

The
Silver



Spears

CLARE C. MARSHALL

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The Violet Fox Series #2

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One

Run.

That's what I thought when the guards came towards me.

I strolled by, and they barely gave me a second glance. Good, my disguise was working. It hadn't been easy tracking down peasant clothes—it was harder to find them in the castle than in the underground.

Throng of people wove through the streets of Marlenia City. A purple cape with a generous hood—I could never escape the colour—almost completely covered my brown bodice dress as I dashed between the folk attending the bustling market. This was familiar. As the Violet Fox, a thieving icon inspiring hope for the Freetor people, I'd spent most of my time running from surface guards, all while trying to free and feed those forced to live underground.

That was in the past. Today I wasn't the Violet Fox. Today, I was Kiera Driscoll, future High Queen of Marlenia, just trying to hide my face while I met secretly with my future husband to quietly celebrate my name-day.

Our preappointed spot was an alleyway just off Deacon Street in the merchant district. I slipped between the buildings, relishing the feeling of being in the shadows once more. I leaned against the stone building and listened. Old habits returned: checking my hip for my dagger, shifting my weight to and fro to feel the familiar press of a hidden knife, and holding my breath for twenty seconds to adequately

hear my surroundings. I stalked the length of the alley, finding the tall stone wall at the end. Good. I was alone.

Until now.

I whirled around to face the intruder, immediately adopting a defensive stance. He reacted similarly—but there was no mistaking his form, even beneath the hooked cloak.

“You came.”

“I almost didn’t.”

Keegan pulled me close and pressed his lips to mine. I savoured his touch. How long had it been since we kissed? Too long. The politics of the castle kept us apart during the day, and when we did see each other, it was in the company of others. My hands explored beneath his hood. I enjoyed the feel of his dark curls between my fingers, and the hint of stubble lining his cheeks.

When we drew away, the white scar blazed stark against his red lips, and the guilt briefly settled within my stomach. I had given it to him when we first met. Fortunately we had taken a liking to each other since.

My gaze swept over his clothes. Although he didn’t wear his crown, he still wore the Tramore colours: blue and purple. “I thought I told you to wear something less respectable. We *are* going underground.”

“Sorry. This was the best—or the shabbiest—I could do. I can’t stay long,” Keegan said. Regret stained his green-gold eyes. He quickly took stock of our surroundings. The streets of Marlenia City were prone to greedy thieves who would stop at nothing to overhear juicy intel.

He gently pressed me against the wall and tucked my hair behind my ears. Anyone glimpsing into the alleyway would assume we were star-crossed lovers meeting away from judging eyes. It was partially true. He lowered his voice and nudged his lips against my ear. “Captain Murdock’s men have just returned from the Eastern border,” he whispered.

“What’s the news?”

“Some odd activity from High King Leszek’s men in Sallingaire. They’re planning something.”

My heart sank. Ever since the Gathering last month, relations between the West and the East had spiralled. The East had been more than upset when Keegan left their daughter, Lady Sylvia Frostfire, at the altar, choosing a Freetor over a Marlenian noble. Now they were refusing to trade with us, and causing trouble for the Western towns along the Eastern border.

“And the North?”

Keegan looked grim. “Still nothing.”

I hated not knowing. Even though the East had the largest army in the world, I was more concerned with the North, and in particular, Lady Dominique Castillo. I had impersonated her during my mission to infiltrate the castle, but during the pandemonium of the Elder murders underground, she’d escaped and exposed my true identity. She’d sworn revenge, yet all communication with the North had been quiet since. They were planning something, just like the East, yet whether it would be war or something more covert, I couldn’t say.

“Don’t obsess over it now,” Keegan said. “It’s your name-day, and we should celebrate. Before we visit the underground, I want to give you something.”

I frowned. “Keegan, I said no gifts.”

“And I said I’d think about it. I couldn’t *not* give you something. If you would’ve told me sooner—”

“It’s not a big deal.”

He caressed my face. “To me it is.”

