

The

Violet



Fox

CLARE C. MARSHALL

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Within

One

RUN. THAT'S what instinct told me. It whispered to every Freetor, warning us of the danger the surface people could bring. The Marlenians would try to strike us down if we were seen in public, or worse, if our thieving hands touched their market goods.

They would never strike me down.

"I count three men to the left, on the street corner. There are four more on the other side of the market." My brother Rordan adjusted his hood, revealing his grey eyes. "Are you ready to do this?"

I grinned. "Whenever the others are in position."

Rordan shook his head, gliding his teeth over his bottom lip. "Sis, sometimes I wonder if you have a death wish."

"There are only seven guards. I've been up against more."

"We only *see* seven guards. There are always more around the corner."

"Stop ruining my fun."

"This isn't supposed to be fun. You're taking it too far with this . . . getup."

Rordan gestured to the worn violet cloak that enveloped my thin form. I pulled the hood down over my eyes to hide my mask. Every time we came up to the surface together, he got annoyed at me for "making a public display." I was always getting in trouble with him for something or other, mostly because I had a short temper. But it didn't matter what he thought. What mattered was keeping our stomachs full.

I peeked from behind the barrels where we were crouched. A stone wall ran parallel to us five stone-throws away, separating the streets into perfect lines that met at the castle far to our left. Carriages ploughed through the peasants and beggars that dotted the streets. Small blue lights hung from the second-storey windows and encircled the Marlenian royal family crest: a sceptre topped with a white orb, shining the way through the stitched, pointy mountains on the violet fabric. Over the past few months, I'd stolen dozens of stitched crests just to create my cape.

Wrinkling my nose, I lowered my eyes to the vendors. Merchants who hoped for a few coins to feed their families called to the Marlenian peasants, brandishing their wares. To my people, their apples and bread loafs were worth more than metal dug from the ground. We lived among the metal. It was everywhere and easy to get. But when you live underground, far from the sun, food is a rare treasure. I thought about the thick slice of bread and the tiny crab apple I had eaten that morning. My breakfast could've fed a family of three, but I was allowed to have it for myself—one of the privileges of risking my life every day on the surface.

A small vendor selling baked goods and fruits had the most crowded stand in sight. I gestured to the merchant and Rordan nodded. This vendor was not sympathetic to the Freetors, so he was a fair target.

The seven Marlenian guards patrolled the area like a pride of large cats stalking its prey. I'd only seen a picture of a wildcat once, when I was small. It was a special treat from my father, who had found it during one of his trips to the surface. According to him, the Marlenians had hunted them almost to extinction, except in the North, where they lived in the mountains and preyed on travellers.

Sometimes I wished the Marlenians didn't know about us. It would be easier to live that way. Every day our numbers got thinner. Maybe someday, someone would draw a picture of me to bring home to his family, and he'd say, "Those Freetors, whatever happened to them?"

It was a little hard to see with my hood blocking my vision, but a small space in the crowd cleared. My eyes were on a giant basket filled with fresh bread. The aroma tickled my nostrils and reminded me of

my near-empty stomach. The basket sat on the ground next to the stand because it was too big. Approaching it from an angle, I glanced at the price tag dangling from a piece of string. For the same price as the bread, we could get enough food to feed a third of the Freetors in the Undercity. This made the unsympathetic merchants almost as bad as the Marlenian guards.

My friend Laoise was one of the runners today. She was disguised as a Marlenian middle-class errand boy. It was common for the nobles to have them—they were more reliable than Freetor slaves and they were fast, because if they displeased their masters, they would be disciplined. No one would question her as she escaped the streets with stolen goods, especially if she ran towards the castle. I nodded twice in her direction. With that signal, she casually strutted to the same merchant table.

The merchant was busy exchanging coins for goods and didn't notice as I slipped around the side of his counter. My hand hovered over the bread basket.

One of the merchant's customers, a burly man with a three-day-old beard, was gossiping beside me. ". . . and at the last address, could you see his eyes? They never left the sceptre. Every good Marlenian knows that he is not to be trusted. To think that the Holy One puts his faith in him . . ."

"Now, now, there's no need to question the Holy One's faith," the merchant replied as he reached under his counter for a bundle of apples and passed them to another customer, a lady on his right. "But I have heard rumours of the Advisor's . . . persistent behaviour lately. You'd think he was after the sceptre!"

Marlenian gossip. I knew I shouldn't care. All I had to do was close my hand around the basket handle and pass it off to Laoise—she would do the rest. But I was frozen, listening.

"Well, may his hands burn if he touches the Holy One's sceptre." The Marlenian scratched his head. "Then again, if the rumours are true, and he's as anti-Freetor as they say, maybe he should be holding the sceptre and ruling the lands. Damn Freetors, poisoning our children, stealing our food. I don't even trust the ones we have as slaves."

I gritted my teeth and wrapped my hand around the basket, slipping it between the folds of my large cloak. Marlenian lies were the only poison in the four provinces, and they infected everyone. Obviously he had never had to live underground for his entire life. I jutted my chin to Laoise, and she sauntered towards me. There were a few bundles of apples out front within reach. If I could just . . .

“You! Halt!”

I froze. Part of me wanted to run. I didn’t have to look to know that the merchant had his eyes on me. My hood obscured my face, and the violet mask that hid my eyes and marked me as the Violet Fox felt heavy on my skin.

“Uncover your face, or I’ll call the guards,” the merchant said.

