats to burn him alive?! Should we forget these as well?" Lady Silver asked with seriousness in her tone.

"I deny those charges as well," Violet raised her finger. "On the grounds of...um...Simon was annoying me."

Queen Angelica put her head in both hands followed by a long sigh.

"Come now, I said I was a tailor, not a lawyer." Violet looked to Queen Angelica hearing the sigh. "Wasn't even offered one despite my asking."

Lady Silver lightly rubbed her temples. "Let's move onto the next charge."

"Why, of course, darling," Violet agreed, wiping sweat from her brow.

"Charge number...! Um...five was it?" another noble tried to shout from Violet's right but lost count, looking over their papers.

Lady Silver ignored the confusion and read from her paper aloud. "Miss Violet, on national television, and during an important ceremony, you disturbed the incantation with...a song. A song we had thought been erased from time. One we, ourselves, did our best to erase. For what reason did you sing this rebellious and treasonous song. Where did you learn it?"

"You know, it's a curious thing," Violet spoke, tapping her chin in thought. "I know part of it is because I desire things to be better in life. Why have a need to forget tragedies, as even I keep trying to do, when we could simply make life better and prevent them from happening? This I wondered for a good bit far into my nights at the boutique. The song was an answer to that, and it felt good to perform it. I also sung it for my friends buuuuutttt..."

Violet slowly turned her head momentarily to see Rebecca giving her the middle finger, promptly looking forward again. "It has gone unappreciated. A dear friend had a talk with me earlier and reminded me of the other reason. That is to say...protect my family and friends. It's what I've always done and strive to do. That's why I pulled the group together in that forest because...even if they fight me now...I still consider them my friends, like family too in a way. I sang the song as a declaration that I will do what needs to be done to protect my family and friends, seeking a better future. Much like Erika showed me, bless her soul, wherever it is."

"...What?" Claire blurted out, greatly confused.

"Erika? Erika Diamond?" Lady Silver said slowly. "The Maiden of Defiance?"

Lady Silver stood up from her seat at an alarming speed. "I see now. How you learned this song. How you know that name. It was the Stone of Virtue, wasn't it?! You are able to tap into the memories, aren't you?!"

"Maiden of what...?" Claire tilted her head overhearing this exchange alongside the others.

Vulpus sat up, stretching. "Can we go now?"

"The Maiden of Defiance...?" Violet blinked in confusion but then came to a realization. "...Oh, um, yes, I have seen the memories and know the truth."

"I see," Lady Silver said slowly, bringing a hand to her chin in thought. "Hmm, very interesting."

"Is there a problem, darling?" Violet tilted her head.

Claire had no idea there were memories inside the Stones. The younger sibling made hers appear, poking it. But then the Stone glued to her finger and wouldn't let go. Claire yelped and flailed. Vulpus tried to get it off of the younger sibling without luck. This event caused Josie and Paige to quietly laugh a bit, covering their mouths to not cause a disruption to the trial's proceedings as the judicial guards observed them from the doorway.

The younger sibling, Claire, relaxed a bit letting the stone rest in the palm of her hand. Pondering whether or not these stones actually had memories in them, suddenly some were offered to the girl.

"...Melody?" Claire asked no one in particular at the memories she was given. A weird sensation ran along her skin like an icy wind causing her to shiver. Vulpus offered warmth asking if she was okay. With a nod, Claire and Vulpus both returned their focus to the front to watch the trial's proceedings once again though the younger sibling felt a bit uneasy running that name through her mind a few times.

Lord Amethyst stood up from his seat gesturing to the other noble with a graceful hand. "May I take the floor, Lady Silver?"

Lady Silver looked to the man then nodded, assuming her own seat once more. Violet turned her gaze from Lady Silver to Lord Amethyst.

“Miss Violet Diamond, it is a rare feat to be able to connect so deeply with a Stone of virtue,” Lord Amethyst spoke in a normal tone. “You must have a sharp mind and incredible will power to be able to stare into the abyss of knowledge these provide.”

"Why thank you, it's been causing many nightmares, but I'm managing," Violet smiled.

“An expected outcome,” Lord Amethyst remarked, waving his hand in a whimsical manner. “Most who stare too deeply are driven mad by the Stones of Virtue. Knowledge can be great, but it can also be a bad thing as well. Too much knowledge all at once will only cause pain.”

"How many have gone mad from this?" Violet asked curiously.

“Difficult to say,” Lord Amethyst simply responded.