His kindness was touching, but name-days weren’t something that Freetors often celebrated. Many didn’t even know the exact day. After my parents left on a raid and never returned, my brother Rordan raised me. My name-day, he’d said, was three months and ten days after the longest day of the year. On that day, we’d go up to the surface, not on Fighter business but dressed up in our fanciest Marlenian clothes, and visit a merchant stall sympathetic to the Freetors. He’d let me pick out a sweet that couldn’t be found in the Freetor underground. And we’d buy as much as we could afford with his secret stash of silver quid. Then sometimes he’d sneak me into a bar and I’d get a taste of

beer, or if the surface was too dangerous, we'd travel underground to the obscure caverns, as far as we could go in a day, and try to find the underground streams. They always had the freshest water.

But I didn't mention any of that. Rordan had been a sore subject between Keegan and me ever since he was put to death in the square a month ago. To stop my brother's death I would have had to reveal myself as a Freetor. And Keegan hadn't been able to do anything because the Holy One and the Advisor had already decreed his death.

The Advisor. My father.

That was something I didn't like to think about either.

"What's wrong?" Keegan asked softly, lifting my chin.

I chased away the dark thoughts with a smile. I wouldn't let my heavy feelings ruin my day.

"Nothing," I said, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Let's see this gift."

His cheeks coloured as he reached into his robe and produced a hand-stitched bag from an inline pocket. "It's only one of many things I'm surprising you with today."

"One of many! Keegan...!"

"You deserve it. Take a look."

He handed me the bag. It smelled faintly like the Marlenian market a few streets over—the earthy scent of horses, a whiff of freshly baked goods. The brown leather was smooth between my fingers. A single but sturdy clasp held the bag closed. Yellow lettering stitched small in Freetor code adorned the rim of the front flap. It had several side pockets, fastened with buttons, to keep silver and other small trinkets. I hung the long strap over my shoulder, letting it dangle to my hip.

"I love it," I said.

He grinned, and let out a nervous laugh. "I'm so glad. I spent hours there yesterday, trying to figure out what you might like. When I saw it, though ... " He fingered the yellow lettering. "Freetor code. I can't read it, but the lady said it wasn't anything offensive. What does it say?"

"*Freedom under the sun,*" I read, placing my hand over his.

“Something I used to say when Captain Murdock’s men were chasing me around the streets.”

“You’ll have to teach me how to read Freetor code,” he said. “I asked your father, but ...”

He trailed off, flicking his gaze to the nearby guards. No one was supposed to know that the Advisor was my father. Not yet, anyway. Ten years ago he’d become Ivor Ferguson, a Marlenian merchant from the East, and worked his way up the social ladder in Marlenia City by cultivating several local businesses. After he saved Keegan’s life in the market, he became recognized for his keen insight and was eventually offered the position as the Holy One’s Advisor. He did terrible, horrible things as a Marlenian, sentencing many Freetors to their deaths, just to keep his identity safe, hoping that he would see me and Rordan again someday. Somewhere along the way, though, he really became a Marlenian, and forgot what it was like to starve and live underground.

Sometimes I wished he hadn’t told me he was my father. It was better when I thought he was dead, when I could write to him in the magical journal he had given me before leaving me and my brother long ago, and create a better, kinder image of him.

I tried to smile again. “Yeah, maybe someday I’ll teach you.”

“Has he wished you a happy name-day yet?”

I twisted my lips. “No.”

“Oh. Maybe he’s planning something large for you.” His eyes were hopeful, even if his smile wasn’t.

“Maybe.”

Keegan glanced at the sky. It was growing late. “There’s something I have to tell you, but it can wait until later tonight.”

“You just had to tease me, didn’t you.”

“I have to keep the Violet Fox on her toes somehow.”

As I hid my smirk, we disentangled from one another and slid into the streams of busy Marlenians. I pulled my hood further over my face. I was used to traversing these streets with a mask. Now my features were known to almost everyone, as was my secret identity.

The entry point to the Freetor underground was just two blocks

up. I gestured to Keegan and he followed me once again into the shadows. His hood had blown down, revealing his face. I supposed it was inevitable, though inconvenient. I had hoped for the two of us to have a worry-free, private afternoon. Keegan could scarcely go anywhere without being surrounded by people with impossible demands or cloaked threats. I would have to be extra watchful of him in the underground.

A Fighter leaned against the wall, guarding the hatch that led to the network of tunnels. He tensed as we drew near, hand at the ready. Thin, dirty, and unshaven: but in his eyes was the unmistakable, focussed look of a threatened wild animal. *I am not your enemy, I am one of you*, I wanted to say.