Laoise slowed and pretended to be looking at something across the street. In a few moments, she would pass behind me, take the basket from my hands, and run. I only had to stall until then.

“Tees a ’orrid sight, Meester,” I said in a crackly, old-woman voice. “Tees one will get out of Meester’s way.”

“I thought the Holy One banned violet and purple cloaks from the market,” the gossiping Marlenian said. “Because of the—”

My breath caught in my throat. Damn it.

Before the man could finish his sentence and before the merchant could shout for the guards, I tossed the basket to Laoise and threw myself on top of the merchant’s counter. Apples and oranges dropped to the ground, and bread crumbled underneath me. I had to buy enough time for Laoise to escape with the goods. The merchant grabbed at me, but I swung my legs around and caught him between my thighs. He and the Marlenian citizens on the other side of the counter grabbed my upper body and pulled. The guards weren’t far away. I kicked the merchant. He flew back against the stone wall and sunk to the ground. Grabbing two apples, I threw them hard over my shoulders. I heard two of them hit foreheads, and the grips around me lessened.

I propelled myself forward, underneath the counter, and found an empty basket. I shoved everything I could inside it before two guards appeared on either side of me. They drew their knives, but I was faster.

I faked left and then dived right, dipping underneath and evading the guard's grasp.

Rordan was across the street, and so was my escape route, but the road was busy with frightened Marlenians and determined guards. With two guards at my heels, I leapt on top of the barrels beside the merchant tent and threw the basket full of fruit and other goods on top of the canopy. Some oranges fell out, but I grabbed them as I climbed. The merchant tents lined the stone walls, but I wasn't close enough to jump on the wall. Praying they wouldn't collapse, I leapt from tent-top to tent-top, looking for another runner to take the basket. Marlenian guards shook the poles that held the tents upright, but I was always one step ahead of them, onto the next top.

Finally, I spotted a runner: a lanky boy with a gaunt but determined face, wearing a violet strip of fabric around his head. He was looking up at me, watching my every move just like the guards. I leapt from the tent-tops and, in mid-air, threw the basket to the runner. The guards reached for it, but the Freetor runner was quicker. He jumped and caught it with both hands, and ran. I ignored the stabbing pain in my ankles as I landed on the worn gravel street. There was no time to pause. The basket was tossed to a few different Freetor hands before disappearing into the narrow Marlenian streets. A few guards broke off to chase the runners, but the majority stayed with me, the prize, the Violet Fox.

I probably wouldn't get away with another basket of fruit, not today, not until I shook the guards. One of them grabbed my cloak—Rordan was always telling me this would happen, that I should not leave things dangling for them to catch hold of—but I undid the ties at my neck and let the fabric billow over the guard's face. I slipped away with my smaller violet cape still wrapped around me. My survival instincts told me to leave the cape behind too, that it labelled me as the Violet Fox, but I couldn't bear to part with it. The large cloak fell beyond the guard and tripped up the horses. One of them whinnied and reared, blocking the other three guards chasing me. Struggling to stay on the horse, the guard shot me a death stare as I disappeared into an alleyway.

The Marlenian streets were a maze, filled with tall, narrow buildings and even narrower alleyways. I wove between them like a master seamstress, the map of the city burned into my mind so fiercely that even the more experienced guards began to question their whereabouts. They would bring my cloak to their superior, and that would be their accomplishment for the day—but the real prize would remain elusive.

I had to get to the safe point, but I got distracted just as I was leaving the merchant district. On a narrow street, a carriage was parked outside a pub—no driver in sight, but the pub was surrounded by houses and businesses. The sun was barely at its highest point in the sky, and the driver was already having his first pint. The horses smelled like they hadn't been taken care of in days. This carriage was probably bound for the slave trade market, further north.

I flipped my cape around to hide the violet fabric and darted for the back of the carriage. No guards in sight, not yet. A few Marlenians strolled down the street but paid me no mind. Even so, I knew they'd squeal as soon as the guards showed up. A barred gate kept my people from escaping the carriage. As I approached, I counted at least twelve. Children cried for their mothers and fathers, while the older ones—some old enough to be Elders—slumped against the walls, defeated.

I couldn't let them give up. I would not see my people enslaved.

The gate was locked, of course. I wished that I had the Elders' magic. Then melting the lock would be easy.

"Look," the woman whispered. "The Violet Fox."

My face flushed as they all scurried to the back of the carriage. I had to focus. I didn't look like a driver or a guard, so I'd have to hurry. I plucked a pin from my hair and worked the lock as a child wrapped his tiny fingers around the bar.

"Are you here to save us?"

"Yes," I said.

The boy wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "I knew you were real. My brother Pat said you were just some story, but he works in the South caves, and he doesn't know nothin'."

I cracked a smile just as the lock snapped open. “There.” A carriage was heading towards us, and I could feel Marlenians watching from their windows. We had to hurry. “Everyone out. Quick.”

The Freetors tumbled out of the carriage as the driver emerged from the pub. One of the Marlenians watching from the window above, too frightened to say anything before, spoke up.

“The slaves! They are escaping!”

“They aren’t slaves anymore!” I shouted. “Freedom for all, under the sun!”

I took off down the street as the freed Freetors scattered. They’d have to find their own way back underground. I hoped that Laoise or one of the other runners would intercept them, because right now, I had to make sure I didn’t get caught.

Even so, I flipped my cloak again. The chase wouldn’t be any fun if they couldn’t spot me.

