

CLARE C. MARSHALL

The Emerald Cloth
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Books by Clare C. Marshall:

The Violet Fox
The Violet Fox
The Silver Spear
The Emerald Cloth
The Midnight Tablet

The Sparkstone Saga: Stars In Her Eyes Dreams In Her Head Hunger In Her Bones Darkness In Her Reach

> Other Titles: Within Gear & Sea

- CAST OF CHARACTERS -

Kiera Driscoll. AKA The Violet Fox. A sixteen-year-old Freetorborn folk hero who fights for her people's freedom. After a series of adventures, she has married the rightful prince of the realm, Keegan Tramore.

Keegan Tramore. The rightful Prince of Marlenia and son of Eamon Tramore. Married in secret to Kiera Driscoll. Currently cursed in a frozen sleep and in the clutches of the Frostfire family.

Laoise Mullen. *Pronounced LEE-sha*. Best friend and confidant of Kiera Driscoll. Fast runner, quick thinker, and devoted to the cause. She is Bidelia's daughter.

Bidelia Mullen. AKA Mother Margaret. Laoise's mother. Determined, stubborn, and cautious. She worked undercover for years as the head servant in the castle until she was exposed and tortured at Sylvia Frostfire's hand.

Monju Farin. Southern bard assassin who helped Kiera and Keegan find the Silver Spear. Once loyal to Dominique Castillo, he now fights loyally at Kiera's side.

Conal Driscoll. AKA the Advisor, AKA Ivor Ferguson, AKA Kiera's father. A Freetor-born man who pretended to be a Marlenian shopkeeper and rose to power as the Holy One's Advisor. Universally hated by Freetors—very few know the secret of his birth. Often duplicitous, he is devoted to Kiera, but equally devoted to the study of magic.

THE FROSTFIRE FAMILY Rulers of the Eastern Province

Sylvia Frostfire. AKA Daughter of the East. The youngest child of Leszek Frostfire. Airy, arrogant, fond of large dresses, and blindly in love with Keegan Tramore. Despises Kiera. Would

have married Keegan Tramore if Kiera had not interrupted the wedding, sparking the current Eastern invasion of the West. Currently betrothed to Marin Castillo.

Leon Frostfire. The second-oldest child of Leszek Frostfire. Boisterous and eager to prove himself worthy.

Boris Frostfire. The eldest son of Leszek Frostfire. Quietly imposing, stubborn, and usually boring. Currently betrothed to Dominique Castillo and heir apparent to both the Western and Eastern thrones.

Leszek Frostfire. AKA High King of the East, AKA Emperor Leszek. Invaded Marlenia City—the seat of power in the West—and declared himself emperor of the entire realm. Hungry for revenge, desperate to keep his newfound power, and greedy. Currently ruling from the occupied Marlenia City.

THE CASTILLO FAMILY Rulers of the Northern Province

Dominique Castillo. AKA Daughter of the North. Ever since the Freetors kidnapped her and stole her identity, Dominique has pledged her life to eradicating Freetors everywhere. Kiera's chief nemesis. Clever, constantly scheming, and fond of cutting out tongues. Currently betrothed to Boris Frostfire and therefore set to become the next High Queen of Marlenia.

Marin Castillo. The little-seen nine-year-old son of the High King of the North. Dominique's brother. Sequestered away in the Northern capital of Ninyanas. Currently betrothed to Sylvia Frostfire.

Matís Castillo. AKA High King of the North, AKA the Pauper King. Frail and probably ill, he remains as always hidden in his castle in the Northern capital.

THE GARETH FAMILY

Rulers of Baile Gareth in the Western Province

Ansel Gareth. Ruler of Baile Gareth in Feenagh Forest. Historically loyal to the Tramore family, Ansel's allegiance has been called into question with the Tramore family scattered and the Frostfires now in power. His word influences other lessor lords. Currently harbouring Kiera and her friends from the Frostfire forces. Will do what is right for his small corner of the realm and nothing more.

Linnaea Gareth. Only daughter of Ansel Gareth. Quiet and timid, she is unmarried and living beneath her father's thumb—for now.

Joel Gareth. Ansel's second son. Rebellious and definitely hiding something.

Wallace Gareth. Ansel's oldest son and heir to Baile Gareth. Married and living in Gareth Manor with his wife.