I drew back my hood and cleared my throat. "Open the hatch."

Indignantly, he asked, "Why?"

"Because we want to go down," I replied, balling my hands into fists. I remembered when this used to be so easy. Now everything was different.

The Fighter searched my face, and finally, a spark of recognition lit his eyes. "You're the Violet Fox." He glanced at the prince. "And...Prince Keegan."

"Yes," I replied. "Today's password is *Don't lie down to sleep*." Laoise had generously supplied the words. They changed every day to prevent unwanted guests in the underground, which was more of a problem nowadays, now that certain curious Marlenians wanted to know what the underground was really like. I had encouraged some of the Fighters to let Marlenians—in escorted, small groups—down for a few hours, in exchange for a few pieces of silver. Anything to help our people make amends, and to kick-start the Fretor economy.

Reluctantly, the Fighter unlocked the hatch. I didn't like the way he was glaring at Keegan, so I let my prince descend the ladder first.

"So," said the Fighter, his tone gruff. "How long has it been, Fox, since you went to live with the Tramores in their rich castle?"

Don't get angry. It's not worth it. "Almost two months."

“Yeah? That seems like too long, if you ask me.”

“I wasn’t asking.” Keegan had almost disappeared down the ladder—his outline blended with the darkness.

“You promised us our land,” the Fighter continued. He took a threatening step towards me. “When are we gettin’ it, hmm? My ancestors used to own a few acres just south of Feenagh Forest. My mother used to tell me stories about the bounty of rabbits her great-great-grandmother would catch and cook for her brothers and sisters. ’Cause you should know better than anyone, Fox, that if we Freetors don’t get what we want, we take it.”

“That’s the old way. Do you even know how many Freetors there are, all trying to claim the lands their ancestors lost? Lots. And right now, we’re trying to figure out the fairest way to divide up the lands so that everyone is happy.”

“Everyone can’t be happy. That’s impossible.” The Fighter laughed bitterly. “Look at ’cha. In the castle barely a month and already you sound like them. Violet Fox has been choked by the Marlenian violets. The filthy Tramoses have—”

“That’s *enough*.” I drew a dagger from my belt and held it to his throat. “I won’t tolerate any more of this prejudice. We have to work together if we’re going to face the true enemy.”

“Kiera!” Keegan hurried up the ladder. His hand hovered at his waist where his own weapon was sheathed. “This isn’t helping. You know it.”

Yes, I did know it. This intolerant Fighter wouldn’t listen to reason any more than most. It was hard to make people see past their own problems, especially when they were used to only thinking about themselves.

The Fighter laughed at my dagger. Funny how only a month ago, if I had been wearing my mask and a cape, pointing a dagger at another Freetor could’ve gotten me a severe punishment. Now what did my dagger mean? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I was not to be feared, apparently. This made me angrier than anything else.

I sighed and retracted my weapon. “What’s your name?”

The Fighter narrowed his eyes. “Why? So you can cast your Freetor magic on me?”

“Freetor magic? Since when can I command that?” Now it was my turn to laugh. “Do you want your lands or not?”

“Kiera...” Keegan’s voice was full of warning now as he climbed out of the hole.

The Fighter looked suspicious. “I’m Brid Farrow.”

“Farrow. All right. When I get back to the castle, I’ll look up your name in the library and see what I can find.” It was a long shot, as many of the records about Freetors owning land had been destroyed during the war two hundred years ago. It was possible that he had distant relatives with a similar name who owned land, however. “You know, you can go to the castle library and look up anything you want. It’s available for anyone—”

“Can’t read, unlike *some*.”

“My father taught me to read, thanks. And it’s not like you’re not allowed to know how to read.”

“Yeah? Sorry for not being so privileged as the Fox.” He spat on the ground, next to my feet. “You know, there’s a rumour that you’re half-Marlenian. Sired by some rich noble. No wonder you took to the castle life so easily.”

“I’m *not*—!”

“All right, that’s enough. We’re just here to take a look at your home, and maybe the market. No one wants to cause any trouble,” Keegan said, casting a stern glance at the Fighter. “C’mon, Kiera, let this one go.”