"Were the stats not recorded?" Violet poked the side of her head.

“Oh, I’m sure they have them written down somewhere. I’m sorry. I’m not prepared with the stats at the moment,” Lord Amethyst remarked. “Let me say this, Miss Violet Diamond. The Stones of Virtue are Mezmaria’s greatest treasure. They are also bringers of great misfortune. Those who wield the stones are able to do much. However, there is always a cost to their use. The closer one gets to the stones, the more pain they bring. This is the reason the stones are distrusted. They are scarcely used and mostly as a last resort. We have made it our goal and mission to limit the Stones’ uses so that those who wield them aren’t completely broken. That is why we have the Reclamation Ceremony to begin with. It is to ease the pain and allow those who served to return to their lives. For this reason, we humbly ask that the stones be returned. That we are allowed to sever the connection between you and them.”

"What if I simply refuse to give up the Stone?" Violet asked curiously. The grinding of Rebecca’s teeth could almost be heard when this was asked.

“What reason would you need to have it?” Lord Amethyst asked in a calm tone despite the other nobility expressing aggravation on their faces.

"Because a danger is still looming out there. I can feel it in my heart," Violet answered honestly. "To ignore Erika in her pointing it out in those memories would be foolhardy."

“A valiant effort for sure but, with one of your members deceased, the Stones must be returned for they are at less power than before regardless,” Lord Amethyst said trying to reason with the tailor. “Without the seventh bearer, it’s hard to say what could happen to the stones. Right now, the stones must be disconnected from you and your fellow members so that they may strengthen once more with new Bearers. I’m sorry.”

"Hmm, yes, I did feel a drop in strength when Avril...well, left us. Be that as it may, I am going to refuse giving the stone up for now," Violet waved her pointer back and forth. Despite the growing anger toward the tailor in the room, Lord Amethyst was rather calm in his approach toward her.

"I had a feeling you’d say that my l-“ Lord Amethyst paused for a moment. “...Oh...um...hmm...”

"Something the matter, darling?" Violet asked with concern.

"Oh, just a memory of something..." Lord Amethyst said gently.

"This trial has gone on long enough," Lady Silver remarked from her seat, growing agitated. "I already know what the verdict is...So, with that in mind, let's move forward. Now, miss Violet Diamond, here's your verdict."

"Not guilty, yes?" Violet asked with a hopeful look. Rebecca facepalmed in aggravation.

"Lord Amethyst and Queen Angelica have plans for you, Miss Violet. But in all things, you are of course...guilty." Lady Silver banged her cane down like a gavel. Violet sighed hearing as the woman of nobility addressed the others in the courtroom. "While the rest of you may leave, Miss Violet and her family are to stay. The sentencing will be carried out from there."

"Drat," Violet snapped her fingers.

Rebecca, Paige, Willow, and Josie took their leave. The Mezmarian Nobility left through the back. Lady Silver was the first to leave, Lord Amethyst, then the other nobility.

"Violet," Queen Angelica spoke up once the others had left the courtroom. "I can understand your woes, however I cannot allow the Stones of Virtue to be separated. The stones are like batteries. They need recharging. They will choose bearers again later and, likely, they will choose new hosts. I hope you will understand this."

"I do not. It is not a battery but a stone. My vision isn't that blurry albeit I might need glasses in the coming years," Violet blinked. "Rather sure it's a stone."

"You know what I mean," Queen Angelica chuckled. "Don't get sassy with me. Once the stones are ready again, it's possible they'll choose you again. But they need their rest as well. As do you."

"I'm rather sure the stones don't need rest considering how they encompass their strength and build upon it...but...Okay, well...if Queen Angelica says to do so, then I'll abide," Violet smiled, giving in.

"Thank you, Violet," Queen Angelica said earnestly. Violet nodded and was now willing to separate from the stone.

Richard Cross came into the courtroom with a box and some guards. "Sorry, Violet. But please present the Stone."

The man presented the box to Violet and Claire. The other stones were already in the box. The tailor had to struggle quite a bit but got the stone off her hand with gritted teeth. The stone was then seen trying to roll out of the box as were the others. Claire was next and had some difficulty, too, but to a lesser degree as she was the only one bearing a stone at that moment. The action of simply putting the stone in the box without any spell made Violet wonder more about the ceremony beforehand. Vulpus eyed the rolling rocks wanting

to bat at them. Fighting everything in her body not to. One of the stones seemingly barked at Vulpus causing her to yelp and hide behind Claire.