I headed for today’s safe point. Safe points were chosen by the Fighters each morning. The Fighters guarded these entrances extra carefully—you needed that day’s password to get back in. People who tried to enter the Freetor underground through a non-safe point entrance were treated as hostile. Bad news for the Marlenians trying to find us and for any uninformed Freetor stuck on the surface.

Today’s safe point was in the eastern district of the city, which was home to the less-than-wealthy merchants, the blacksmiths, the bakers, and other Marlenians who made their living with their hands. The houses were two or three storeys tall with brightly painted shutters. Some of them even had plants hanging from windowsill pots. My stomach grumbled. I was almost hungry enough to climb up and snatch some flower petals. The guards were still teeming behind me somewhere, but I slipped into the darkness of an alleyway. The stones were smooth and cool against my body and offered a momentary respite from the chase. I closed my eyes and counted the seconds. I was not safe, not yet, but each second I counted was one second that they did not have me.

He was a whisper of wind on my cheek. I knew he was beside me, but I chose to ignore him until he spoke.

“What were you doing? You could’ve gotten caught!” Rordan scolded.

“Did Laoise get away?” I asked.

“Yes, she’s safe, and so is everyone else. Now c’mon, let’s get back before you stir up any more trouble.”

Horses trotted down the road beside us. A carriage decorated in deep blues and purples and gold with a large royal crest on the door caught my attention. They swiftly passed, heading towards the castle. My eyes jumped to the stone wall running parallel to all Marlenian roads. There was a ladder lying against it, beckoning me.

“Kiera!” Rordan hissed. “That is the prince’s carriage. We have to leave!”

The prince’s carriage. I wouldn’t dare pass up the opportunity. I scampered towards the ladder.

“What are you doing?” Rordan shouted.

“There might be something valuable in there!” Something that we could sell or trade on the underground market for silver, or food. My mouth watered.

“I doubt it! Get back—”

He trailed off. Sounds of horses galloping on the gravel and angry guards fast approaching drove me to hurry up the rungs. I snuck a glance over my shoulder. Rordan had disappeared. Fine, if he wouldn’t help me, I’d do this myself, and he’d thank me later.

Guards piled into the alleyway, pointing at me and shouting my street name. They started up the ladder. With the Marlenian guards nipping at my heels, I gripped the wall and balanced myself. The wall was barely wider than my foot. On the other side of the wall, the carriage wheeled through the commotion. More guards and concerned citizens gathered. Up ahead was another street that crossed this one, where the wall turned.

It was a narrow window, but I had no choice. I concentrated on the moving carriage as I ran on top of the wall. There was a canopy beside the fork where the wall ended. Without a second thought, I leapt onto the canopy and bounced off, flying through the air and landing on top of the carriage just as it whisked by.

“Stop the carriage!” the guards shouted.

The carriage veered hard to the left. I grasped the gold trimming as my legs flew out from under me. A footman riding on the back drew his short sword. I dove into a summersault to avoid his sharp blade. While the footman struggled to catch me, I scrambled to the front. The driver looked up and saw me and tugged on the horses’ reins. It was too late. I jumped on top of him. I wasn’t heavy enough to throw him off. Instead, I tore off a piece of my cape and blindfolded him. While he tried to free his eyes, he released the reins. I grabbed them and whipped the horses. They rode faster. The driver pulled off his blindfold, and I drew my knife and held it to his neck.

“Help! Freetor!” he cried.

“Who is in this carriage?” I demanded.

“Prince Keegan and his servants.”

“What about supplies?”

“This is a transport carriage. There is nothing of value.”

I hated when Rordan was right. The driver reached for me, and I scratched his face. He yelped, and I pushed him off the carriage.

More galloping sounds came from behind. The guards were catching up. I tied the reins to the edge of the seat and climbed back on top of the carriage. Ten guards on horseback were chasing us. I waved. They spurred their horses to ride faster. I flopped down on my belly and peeked through the carriage window. A manservant gasped in surprise. Before he could draw a weapon, I rolled over and dove feet-first into the carriage.

I landed in between two servants. The prince faced me. I’d seen him a bunch of times in the square, but never this close up. My heart was pounding in my rib cage. He couldn’t have been much older than me. Curly black hair framed his face in an almost feminine way. I could smell the soap he had washed with. It almost drowned my own stench. Recognition and fear crossed his yellow-green eyes. At the same time, we drew knives and pointed them at each other.

“How dare you attack my carriage, Freetor,” the prince said. His voice was thick with the regional accent: long *a*’s and hard *c*’s.

I laughed. “You Marlenians like to pretend to be brave and dashing.” My knife toyed with a gold chain around his neck, but I had my eye on a shiny brooch over his left breast. “Really, you’re just scared meat hiding underneath silk and gold.”

“And you’re just a filthy Freetor playing dress-up!”

I pressed the knife against his neck and felt the cold blade of his knife dig into mine. All I had to do was press a little harder, and the prince of Marlenia would bleed like my people had bled and join them, rotting in the ground.

“It seems we are in a stalemate,” the prince said. “Release me and leave, and I will forget this ever happened.”

“Give me everything of value that you’re wearing, and I’ll consider it.”

“You’re in no position to bargain.”

The two servants leaned away from me and shared looks of extreme terror. Balled into fists, it seemed like they wanted to fight, but were too scared to move. I twisted the blade pointed at Prince Keegan’s neck. “Neither are you.”