I grumbled. I hated letting go of fights. I was winning. I would’ve won, especially if he had dared to draw a weapon against me. I guess if word got around that the Violet Fox had pointed her dagger at a Fighter guarding an underground entrance point, well, that would not be good for Marlenian-Freetor relations.

Keegan climbed down the ladder once more, and I followed. As soon as I was submerged in the darkness, the Fighter gripped the wooden trap door and smiled wickedly down at me. “Have fun getting dirty, *Your Highnesses*.”

“Have fun standing there all day by yourself,” I muttered.

The trap door banged shut, sending bits of dirt and clay flying down. I spat them out of my mouth and wiped my eyes. That wouldn’t have bothered me before. Maybe I was more like the surface folk—more than I realized.

At the bottom of the ladder, an ever-burning torch hung on the wall. Keegan took it and the flame sputtered, as if in objection to being held by Marlenian hands. Keegan raised his eyebrows, but the fire didn’t consume him. “Magic?”

“Possibly,” I replied. “There’s always at least one at the entrances, and they never seem to go out.”

“That would be useful for the darker areas of the castle,” Keegan noted.

“One step at a time. Freetor magic in use in the Marlenian castle? We’d better give everyone their lands first. This way.” I pointed down the passageway, which sloped down into a maze of tunnels.

“After you, my lady.”

I smiled wanly and carefully made my way down the passageway. The earthy smells were comforting, at least. My eyes adjusted to the darkness—if I still lived down here, they would have adapted immediately. I trailed a hand along the wall, and my fingers were tickled when they discovered a large patch of glowing green moss. It sprouted all over the cavern corridors, especially during the warmer seasons. I picked some and plopped it into my mouth, grimacing at the taste. Bitter as always. Yes, I really was spoiled at the castle. When there wasn’t enough food to go around, this moss made up a great portion of my people’s diet. Some older Freetors had horrendous green teeth.

I glanced back at Keegan, and picked some more moss from the wall. “Try some, if you want.”

His face was red and shadowy from the torch. “I...I don’t think so, thank you.”

I spun around, walking backwards down the slope. “You’re sure? It’s your first time underground—you might as well experience what it’s really like.”

Drawing in a deep breath, he turned his gaze to the green glow covering the left wall. “Very well, if you insist.”

After passing the torch to his other hand, he picked a clump of moss and bit into it. His face screwed up almost immediately as he dropped the handful to the ground. “Ugh. Kiera. That is dreadful.”

“You get used to the taste after a while,” I replied. I held out a hand for him to stop walking, and then bent down to pick up the moss. I put it into my pocket for safekeeping. Nothing should go to waste, not even the bitter green moss.

“I’m sorry,” Keegan said, touching the small of my back as we continued.

I shrugged. “Most of us don’t like it either, but for some, it’s all they have.”

“At least it grows in great quantities.”

We trudged in silence to the bottom of the slope, where I stopped to orientate myself. It only took me a few moments to map out the best way to my cavern. I guided us to the right. Fortunately the tunnels were quiet this afternoon. Maybe it was a market day, and everyone was in the Great Cavern, or up on the surface enjoying their new freedoms. I hoped it was the latter.

“Kiera,” Keegan ventured after a long silence. “That man, at the entrance. Do you really intend to go to the library on his behalf and find his lost lands?”

“I guess I said I would,” I replied. “We have to do this for every Freetor eventually.”

“Yes, I know, that wasn’t really what I meant. I was going to say...what he said about you, your ancestor being half Marlenian and that ...” He cleared his throat, and it echoed in the passageway. “That really bothered you.”

I wet my lips and turned a corner. “It bothered me that he was being disrespectful.”

“People will always say negative things about you when you’re in the public eye,” Keegan said as he held up the torch higher. “You best

get used to it. I'm surprised you're not already used to it, given your history."

I grimaced. "Oh, I'm used to it. I just hate it when people insult my family. And you."

"You shouldn't let it get to you so."

"I know. It just...it just does."

"Perhaps that's something we can work on."

The way he said it got under my skin and lanced my heart. *Something we can work on?* Like I was some sort of...project? I thought he loved me the way I was. Now I was an imperfect masterpiece? Unfit to be High Queen?

I didn't voice objection because it was my name-day, and I wanted to keep a happy mood. I pushed these thoughts deep within me. He probably didn't mean anything by it. It was probably a joke. I hoped.