Richard closed the box then looked at Violet. "Sorry again for your loss."

"Avril was a great friend, Richard," Violet softly smiled.

"Yeah..." Richard said as he escorted the four to the main hallway. "At least it's over, right? No more mimics, no more stones. You're free. I'm free. We're all free."

"I've said it, too, but really there is a couple of mimics alive still," Violet noted.

"More than Virtuous?" Richard asked with a confused look.

"Roxxy," Violet pointed out.

"Dead," Richard remarked. "Decayed into nothing but ashes like the others."

"I...oh..." Violet looked downward.

"There are no mimics left, Violet. They've caused us nothing but heartache and pain. Good riddance, too," Richard said as his expression hardened.

"Some of them had good in them, Richard. Surely you must see that," Violet pleaded.

"Which one?" Richard said, slowly growing aggressive, now looking at Violet. "Name me one. One who wasn't a human beforehand?"

"Why, Virtuous, I...suppose. I...think. Could never fully tell, but he did assist us in that final fight with his own mother," Violet thought about it.

"That psychopath?! He hunted us down! Chased after your sister! He even tried to turn her into a mimic!" Richard began to shout. "You're talking nonsense again!"

"I do despise him for that, darling. Don't get me wrong. But he was following orders as was Sunny. You know this. If it weren't for Pandora Black, maybe they'd had been better," Violet said trying to encourage the thought and calm Richard. The tailor then thought about it realizing he was, indeed, a psychopath.

"Violet don't be absurd. Virtuous was-" Richard started until interrupted.

"-Executed." a familiar voice interjected. Violet, Richard, and the others turned to find Lady Silver with several of her guards nearby.

"He was what...!?" Violet said, a bit flabbergasted, looking to Lady Silver. "Y-you didn't...! He's the last of his kind! "

“That’s why I said there aren’t any more mimics,” Richard remarked, starting to walk off with the box in his hold, heading to the Mezmarian Treasury.

“The beast was dealt with before it could cause any more harm,” Lady Silver nodded proudly.

"He was a living creature! Richard! You know this is wrong!" Violet pleaded with outstretched arms. "What harm was one mimic going to do!?"

“One of the more powerful ones, Violet,” Richard spoke while still walking away. “He was the offspring of the most dangerous being we faced in recent wars. We weren’t taking any chances.”

Violet was thinking on what to say but was too shocked and saddened. The tailor and the others spotted a noble standing off in the distance down the hall, a man in a golden pinstripe suit. The man closed his eyes almost in disgust then walked off.

“Leaving so soon, Mr. Gold?” Lady Silver called out to the noble. The man turned back but said not a word for a long while then took his leave once again. Violet looked to this 'Mr. Gold' as Lady Silver smiled and said, “Poor, Mr. Gold. Still hasn’t gotten over it. Even now.”

"Gotten over what?" Violet asked curiously.

“Oh, curious huh, miss tailor? It involves you, after all,” Lady Silver smiled darkly, turning her gaze to Violet. “When I say you, I mean you, and your adorable little family.”

"Not sure what I did this time, but I assure you it was not mean-spirited," Violet raised her pointer.

“You killed his daughter,” Lady Silver chuckled lightly. “If that wasn’t mean-spirited then I guess you enjoyed it.”

"I did what now?" Violet blinked multiple times. "I deny this charge."

“Oh, another charge you deny, huh?” Lady Silver poked Violet in the ribs with her cane. “I thought as much. Does the name Danielle Gold ring a bell? A spoiled brat who stole her daddy’s robotics?”

"Certainly, that name rings a bell. She and Sophie were traitors to our country in joining Pandora Black. We put a stop to them as we did the other traitor, Antonio," Violet remembered.

"Dani sided with Pandora Black and nearly got everyone killed...including herself. ...She probably could had still be healed, but I don't think Sunny would be so willing to help after an execution," Claire chimed in.

“Correct. Danielle Gold and Sophie Silver were indeed traitors. And the world is a better place without those traitors. Same with Antonio,” Lady Silver nodded with confidence.

"Guess we're agreed then," Claire shrugged.

"I'm not saying I like the thought of children dying, though. It's just...the two were...quite aggressive," Violet sighed.