The carriage slowed to a stop. The guards shouted outside. I looked to the window, knowing I only had seconds to escape.

“My family will eat tonight,” I said.

I released the knife from his neck. The prince followed suit. The carriage door opened, and an angry, sweaty guard appeared. Smiling at him, I grabbed the prince’s brooch and tore it off his jacket. The servants seized my legs as I reached for the opposite door. I kicked free but lost my balance, and the guard sliced my arm. The brooch flew out the window. I screamed and fell forward. My weight pushed the door open, and I landed in the dirt.

“Seize her!” the prince ordered.

I was dizzy with shock. Something dug into my side. Thinking it was a rock, I rolled to avoid it, but the gold glint in the sun caught my eye. With my good hand, I tucked the brooch into my pocket.

“Well, well, the Fox is at it again.”

Guards pulled me to my feet. I still had the mask around my eyes, but I doubted they would let me keep that for long. The prince stepped out of his carriage, and the guards parted to make way for him.

“Give it back, thief,” the prince said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The guard yanked my head backwards and held a knife to my throat. “Perhaps this will refresh your memory.”

“I wouldn’t try anything if I were you,” I said. “There’re a bunch of Fretors watching us right now with crossbows. If you so much as scratch me, they will open fire on your precious prince.”

The guards exchanged glances. I kept my expression blank. Of course there was no one waiting to rescue me. In the underground, everyone helped their neighbours get by if they were trouble. Even when I joined the Fighters, I took the vow to put my personal needs second to the needs of the Fretor people. On the surface, that vow didn’t always apply. It was every man for himself to avoid getting captured. Because getting captured meant death, or worse, torture. And giving up the names of our fellow Fighters and information about our safe points meant we’d all die. Heroics were something only Marlenian women read about in their weekly gossip stories. I prayed that the guards were ignorant of Fretor customs.

“If you return the brooch, we will let you go free,” the prince said.

I couldn’t help raising my eyebrows. Let me go free? The guards mirrored my reaction. Wasn’t I the most wanted Fretor on the streets? Wasn’t the price on my head enough to feed ten starving Fretor families for a year? As if to prove his good faith, the prince held out his hand. The guards loosened their grip on my head but still held my arms tightly.

My eyes darted back and forth between his open palm and his face. If I gave up the brooch, everyone within three caverns of mine would starve. But I would be free to steal again tomorrow. Unless the prince was lying. His eyes didn’t waver from mine. They were different from the guards’. Less hardened. Sheltered. Green, speckled with flecks of gold. My teeth gritted as I realized that he probably didn’t worry about where his next meal was coming from.

One of the guards holding my arms kicked me in the shins. I couldn’t hold back a scream.

“You have nothing to say to the prince?” the guard said. “She

stares at you with such disrespect, Your Highness. I take it that she is declining your generous offer?”

“She was quite talkative in the carriage,” the prince remarked.

I ignored the pain in my leg. “This brooch, when sold, will feed twenty people, maybe more. I won’t give it up.”

“Any merchant showing sympathy to the Freetors is breaking the law. Perhaps you could enlighten us as to which merchants are helping you, and we might be lenient.”

Right. As if I would betray the few decent Marlenians sympathetic to our cause. All we wanted was to be free of Marlenian tyranny and have our own lands on the surface.

“I didn’t think she’d talk,” the guard said. “I would say that’s a no to your deal, Your Highness.”

“It would seem so,” the prince replied, heaving a heavy, sarcastic sigh. “Take her to the dungeons, then. I imagine she’ll feel right at home there, in the cold, damp underground.”

Marlenian dungeons hadn’t existed until fifty years ago. The prince’s grandfather—the previous Holy One—had decreed that if the Freetors wanted to hide in their filthy holes, he would dig one for them in the castle. The dungeons were said to be twice as deep as the Freetor caves and three times as cold. Light could not survive down there. It was also said that the whole underground was reinforced with half a league’s worth of stone, so a prisoner wouldn’t be able to dig himself out. No Freetor had ever lived to report what was really down there, and I certainly wasn’t going to volunteer for that mission.

I had another knife hidden in my boot. If I could only . . .

“Find the brooch,” the prince ordered.

Their hands slipped into my pockets, and out came the brooch. Twenty people’s meals in the centre of his palm. The guard handed it to his liege. My heart sank.

“Take her to the dungeons,” the prince said. “Alert the authorities and the business councils that we have apprehended the Violet Fox and that she will terrorize our streets no more.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the guard to my right said as he tightened his grip on my arms.

I resisted. There was no way that I was going to live the rest of my life in a dark dungeon. If I was going to die, it would be with a knife in my hand and a smile on my face—and I'd take as many Marlenian guards as I could with me. The prince, too, if I could.

One of the guards slammed me in the stomach. I doubled over again, but this time I took advantage of the opportunity. Grabbing the knife from the hidden compartment in my boot, I whipped up with a steady swing and slashed Prince Keegan across the lips. Like two fat worms, they split in two and oozed red. He screamed and fell to his knees in agony. Part of me wanted to watch him suffer, as he had made my people suffer, but Rordan's voice shouted from a distance, and it would be foolish not to heed his call. I slipped by the guards, rushing to help their prince, and followed my brother down a side street.

"You came back for me," I remarked.

"You're my sister," was all he said.

The Marlenian side streets had only foot traffic, so it was easy to lose ourselves in the bustle. More people were out than usual buying things from vendors that were tucked away beside and inside the buildings. Probably because of some Marlenian holiday that I didn't care about.