"It's just down this way," I said instead.

He followed me without further conversation through the dank tunnel. A group of Fighters passed. They eyed Keegan and me suspiciously but greeted us with curt nods of wary respect. My people didn't know what to think of me anymore. Even though I had fought and bled for them and brought them food to sate their bellies my whole life, now I was just another Marlenian, high in the mountains, making blanket decisions that did not take the Freetors into account. But I'd show them, I hoped. Soon they would see that I had not forgotten them, that I was still a Fighter deep down. Now I fought for the rights of all, not just for those who had been wronged and thrown underground.

Finding my old cavern was not difficult. I knew these passageways in and out, and soon we stood before the entrance. There were no wooden doors in the underground except for those leading to the Elders' chambers and the Great Cavern. The only thing that separated our cavern from the passageway was a tattered old cloth. I ran my hand over it, and dust flew out. Keegan coughed and I waved it away. There were no sounds from within, so I assumed that the quarters had not been reassigned to another family, as was custom after

all members of a particular family died. They probably hadn't had time to deal with petty things like that, ever since the collapse of the Elder council. Still, I wouldn't be surprised, or particularly angry, if we found lost, hungry souls behind the fabric. Everything was fair game down here.

I glanced at Keegan, but he was waiting for me. "Are you going to go in?"

"Yeah." I pushed the tattered curtain aside.

Inside was almost as I'd left it two months ago. One main cavern with two smaller adjoining caverns—bedrooms: one for Rordan, and one for me. Not all living spaces were so extravagant, but because Rordan and I were both Fighters, and I was the Violet Fox, we had been allowed luxuries. Stone counters lined the wall to my left. If Rordan had left any scrap of food here, it was gone now. I didn't doubt that our place had been raided for anything edible since our absence. One of the stone chairs had a large chip in its side—perhaps there had been a fight recently.

I dipped my head into what used to be my room. A long flat stone: that was my bed. There used to be hay too, but it was gone now. So we had been looted. Fortunately I had taken what little valuables I owned with me to the castle, namely, the magic journal my father had given me before he left us, when I was six years old, and my Violet Fox cape and mask.

Back in the main cavern, Keegan examined everything with curious, quiet wonder. His shoes scraped against the dirt and stone floor as he pivoted around. It was strange to have him here. A prince in the damp, smelly underground. My home.

"This is where you used to live," he said finally.

It wasn't a question. Keegan ran a hand over the smooth stone wall. The ruby ring on his index finger made a slight scraping sound against the stone. I tensed. I'd never brought a man back to my cavern before. Three cavern rooms, dark, cold, and bare of life and character. Somewhere outside in the corridor, water dripped slowly and eternally, eroding the edge of my sanity. A worm inched across the

floor. Keegan surveyed the cavern once more, and I couldn't stand it—I shouldn't have brought him here. This wasn't his place. It was Rordan's. It was...mine.

Keegan approached me. His royal boots scuffed the packed-down dirt floor. "Kiera ..."

I couldn't meet his eye. "It's no palace, I know. But . . ."

He knelt and brushed his fingertips against my chin. I met his kind gaze.

"Thank you for showing me your home."

I leaned my forehead against his. "Welcome, I suppose."

He chuckled softly and kissed my chapped lips. There were a million things he could've said—that he was overdressed, that Rordan and I had done well for having so little, that the Violet Fox was lucky to have survived all those fights on the streets so that she could end up in his arms. Instead, he caressed my cheek and stared at me as if we were not in the dank underground but in the courtyard where we'd first kissed.

"Is there anything else you'd like to show me, while we're underground?" he asked.

I moved away from him, thinking of all the places Laoise and I would wander to for fun—the half-caved-in passageways, the wooden doors that led into the Central Cavern where the Elders would meet, the underground streams filled with precious fresh water, and of course the lichen caves that shined so abnormally bright. Those were our places, though. Taking him there would be too much of a crossing of worlds to bear.

"The Great Cavern has the main marketplace. I guess we could see what's there today."

"I'm sure our coins would be well spent."

Why, because every Freetor is so poor that all you want to do is shower us with coin? You think that would solve our problems? The words were on the tip of my tongue but I restrained myself. It was a poor retort. He didn't realize how offensive he sounded, and he didn't mean anything by it. He just wanted to help in any way possible.