"I've known Mr. Gold for quite some time. He was a cold man. Never even spoke of his child. Then she goes and gets herself killed. He hasn't been the same since," Lady Silver said, rapping fingers on her cane. "When my daughter turned traitor, I abandoned her immediately. A traitor is a traitor, after all. Then again, I guess his legacy might be in jeopardy now. Maybe that's why he has fallen so low? Unlike him, I've still got a few spares and can always have another if they fail as well."

"Children are not objects to throw away willfully, miss Silver," Violet furrowed her brow.

"Children are made to extend one's line. Should they fail to do so, they are nothing but trash," Lady Silver replied darkly.

"...You're a bit weird, aren't you?" Claire tilted her head.

"I certainly hope that rubbish was not taught to you by your own mother," Violet crossed her arms.

"Taught to me, and my children are taught the same. Survival of the fittest," Lady Silver said as she started to walk off with her guards but stopped short. "Oh, one more thing before I go. It's about that mad girl. The one called Hayley."

"What's become of Hayley?" Violet asked with concern.

"Admitted to a mental pris—I mean institute—where she will live out the rest of her days," Lady Silver remarked coldly.

Assuming she's away from knives, Claire figured that's probably for the best.

"Why would you...? Sure, she acted out too much but...well, I suppose she'll not try to hide inside someone's corpse like a fort and declare she's peaceful while in there...I hope," Violet pondered.

"From what I've heard, they had to move her into maximum security after an incident," Lady Silver said. "There's a lot of questions asked. Like how'd she get out? Where did the bear come from? How did she get a bear into a five-story building...just a lot of questions..."

"Sounds like her," Claire shrugged.

"Sounds about right," Violet nodded.

"I figured as much," Lady Silver remarked, looking at Violet and Claire with disgust. "It's just like citizens of Vanillaville to act like trash. Well, miss tailor, and your little family, I bid you all farewell. Let us not meet again."

Violet waved as Lady Silver left but now annoyed.

“That lady is weird,” Vulpus commented. Claire agreed, ready to go home.

"Time to head home," Violet sighed with relief, heading for the exit.

“Sorry to burst your bubble,” a woman said as she came out from a door behind them, looking the Violet and the others over. “You’re not done yet. I’ll be escorting you to Lord Amethyst’s office.”

"Drat," Violet snapped her fingers wanting to escape the building, sighing, then following the woman.

“I’m commander Janet Jade. The war commander of Mezmaria,” the woman said.

"Mrs. Jade?! You're a mayor and a war commander!?!“ Violet gasped.

“You met one of my sisters probably,” Commander Jade said.

"Oh, I see," Violet tapped a finger to her chin. “You look alike.”

“I’m one of the six Jades of Mezmaria,” the woman, Janet, remarked.

"Do the other four look like you and your sister, by chance?" Violet asked curiously.

“Probably,” Janet shrugged. “I don’t talk to them much.”

"Wait a tick, why wasn't Claire put up front?" Violet asked curiously

“Cause she’s still a minor, I’d imagine,” the commander nodded.

"Front of what?" Claire asked, confused.

“You wanted Claire to be tried on the stand, too, sister?” Eve asked, having been silent for a long while.

"No, no, I was just wondering. But that makes sense," Violet blushed.

Janet expressed confusion at the tailor’s words then started to lead the four to Lord Amethyst’s office into a waiting room nearby. “This way, please...Mr. Amethyst will call you in shortly. He’s in with another at the moment.”

When Violet and the others were in the waiting room outside of Mr. Amethyst’s office, Janet took her leave.

“You can wait on the sofa or chairs over there,” a voice said from a nearby desk they didn’t see before.

Looking over, Violet and the others found a woman with her hair tied in a bun and wearing glasses. She also looked like Mrs. Jade, mayor of Vanillaville.

“...Getting the feeling Amethyst only employs Jades...” Claire whispered.

"Hmm, deja vu..." Violet tapped a finger to her chin. The tailor moved to sit on the sofa with legs crossed. Claire, Eve, and Vulpus soon joined her.

"Normal enough at this point," Claire remarked.

"Mayor Jade was part of a big litter, huh?" Vulpus tilted her head. The secretary Jade lowered her head going back to her work. When the secretary had her eyes turned away, Violet slowly got up to try and get a listen in on the conversation within Mr. Amethyst's office while Claire, Eve, and Vulpus observed her actions.

"...and I've told you the forest is dangerous," a voice said within the office.

"It's the last I'll get to for an entire year! My little traveling companion and I are up and ready!"