Rordan nodded to one of the vendors. Without looking down, he tilted his head to an alleyway off to the right. It wasn't wide enough for the two of us to walk side by side, so we slid between buildings with our noses scraping the opposite brick wall until the alleyway widened enough to accommodate a wooden door beneath our feet.

My brother bent over and rapped on the trap door. He muttered the day's password. After a few moments, the door popped open a crack. Two nervous eyes looked us over, and then two hands pushed the door open to its fullest. There was only enough room for one person to climb down at a time, and so I waited as Rordan slipped into the underground. Taking one last look at the sun as it shined precious rays into the small corner of Marlenia that I could tolerate, I gripped the ladder and descended into my home.

“Welcome back,” said a Fighter as we reached the bottom. Fighters were our version of Marlenian guards, but they did more than just protect the people. They made sure everyone had his or her share of rations and sometimes went on secret missions to the surface. That was why I had joined, at least. The Fighter gripped Rordan by the shoulder and smiled, and then nodded to me. “The goods you took were delivered to the Freetor families in need. Well done.”

“It was easy,” I replied.

I grinned, but inside I knew it wasn’t enough. Even if you combined the fruit and the bread I had taken, it would only feed about three Freetor families, if rationed correctly. I could’ve had the prince’s brooch. Another Freetor guard approached the first and whispered something into his ear. I took off my violet cape and rolled it up.

“Kiera,” said the second Fighter, “The Council of Elders has requested your presence in the Central Cavern.”

My eyes popped. My fingernails dug deep into the cape’s smelly fabric. Were they going to punish me for what I had done to the prince? Or reward me?

“Right now?” I asked.

The first Fighter nodded. “Immediately.”

Two

ONE HUNDRED ninety-nine years ago, a man named Alastar rose up against the Holy One, starting the war that would forever change the land of Marlenia.

Alastar had a gift that the Marlenians both feared and coveted—he could wield magic. Alastar presented his talents to the Holy One and offered his services in the name of Dashiell, their man-god. In exchange, Alastar asked the Holy One for lower taxes for merchants and other common folk. Back then, the commoners were so poor that some sold their children into slavery just to get their next meal. But the Holy One refused him. Magic was an unholy curse, meant to lead us astray, away from Dashiell’s grace and light, said the Holy One. He rallied the forces of Marlenia to strike Alastar down. But Alastar resisted, and others joined him: our ancestors.

While the Holy One wanted Alastar and his magic destroyed, some secretly wanted Alastar’s gifts for themselves. Alastar only entrusted his closest friends with the secrets of magic, and he made these few his apprentices. He taught them how to make objects float in mid-air and how to conjure lightning from the sky, and other spectacular things that you could only imagine. Those who joined Alastar’s cause only to learn his magic did not meet a happy fate. Our ancestors fought for one reason: to be free of the Holy One’s tyranny. Anyone who fought for any other reason was considered an enemy.

Thousands from around Marlenia joined Alastar's cause. And thousands died. Among the dead were the Holy One and his family. With no heir, the throne of Marlenia was ripe for the taking. Just when it looked like Alastar's men were going to win—just when it looked like everyone would be free of tyranny—another man rose to take the Holy One's place. Captain Killan Tramore took the sceptre from the Cathedral of Dashiell in the Grand Square and rallied his men. A surprise attack. Even Alastar's magic couldn't stop Tramore's rage—some say he was guided by Dashiell himself. Those who weren't killed were driven underground. They built tunnels and learned how to survive. But the Marlenians never learned how to use magic.

And now, they never would.

The flames from the Fighter's torch danced and threatened to lick the cave walls. Green moss, glowing in the orange light, grew around us. The summer weather meant a warm underground, but it also prevented us from lighting torches on the walls in fear of burning the moss, our one stable food supply. The entrance tunnel was long and narrow, sloping downward, and we walked one by one, manoeuvring around the occasional moss picker. Even if the pickers worked all day and night, the moss wouldn't feed every Freetor. Nor would we want to eat it constantly: it had a bitter taste and stuck between our teeth.

After many twists and turns, we came to an opening in the tunnel. The Great Cavern was the largest cave in all of the underground. Its walls, worn smooth by thousands of Freetor hands, sloped in a concave fashion almost two hundred arm-lengths above me. The tiniest hole at the top let in a speck of sunlight. It shone down in a perfect straight line. A few Freetor merchants showed their wares on matted and mouldy blankets, but the Great Cavern was nowhere near as busy as the Marlenian streets. The poorest of Freetors squatted beneath the line of sunlight, craning their necks to the ceiling, hands clasped in deep prayer. Some of the Freetors believed that the underground was protected by our exiled ancestors. No doubt the words on the praying Freetors' lips were a plea to those dead and gone. One of the women among them held a crying baby. She sang a song about green hills and children with full tummies, but a melody can't satisfy a child's hunger.

Their gazes were full of hope. One of the hungry Freetors reached for me, as if to ask if I had any food.

“You’ll get your share soon enough,” the Fighter said, brushing the hungry Freetor’s hand away.

They looked to me and saw my bunched-up violet cape. They knew who I was. I nodded, confirming the Fighter’s words. Meekly, they retracted their dirt-stained hands and returned to their prayers.