That was why he was willing to hear investment opportunities from any person—Freetor or Marlenian—much to the Advisor’s dismay, for most of them were terrible. My father had been right about one thing: the miserable history between the Freetors and the Marlenians would not be solved by our marriage alone. We were a long way from healing the rift between us.

“Don’t be too surprised if small hands try to pick your pockets,” I warned him as I lifted the fabric curtain at the entrance. “We should’ve dressed in rags. It’s possible they might not let us in at all.”

“Even after all you’ve done for them?” Keegan asked, incredulous.

I sighed and said a silent goodbye to my childhood home, to the memories Rordan and I had shared there. “Especially so.”

Keegan followed me cautiously through the winding tunnels that led to the Great Cavern. The Freetors we met greeted us with silent nods; they looked as though they had been warned of our presence. That wasn’t surprising. Freetors with little to eat had to do something with their mouths, and spreading news was one way to occupy their minds and stomachs.

The Great Cavern was central to the Freetors’ needs. Items procured from the surface—mainly through theft, but on the odd occasion, fairly won—were sold on tattered blankets on the dirt and stone floor. Most remarkable about the place was the tiny beam of light that shone down from the ceiling. The only place where the sun penetrated our dark world. Women and children gathered around it, praying for relief from hunger, or just relief from this life. Seeing me in this cavern used to bring them hope. The Violet Fox would alleviate some of the suffering. But as we entered the cavern, a hush fell from their praying lips as they saw me in attire devoid of holes, and glimpsed my belt brandishing a knife: my Freetor knife given to me by my brother. I was a washed Freetor in nice clothing, and that only meant you were a Fighter on an Elder mission, or you had killed someone for the

clothes—in which case, they wouldn't stay clean for long.

Keegan was even more out of place, for many of the Freetors knew his face. Some of the women held their children closer, while the men gripped their knives. I didn't think that any of them would dare act against the Prince of Marlenia, not with me here. But I could be wrong.

"What?" The challenge was heavy in my voice. "If any of you have anything to say to us, now is your chance. We're just here to browse."

"Coming to see how the other half lives?" a man from somewhere in the crowd said, and others mumbled in agreement.

A reply rushed to me but Keegan was quicker. "To understand your troubles, I must immerse myself in them."

That was not the wisest thing to say. A few of the men drew their knives but I stepped in front of Keegan. "We're not here to make trouble. We've got enough of that already. You think that finding land on the surface for everyone will take a few days? Weeks? We're deep in negotiations with lords on the Western frontier to ensure that every family gets a proper lot. Kind of hard to negotiate if you have a dead prince."

A brave lie born from a kernel of truth. I had written letters, under the Advisor's and Keegan's assistance, to many of the wealthier lords in the West, the province where we resided. Many had replied graciously, eager to please the royal family but not eager to donate half an acre or two to people of their bailes who were most certainly thieves and cutpurses. Even if some of the lords were interested, I suspected their charity wouldn't be free, and that the Freetors who claimed the lands would be expected to work them while the lords claimed the majority of the benefits. Lords were fairly autonomous within their bailes—land owned by nobility—so long as they followed the Holy One's laws. There were no laws against having servants, and the regulations regarding their pay were undeveloped at best. My father considered this a fair option, but I suspected Freetors wouldn't take so kindly to indentured slavery.

Some of the Freetors returned to browsing, while the more offended at-arms men and women backed away. Muttered retorts flew through

the air but were not strong enough to be heard or carried with enough conviction to make a dent in the argument. Fighters by the entrance and on patrol approached me, and one dared to lay a hand on my shoulder. I tensed, but the gesture was brotherly. “Be careful, Violet Fox. Your name no longer carries the same weight it once did. Things have changed since you left us.”

I frowned, and he left with his patrol before I could question him further. Keegan raised an eyebrow and watched them leave, as if sizing them up, but even the Prince of Marlenia would be dead moments later if he were to suddenly decide to target a group of Fighters. I had sliced his lips in two when he and his guards trapped me on the streets. These Fighters would go directly for his throat.

“Don’t leave my sight,” I whispered as we strolled down a row of blanket merchants.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

A smile snuck through my concern. “I mean it.”