"Be that as it may...the school season begins in only a few months and..."

"Have no fear, we'll be back before you know it!"

"...I have others I need to speak to...we'll discuss this further afterward."

Violet couldn't discern one voice from the other, who it belonged to. But the tailor could now hear footsteps coming towards the door, rushing to sit down on the sofa.

The doors to the office opened and a young woman with blonde hair stepped through. She stretched a little carrying a little white rabbit with red eyes in her arms. Mr. Amethyst followed behind the two, catching sight of the tailor.

"Ah, Miss Violet, you're here," Mr. Amethyst said with a smile. "And your little family as well."

"We never left," Violet tilted her head in confusion.

"True," he chuckled.

The woman carrying the little white rabbit with red eyes zipped over, looking Violet and Claire over but stopped and scurried back when seeing Vulpus. As she did, the two siblings could see bunny ears pop out from the sides of the woman's hat. "No way! A kitsune! Caught me by surprise, for sure!"

"What is with everyone looking us over so much? It's a bit creepy at this point. Vulpus, do you know this lady, honey?" Violet asked curiously.

"No, but she's a bunny person," Vulpus said, pointing to the ears.

"Sorry about that. Didn't mean to get nosy. Just a tad curious. Oh, I almost forgot," the bunny woman said before clearing her voice, pulled her hat off, and took a bow. "Name's Jessica Wright, famous explorer."

"Oh, yes, forgot my manners too..." Violet returned the bow with one of her own. "Pleasure to meet you, Jessica Wright. I am Violet Diamond."

"Ooh, Diamond, huh? Beautiful! Oh, this little guy in my arms is my little cousin and junior explorer!" The woman raised the white rabbit with red eyes upward as it fidgeted.

"What is the sweetheart's name?" Violet asked with a smile.

"Chester..." She paused for a moment as the little white rabbit slowly waved a paw. "...Darklight. Don't let the last name, get ya. He has nothing to do with that evil wizard or whatever."

"Wouldn't have until you said it," Claire remarked.

"Quite a pleasant name," Violet smiled looking at the little white rabbit, Chester.

Chester's nose twitched, but he resigned to say nothing.

Jessica Wright thought for a moment before chuckling lightly looking at Claire. "You got me on that one. You're bright. What's your name, dear?"

Claire slowly backed away from the strange lady.

Jessica pulled her cousin in for snuggles. "Seems I intimidated her a little. That's okay. Sorry to trouble you, little miss."

"You may go, miss Wright. I have several things to speak to them," Mr. Amethyst spoke up.

"Right, right. See ya in a bit, I suppose," the woman said as she carried the little white rabbit away.

"B-but I was thinking on a prank for them..." Chester finally said as he was carried away.

"Another time, another place," Jessica said as she pulled out a carrot and ate it.

The carrot was a fake. The little white rabbit hopped out of the woman's grip with glee. "Got you! I replaced all your carrots with fakes! Ha ha!"

The rabbit woman gasped and started chasing him out of Violet and the others' view. "Hey! You little trickster! Get back here!"

Mr. Amethyst beckoned Violet and the others into his office. "Follow me, if you would."

Violet blinked in confusion but was ready to follow Mr. Amethyst. "Strange..."

Claire made a mental note that everyone here was weird, and she doesn't want to deal with any of them. Violet and the others were led into a massive office. The window in front of them had a view that oversaw

all of Perfelot. There were chairs, a sofa, and Mr. Amethyst's desk. Above the man's desk was the mounted head of a snake larger than any the four had seen before.

"Make yourselves at home. We have a bit to discuss," Mr. Amethyst addressed them as he made his way to his desk.

Violet looked up at the snake in curiosity. "If it were to be made like home, you might have a window or two broken soon, or everything set on fire. Whichever comes first."

"Kids can be a handful," Mr. Amethyst agreed. "My son, when he was young, would punch puppies just because his mother said it'd make me mad...Hmmm...that's not quite the same...but I digress..."

"That sounds horrendous," Violet grimaced.

"Very," Mr. Amethyst nodded. "Getting back on track. Miss Violet Diamond. Outside of the month of civil services you're already in for, you will be under house arrest for the next year. And you will be part of something the nobles have in store."

The man stood up peering out of the window to Perfelot before continuing. "The nobles have plans to build a new school building in Vanillaville. And you will be one of the building's teachers. When you are not at the school, you will be in your home, or your place of business. As was the sentence the nobles and the Queen decided upon. To be fair, that is better than what they originally wanted for you. Honestly, they wanted you to be chained to the desk."