Rordan and I followed the Fighters through one of the passages, away from the Great Cavern. We passed by modest Freetor homes, one- or two-roomed caverns. Some had makeshift doors: cloth pinned to the dirt and stone. Some were open, showing the secret lives of my people. Nothing was a secret here. We passed by at least forty-nine; I lost count after that.

As we drew closer to the Central Cavern, the dirt on the walls became smooth stone and there were more and more cloths hanging from the walls, not just as doors, but as decoration. One was violet and gold and depicted a hand bursting from the ground, brandishing a spear. There was a story attached to the spear, and I could almost hear my father’s voice whispering it to me, but stories were only words. A spear would be better for the Violet Fox.

We stopped before a set of doors, the only wooden doors in the entire underground. The Fighters turned to face us.

“You are about to enter the Central Cavern, the place of the Elders,” the first Fighter said. “What is said in the presence of the Elders stays in their presence. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” I replied.

Rordan nudged me, hard. I cried out and rubbed my arm. “I mean, yes, clear.”

“Good.” His eyes turned to Rordan. “Because she is not of age, you may enter as her guardian.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. Great. Now I had to share my glory with my brother. I then felt ashamed at the thought—he had just saved my life. Rordan nodded at the guard.

From a pouch on his belts, the Fighter produced a small silver key. I watched, fascinated as it slipped into a hole beneath the protruding

door handles. He fiddled with it for a moment, and then there was a loud click. The Fighters each took a handle and pressed down firmly. The doors opened as they strode into the room.

It was a magnificent sight. The walls were made of smooth, carved stone like in the Great Cavern, but everything seemed to glow. Even the floors were smooth, and they were decorated in repeating tiles with violet circular patterns. I looked around for torches, but there were none.

But the greatest sights were the Elders themselves: seven Elders to make decisions on behalf of the Freetor people and to preserve and protect the magic that separated us from the Marlenians. But only six Elders were here today. They were suspended in the air on carved stone chairs. Each chair had a high back and was carved to look like an underground animal. Elder Mainchin sat upon the giant earth-worm chair. His salt-and-pepper hair grew in patches on his head, but maybe it was just styled that way. Next to him floated Elder Clancy, on the crouching badger chair, and his twin sister, Elder Cleena, on a chair shaped as an alert rabbit sniffing the air to the left. It was said that Elder Cleena had been chosen first to train with the Elders, but she had refused to be apart from her brother. Training to be an Elder was a lifelong commitment, and for half of that time, apprentice Elders were not allowed to speak. It made me think of what I would do if I was chosen to be an Elder. Be away from Rordan most of the time and not be allowed to speak? I didn't think I'd be able to do that.

To the right, Elder Trecia sat on a chair shaped like a fox—I smiled at this. Elder Trecia was younger than the other Elders, in the middle of her child-bearing years. Her face was round but her hands, sticking out from her oversized robe, suggested she had a smaller figure. Elder Garvan, with the groundhog chair, was thinner than a tree branch and looked twice as frail. He wheezed and hacked into his hand and breathed heavily through his mouth.

The chair at the end was empty and featured an oversized ant rearing on its back two legs. I stifled a laugh. Elder Raibeart was supposed to sit there. Perhaps he was busy training the younger Elders.

The centremost chair, and also the highest floating, was a large spider. It was the seat of the Great Elder Erskina, the oldest and the

most powerful person in all of the underground. The stone arachnid's legs wrapped around her frail body in a tight embrace, as if they were the only thing holding her there. Erskina looked as old as the stone in the walls, but she was nowhere near as smooth. Wrinkles lined every part of her face like the tracks that worms made in the dirt. I knew that some of the lines were scars from when she used to battle Marlenians on the surface. It was said that she could pick out a disloyal Freetor with a look and kill a Marlenian by blinking. She laced her fingers, reminding me more and more of a black widow crushing its prey as her dark, beady eyes evaluated my presence.

“Welcome.”

Her voice bounced off the cavern walls. It was gravelly but melodic. The two guards in front of us bowed. I was a little shocked to see Rordan bow too. I didn't know we bowed to the Elders. Then again, I had never been summoned by them before. I hastily followed suit.

“Rise,” Erskina commanded.

We did. The Fighters parted to each side of Rordan and I. “We brought her,” said the first.

There was a moment of silence. Not knowing if I was supposed to introduce myself, I stepped forward and forced a meek smile.

“You are Kiera Driscoll?” Erskina asked.

I gulped and nodded. “I am.”

“How old are you?”

The question startled me, and it took me a few moments to remember. “Uh . . . I'm fifteen. But almost sixteen.”

“She's not old enough yet, Erskina,” said Elder Trecia. I tried to hide my grimace.

“We do not have a choice,” Erskina replied, unlacing her fingers and gripping the armrests tightly. “We must take action.”

“If the information hadn't leaked—”

Erskina raised a skeletal hand to silence Elder Mainchin.

“What is done is done, and cannot be undone,” she said. “We must stop the Marlenians from destroying us before it's too late.”

“What happened?” I asked.

The two Fighters stared daggers at me, as if it were forbidden to speak. I swallowed my fear. Nothing could be worse than facing the Marlenian prince like I already had earlier that day. “I have the right to know why I’m here.”

Erskina’s beady eyes bored into my skull once again, but I didn’t dare look away. Instead of reprimanding me, a smile spread across her wrinkled, leathery face. “Yes, you do have that right.”

I glanced at Rordan. He was staring at his feet. I knew he disapproved.