“So do I.”

Merchants cried to us as we passed, hawking their wares aggressively, and within minutes it was as if no confrontation had occurred. More Freetors appeared in the cavern: some delivering goods to the merchants, others clutching small coin purses to purchase clothing, hard sweets, and other luxuries sold at inflated prices. I had a coin purse tucked in my belt but was wary to spend quid, as I didn’t want to favour any merchant, or make him a target for thieves.

“Do you see anything you want?” Keegan asked.

“I don’t know yet. Do you see anything?”

It was a stupid question to ask. He had everything he needed. But he didn’t make me feel like the question was stupid; he merely crossed his arms and gave the nearest merchant’s blanket a fair look—she was selling handcrafted bowls made of clay, roughly potted and some not quite dry. “I’m not sure yet.”

Children flew down the row beside us. They yelled and laughed and waved at Keegan, crying their admiration for his clothes and his good looks. He smiled and waved back, but I was instantly on the alert.

Something wasn't right.

Tiny fingers slipped into my outer cloak pocket. As quick as a snake attacking its prey, I grabbed the offending hand and pulled the pickpocket around to face me.

A child. No more than eight years old, I guessed. Barefoot, gaunt, scrawny, with filth on her face. Even though Freetors were allowed on the surface now, to live and take jobs, many chose to stay underground and continue their petty crimes. This girl was not helping the Freetor stereotype.

"You don't have to steal anymore," I said to her. With my free hand, I reached into my cloak pocket and took out an apple. It was round and red and had no bruises. A prize to any Freetor. A sad prize, I realized. This girl shouldn't be worried about food. I saw a younger me in her.

I held out the apple. She hesitated.

"Go on. Take it," I said.

She grabbed it from my open palm and held it close to her face. Her nostrils flared as she took a deep sniff. Wide-eyed and speechless, the girl dug her fingernails into the skin of the apple. She whirled around and disappeared into the crowd with the rest of the children. They demanded that she share, and of course she would, as nothing could belong fully to anyone down here.

A deep quiet befell the Great Cavern. Keegan touched my arm, and I turned around, expecting to see a crowd of angry Freetor faces lusty for Keegan's blood once more.

Instead I was met by three robed Elder apprentices. They stood in a row, roughly the same height, wearing the traditional apprentice white-and-blue garb, their twiglike fingers intertwined in front of them. Since much of their faces were mainly shadowed by hoods, I could barely distinguish their unblinking gazes. When the one in the centre jerked his head, the other two copied him in a forced manner, as if they were three bodies strung together and controlled by one master.

"Kiera Driscoll," said the one in the middle. He sounded a few years older than me. "Why have you ignored our summons?"

“Summons? What summons?”

“Twice we have summoned you to the Central Cavern. Why did you not come to the Undercity before?”

I glanced around the awkwardly forming crowd. Apprentices used to take a vow of silence while they trained in the ways of magic. Only Elders were allowed to command the mysterious power that had kept us safe for almost two hundred years. With the Elders gone, I had assumed that new Elders would be chosen from the flock of apprentices, but these three were . . . different. They didn’t have the same wise presence as the Elders, a sign to me that a higher understanding of the magic also escaped them.

Some of the Freetor folk looked afraid. Magic was unknown to them, and apprentices usually kept themselves away from Freetors and Marlenians alike. I had to be strong for my people. I had to appear as if I knew what I was doing, but magic-wielders were unpredictable, especially apprentices. They could be here to taunt me because I killed their “beloved” Elder Erskina by summoning lightning from an ancient magical artefact, the Orb of Dashiell. I didn’t even know how I had accomplished that. Neither did my father, and besides the apprentices, he was now the only one who knew how to command magic—though how he obtained his power, he would not say. Probably by studying ancient Freetor texts, but somehow I felt that would not be enough.

“I never got any summons from anyone,” I said, both to the apprentices and to the crowd. I looked to Keegan. “Did you?”

“No,” Keegan replied. He frowned at the apprentices. “If you want us to go—”

“Not you. Only Kiera Driscoll must heed the call,” said the second apprentice, a young woman. They cast Keegan unfriendly glares.

Right. I supposed some Freetors might not take kindly to a Marlenian prince entering the Central Cavern, one of the most sacred places in all of the underground.