"A teacher? But I already have a job in tailoring..." Violet had a confused look but additional worry in the nobles' other desire to chain her to a school desk.

"And that's what you will be teaching," Mr. Amethyst spoke with affirmation. "You've gained their ire, and they want to keep an eye on you."

"Never thought I'd see the day that a teaching position was a form of capital punishment," Violet played with the thought.

"Is that supposed to be the 'civil service'?" Claire asked.

"Well, it was either that or have a guard at your side for the next two years. Someone named Simon," Mr. Amethyst remarked. "By the way, it was Queen Angelica who came up with it."

"Goodness, no. Keep Simon away from me lest I do something hasty," Violet frantically waved her hands back and forth.

"Simon?" Claire tilted her head in confusion.

"The woman who was just here has been asked to be a teacher as well," Mr. Amethyst spoke, looking out the window upon Perfelot.

"I see," Violet nodded. Claire now thought her older sister would be the only good teacher.

"Now that that is over with, I have a few questions for our nation's greatest magic healer and little Stone Bearer. I've heard some great things about you," Mr. Amethyst said, turning around to look upon Claire.

"Questions?" Claire thought they already went through what was needed.

"Oh, yes, Claire is amazing," Violet agreed. "Both of them."

"Is it true you were able to regrow Miss Ruby's limbs?" Mr. Amethyst asked in interest.

"Eve didn't find her arms until Josie was healed...I'm not sure what happened to those," Claire remarked, slightly dodging the question.

"So, it is true then," Mr. Amethyst smiled. "You didn't even have to reattach them. You simply regrew them. How fascinating. You have quite the gift. And you were able to revive the dead at times. The envy of all Vastria in my office."

"That reviving bit depends on how long it's been. The body that was upstairs not so much. If she was found sooner, maybe I could have," Claire said this with memories popping up where pretty much everyone died in the forest a few times.

"I see. That's very powerful. I'm sorry you weren't able to. The body upstairs I mean," Mr. Amethyst nodded lightly. "They say that once the silver cord is cut and severed, it can't be reattached. And the dead stay dead. I once knew a person who tried finding a way to revive another long dead. She did many things to achieve that goal...What an interesting turn of events..."

The man said this before lowering his eyes for a moment, looking to the side almost with a tinge of sadness. Claire saw this reaction with concern. "Are you alright?"

Mr. Amethyst reached under his desk pulling out a bottle of alcohol. "Oh, yes, my dear. Just a memory. Think nothing of it. You wouldn't think it because of my looks, but I'm actually quite old. I've been told I have an ancestor who may have been a celestial. Hard to really say. Anyways...would either of you care for a sip of a drink? I won't tell anyone."

"I don't normally drink, darling," Violet waved her hand. Claire didn't seem to understand what he was offering but still declined.

"You're better off without it," the man remarked as he poured a small glass.

"How often do you drink to alleviate stress?" Violet asked curiously.

"Not often. Just on occasion," Mr. Amethyst answered as he took a sip. "I'd like to say one last thing before we end this meeting, and you are allowed to go back home. If that's alright."

"That's quite alright. We're listening, though I believe Vulpus is sleepy...or bored," Violet looked over to see the tired kitsune curling up around a sleepy Eve.

"In my opinion, you miss Violet, are not a traitor," Mr. Amethyst mentioned suddenly.

Claire now thought he was cool as Violet smiled. The tailor nodded graciously. "Why thank you. I'm glad someone sees it that way."

"I know who and what a traitor is. The little Gold and Silver girls were not traitors. They were simply children influenced and tempted by dark forces who wished to use them for their personal gain." Mr. Amethyst picked up his drink, sipping it lightly. "You, miss Violet, are also not a traitor. A traitor does not wish for the betterment of her land but how to use it for their own self gratitude. Maybe you could have picked better ways to show it, but that's neither here nor there."

The man took another sip before setting the cup down. "My son, on the other hand...he was a traitor. A man bent on gaining power in any way he could. Antonio was an evil man, through and through, one the world is far better off without. His mother, you see, took him away when he was young and poisoned his mind. Twisting him into a greedy selfish man who would use anyone or anything to his advantage."

"Well, I certainly didn't want to remember Antonio so soon..." Violet crossed her arms.

"Neither did I but, comparing the two of you, it's fairly easy to tell which of you is a true traitor," Mr. Amethyst said in a sad but assured tone.