“Over the past few years,” Erskina began, “the Marlenians have become more cunning and aggressive. They have denied us access to food, wood, and other supplies we need to survive. They’ve captured our people for slave labour. But nothing compares to what they have taken now.”

“What did they take?” I asked.

Erskina breathed deeply, looking up at the top of the cave. A faint blue light wafted in and drifted down the walls. She followed it with her eyes. As if by some secret order, the two Fighters left the cavern. The door banged shut behind them, echoing throughout the space.

“The knowledge of the ancients,” she said quietly. “Or, if you will, the origins of Freetor magic. When Alastar Allaway led our exiled ancestors to the underground, he vowed that the surface folk would never learn the secrets of our power.” She rubbed her forefinger and her thumb together daintily, producing tiny sparks of green light. “But he did want to ensure it was preserved among us. He wrote down his knowledge in a tome in a code that has now become common for the Freetors to interpret.

“Upon his death and the creation of the Council of Elders, it was determined that one of our sacred duties would be to protect Alastar’s Tome, as it is what every newly chosen Elder learns from in the Temple of the Elders.” She gestured to her right to a cavern blocked by a thick tapestry, where the young Elders in training mastered the secret Freetor magic in silence. “Alastar’s Tome is more sacred, more valuable than the life of any one Freetor.

“And the Marlenians have stolen it.”

My throat tightened. Every Freetor alive today owed their lives to the Elders—it was their magic that kept the Marlenians afraid of us, and it was their magic that protected us from any large-scale attack. If the Marlenians deciphered the secret to the Elders’ power, we would lose our only advantage.

“How is that possible?” I asked.

“Recently, a hunchbacked merchant entered the Great Cavern selling woven blankets and clothing. The patterns were full of bright colours, and his family name and colouring suggested he was from the Southern underground, and so the Great Cavern merchants welcomed him into their fold. Somehow he managed to sneak into the Temple of the Elders, undo the magic binds, and escape with the tome without being immediately detected.” She paused. “Our information suggests that there was someone working on the inside. A Temple Fighter, perhaps. Or a Freetor paid off by a wealthy Marlenian with promises of surface freedom.”

I was so angry I couldn’t speak. All this time, I had been trying to make a difference on the surface, to help our people, and then to be stabbed in the back by one of our own?

The folktales said that each Freetor had a drop of magic in his or her blood, and because the Holy One snubbed Alastar’s offer almost two hundred years ago, the Marlenians were cursed to always want but never have our magic. Magic was dangerous in the wrong hands, and that was why only those selected to be trained as Elders were allowed to know its secrets.

“Fortunately, we know the tome has not gone far,” Erskina continued. “Its pages contain special magic bonds, known only to the Elders. We feel its presence at the castle.”

“If you have special bonds to the knowledge, why didn’t you know it was being stolen?” I asked.

“Kiera,” Rordan hissed.

“That is what is most troubling,” Erskina replied, ignoring Rordan. She exchanged solemn glances with the other Elders. “We should have felt it. Because we did not, we suspect someone with knowledge of Freetor magic has undermined us.”

“Someone like . . . the Holy One?” I guessed. I’d always suspected that he knew more about Freetor magic than he should. The sceptre he carried had been kept in the mountain-embedded Cathedral of Dashiell long before the Tramore family reigned Western Marlenia—it was said that when Captain Tramore held it high above his troops, it was as if Dashiell spoke through him, inspiring the men to fight for their lands. That was the day we lost ours.

“His faith in Dashiell is foolish but strong, and his fear of magic is stronger. Some acolyte of the Holy One is responsible for this, perhaps. He is not to be underestimated,” Erskina admitted. “That is why we must retrieve the ancient knowledge before he has a chance to decipher our secrets.”

I pursed my lips. “And that’s what you want me to do.”

Erskina smiled once more. “Precisely.”

I couldn’t help but grin. This was the most important assignment in possibly all of Freetor history, and she was giving it to me. My galivanting around the Marlenian streets in a violet cape had paid off. It took every ounce of willpower not to jump up and down with glee.

The Great Elder’s smile disappeared. “There is one condition to your acceptance of the task, Kiera.”

I held my breath. “What’s that?”

“No matter how tempting it may be, you mustn’t read the knowledge. For if you do, we will know.” The other Elders nodded profusely. “You were taught to read?”

“Our father taught us both,” I replied. Pride swam in my chest. Not many Freetors could make that claim. “And I agree to your . . . condition.”

Anything to accept the task.

“Excellent. I hope this won’t be a challenge for you, *Violet Fox*,” Erskina said with a hint of amusement in her voice.

I bowed my head and smiled. This would be easy. Even a blind man could spot Freetor magic—if he was a Freetor.

“With your forgiveness, Great Elder, if I may ask,” Rordan said quietly, lifting his head, “how can I assist my sister?”

“Ah, of course, Rordan,” Erskina said, turning her dark eyes to him. “You will be her messenger.”

“Messenger? What do I need a messenger for?” I asked. “I go to the castle, get the tome, and come back. One day tops.”

The Elders chuckled.

“Such spirit you have, young Kiera,” Erskina said. “But I’m afraid you misunderstand the mission. This is not a one-day affair. I cannot have the Violet Fox gallivanting through the halls of the Marlenian Castle, as entertaining as that may be for you. You will stay at the castle, in disguise, and retrieve the tome.”

My mouth fell open. “In disguise . . . at the castle?”