“Fine. I’ll go with you to the Central Cavern.” I stepped forward, waiting for the apprentices to lead the way. “Are we going, or not?”

They continued staring at me, unblinking. Then, blinking together. A smile formed on their lips.

“Heed the call,” they said in unison. “Find the Spear.”

“What...call?” I asked. “The Spear?” Could they be talking about the Silver Spear of legend? The one on the Elders’ crest?

Hurried footfalls and laboured breathing broke through the crowd. “Excuse me, coming through! Official castle business.”

The crowd parted and revealed a sweating young page, not more than ten years old. He doubled over, hands on his knees, panting, oblivious to the three robed apprentices beside him.

Startled, the apprentices twisted into smoke and dove into the dirt. Several Freetors who had never witnessed magic before gasped and hugged their loved ones tightly, whispering prayers. Keegan blinked several times in surprise, as if wondering if this was normal. I shrugged mildly, unable to rip my focus from the place where the apprentices once stood.

The Silver Spear. Why would they mention that, and leave without explanation?

I had to get to the Central Cavern.

“Are you all right?” Keegan asked. “And what was that about?”

“I’m fine.” I frowned. “I have no clue. Maybe it’s a joke...but...”

The young page from the castle cleared his throat. “Your Highnesses ...”

Remembering himself, Keegan quickly addressed the boy in his most kingly tone. “What is it, page?”

The boy’s cheeks were flushed. He must have run all the way down here. “The Holy One requests your presence in his bedchamber.”

A pang in my stomach struck me hard. Keegan squeezed my hand. Could it be the Holy One’s final hour? Keegan tried hard to hide his emotions in front of the crowd, as he’d been trained to do since birth, but even this was too much.

“Thank you, page. We’ll be there right away.”

“Well, actually...” The page looked uncomfortable. “He wants to see Lady Kiera.”

END OF SAMPLE!

Did you like the story so far?

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About the Author



*Photo Credit:
Terence Yung*

Clare C. Marshall grew up in rural Nova Scotia with very little television and dial up internet, and yet, she turned out okay. She has a combined honours degree in journalism and psychology from the University of King's College, and is a graduate from Humber College's Creative Book Publishing Program. She is a full-time freelance editor, book designer, and web manager and has clients all over the world. When she's not writing, she enjoys playing the fiddle and making silly noises at cats.

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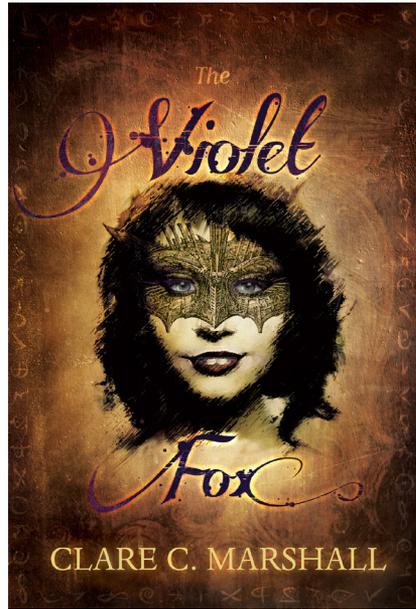
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Run.

That's what instinct told me.

*But to save the secrets of my people
and to protect my brother*

I have to become the enemy.



There are two kinds of people in the land of Marlenia. The Marlenians, who live on the surface, and the Freetors, who are forced to live underground.

The war between them ended two hundred years ago, but the Freetors still fight for the right to live under the sun. Fifteen-year-old Kiera Driscoll embodies the Freetors' hopes as the Violet Fox. In a violet cape and mask, she sneaks around Marlenia City stealing food and freeing her people from slavery.

Then the Elders task her with a secret mission: retrieve a stolen tome that contains the secrets of Freetor magic, something the Marlenians both fear and covet. Kiera must disguise herself as a noblewoman and infiltrate the Marlenian castle before the Freetor-hating Advisor finds out her real identity, before her brother is imprisoned because of the secrets he hides, and before she falls any more in love with the prince she's supposed to hate.

More is happening in the castle than she realizes, and Kiera is faced with a difficult choice. Will she be loyal to her people and their fight for freedom, or will she be loyal to her heart?