"He was rather evil, yes," Violet agreed.

"Well, I won't keep you any longer. Goodbye, miss Violet," Mr. Amethyst said, resuming to take up his drink. "And thank you, little miss, for our talk."

"Please do take care of yourself, darling," Violet bowed her head and turned to leave, looking backward.

"Goodbye," Claire simply spoke turning to leave, poking Eve and Vulpus to wake them up.

The man sat back in his chair staring out the window to Perfelot, longingly.

Vulpus stretched and followed them. Eve, too. The kitsune yawned and asked once outside the office, "Can we finally go home?"

Claire wanted to go home, too.

"We certainly can. Back to my punishment of teaching," Violet nodded.

"Huh?" Vulpus blinked. "What now?"

"Were you not paying attention when my teaching punishment was announced?" Violet giggled.

"They forced Violet into a career change as punishment. Give it a week. They'll come to confiscate all her sewing machines," Claire joked.

"Oh, that'll be too far. I'll fight them if they do so," Violet furrowed her brows.

"Oh no! Not the sewing machines! Those monsters!" Vulpus gasped.

"Will you have any time to use them?" Claire joked some more. Vulpus walked to the secretary and growled at her.

"Seeing as how I now have a whole class of children willing to help make certain clothing, yes, there'll be plenty of time to use them," Violet twiddled her thumbs in thought.

"I don't know...I've been to school and 'willing' is a strong word for it. Also, what you're suggesting is illegal," Claire noted.

"Miss, I think your child is growling at me," Secretary Jade said.

"It means you should feed her before she eats you to gain another tail," Violet noted.

"What?" Secretary Jade blinked. "That's not a thing, is it?"

"It most certainly is, darling," Violet smiled at the secretary momentarily. "Kitsunes eat on a full moon in hopes of gaining a tail."

The secretary sighed pulling out her lunch and offered it to the fox girl.

"Yay! Free lunch!" Vulpus cheered taking the meal happily.

"What do you say to the lady for this treat?" Violet smiled, patting Vulpus on the head. "No, not that! Thank her for the meal!"

"Why are you robbing a secretary?" Claire asked.

"Cause foods," Vulpus pouted.

"Claire, puh-lease. I do not need more crimes against me I need to deny," Violet sighed.

Secretary Jade started writing something down.

"We haven't even left the building," Claire slowly shook her head.

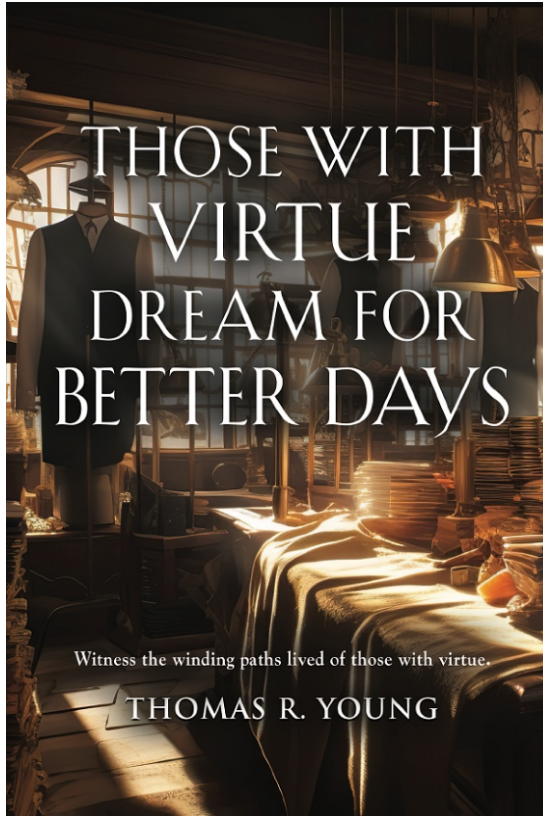
"What are you...What are you writing...?" Violet raised an eyebrow.

"...I'm going home now," Claire sighed, walking off.

The secretary slowly hid the paper.

“I think we should go...” Eve said slowly.

Violet grimaced and rushed for the exit. Vulpus yelped and scurried after the others. But we know who would take the fall for this one.



A continuation into the stories pertaining to Those With Virtue with Violet Diamond and others she holds dear.

Those With Virtue Dream For Better Days

By Thomas R. Young

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13108.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**