“I hear you are quite the impressionist. And your knife skills, they are . . . accurate, as well?” Erskina’s lips were thin and bloodless as she smiled. “Quite a feat, for someone so young.”

I bowed my head in thanks as my cheeks heated. She had heard about today’s events with the prince. The prince. Me, staying at the castle. The prince would be there, and I would have to look at what I had done to him and pretend that I was not the Violet Fox. I tried not to think about that. “No one can, of course, completely replace the Violet Fox in your absence,” Erskina said as if she had just read my mind. “But there are plenty of willing hands to dip into Freetor pockets.”

“When do we leave?” Rordan asked.

“After the training. Elder Trecia will oversee the preparations.”

Elder Trecia stood and humbly bowed her head. “My apprentices will be glad to assist as well.”

“We will instruct you in the details of your castle identity tomorrow,” Erskina replied. “In the meantime, Kiera, do not return to the surface unless instructed. I cannot have you arrested.”

I hid my disappointment and nodded. So I was trapped underground, for now. A good trade-off though, for how much time I would be spending on the surface.

“That is all we require of you today,” Erskina said. “Safe travels, until we call upon you again.”

She waved her hand, and the doors behind us creaked open. Rordan and I bowed once more and left the Central Cavern. The Fighters escorted us to where the smooth-stone walls and Elder tapestries met the dirt-rock walls splattered with glow moss and then left to deal

with other business. From there, we made our way towards our home cavern. I bounced most of the way.

“Can you believe it, Rordan? Me, in disguise, in the Marlenian castle?”

Rordan snorted. I stopped bouncing.

“What’s the matter with you? Jealous?” I taunted.

“Hardly,” he muttered. He grabbed my hand. His eyes darted back and forth as he made sure no one else was listening. “I have something to tell you.”

“What?”

He looked over his shoulder again. I had never seen him this nervous. He brought his lips to my ear and whispered, “I think I saw the intruder who stole Alastar’s Tome.”

Three

MY MOUTH FELL open. “You saw what?”

Rordan pushed me against the cold, rocky wall. “I saw him.”

“Who was he? What did he look like? Was he really a Marlenian?”

“Yes . . . yes, he was definitely a Marlenian.”

“But the Elders said he acted like he was from the South.”

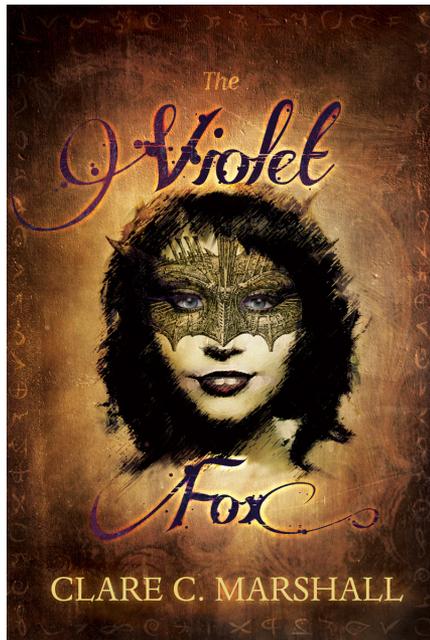
“Well, it wasn’t a good impression. His accent . . . it didn’t have that up-and-down flow that the Southerners have. But that’s not important. Kiera, he’s . . .” He struggled with his words, like they were stuck in his throat. “He was definitely the one who stole Alastar’s Tome.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you!” His voice was a heated whisper. “You would have blabbed to everyone. Your voice echoes the loudest in these caves, don’t I know it. And, you were busy on the surface. It was the day you almost had to stay overnight underneath a merchant’s stall because the guards were so furious—”

Three Fighters turned the corner, and Rordan quickly started telling me how I shouldn’t sleep under a Marlenian merchant’s tent in case I was found there in the morning and in case the Marlenian turned out not to be sympathetic to our cause. The Fighters nodded and smiled thinly to acknowledge us, and when they were out of sight, Rordan trailed off.

“I wouldn’t have blabbed,” I insisted, crossing my arms.



I hope you enjoyed this sample of THE VIOLET FOX!

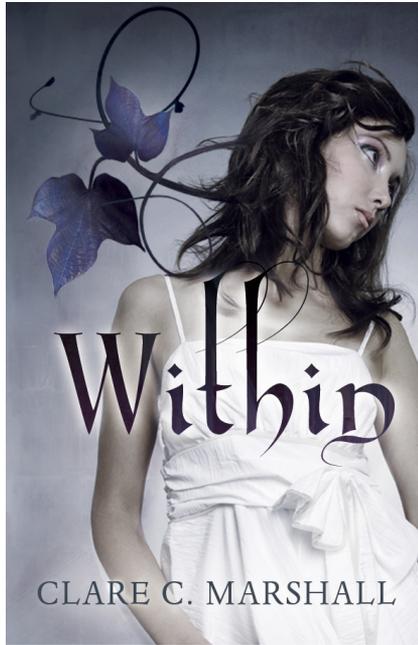
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Trinity Hartell's life changed after the accident. Left with irreversible brain damage, she becomes a burden to her mother, a cause for heartbreak for her boyfriend Zack, and a flattened obstacle for her jealous best friend, Ellie.

But then she starts writing. Perhaps it's a coincidence that the psychotic, murderous protagonist of her novel bears a striking similarity to the charming Wiley Dalton, a mayoral candidate in the upcoming election.

Or, perhaps not...

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