OTHERS

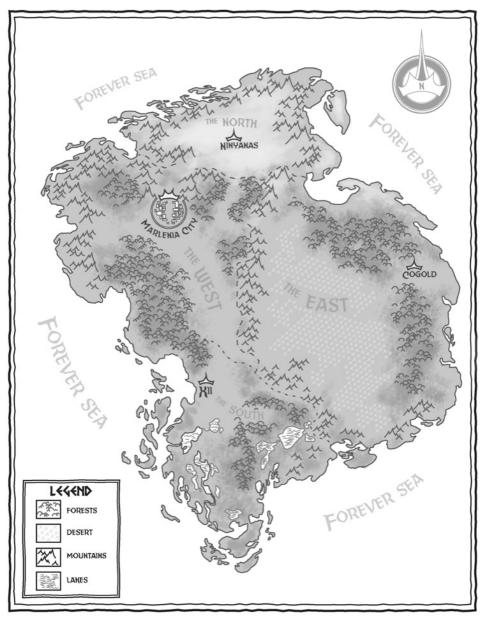
Rordan Driscoll. Kiera's older brother. Member of the Extremists. Publicly executed.

Pascal Antony. Unofficial spokesperson for the Roamers. Former mercenary, usually spoiling for a fight, and slow to sway to any cause—unless you can afford him.

Alastar the Hero. A powerful magic-user who rose up against the royal class, creating the Freetor movement two hundred years ago. He cursed the Silver Spear.

Dashiell. The man-god worshiped by some surface Marlenians. "Creator" of the four artefacts.

[]Marlenia



Marlenia THE WEST





Run. That was what my anger told me.

The men loyal to Lord Ansel Gareth, our gracious host, closed in fast three stone-throws behind me. I grinned as I gripped my rough-woven skirts and mustered more speed on the worn wooden floors of Gareth Manor. The men had the advantage of knowing the manor intimately. I had the advantage of running from soldiers like them all my life.

"Stop! Thief!"

Those words alone brought me back to my base instincts. Run. Hide. Survive. Give the spoils to those in need. My father would be furious if he found out I'd been sneaking around the manor, swiping treasures from the kitchen. Yes, I was a thief. I had to keep my skills sharp. Doing anything was better than doing nothing. I couldn't be idle.

Because if I was, even for a moment, I'd think of the man I loved in the clutches of my worst enemy.

Gareth Manor wasn't as large as the mountain castle in Marlenia City where, over two months ago, I'd disguised myself as Lady Dominique Castillo and gotten myself into this mess. In that time, I started a war between the two most powerful provinces in the world, crossed the West on foot with my love, Prince Keegan Tramore, and found one of the most powerful artefacts of Dashiell: the Silver Spear.

That was when things went horribly wrong: why Keegan was

no longer with me and why I was forced into hiding here, in Baile Gareth, with my friends and what little family I had left.

I rounded a sharp corner into a long corridor. At the end was the back exit to the stables and the henhouse, and beyond the grounds: the dark, thick trunks of Feenagh Forest loomed. Gareth Manor was considered the second most fortified structure in the West, as it was situated in the middle of a forest populated with dangerous, once-mythical creatures called the beatag. Once-mythical, only because Keegan and I managed to meet one, and survive.

"She's just a servant!" one of the guards shouted, close behind.

"No, she's a noble brat! We can't lay a hand—"

I raced on down the corridor and threw open the door. Fresh air. For the first time in nearly a fortnight, I stepped outside the manor and breathed in the crisp aromas of Feenagh Forest and the comforting smell of barnyard animals. I dashed through the knee-high grass hugging the manor. To my left was the henhouse, fortified by a scaleable fence. No good—Laoise had told me of the frequent patrols and the watchtower some distance to the south. Beside it, the stables. Better.

Horses greeted me from their stalls as I approached the stable at top speed. Some danced nervously at my sudden arrival.

A man much taller than me grabbed my upper arm and swung me around. "You're coming with—" When he recognized my face, his grip loosened, and with it, his resolve. "Aren't you...?"

Only a select few knew that I was in Baile Gareth: the former Advisor to the throne known publicly as Ivor Ferguson, my best friend Laoise, her mother Bidelia, the bard assassin Monju Farin, and the Gareth noble family. The face of Kiera Driscoll, the Violet Fox, was not as well known outside Marlenia City. She was also rumoured to be dead. A rumour my father wanted to encourage—for now. As far as the manor staff and

the bannermen were concerned, I was but another lesser noble relative visiting after a long journey, who preferred to keep to myself. My friends were my servants, and the Advisor—well, his face was trickier to hide than mine, and his motives less trusted.

"I get that a lot," I said. "Got to run."

I hurried back the way I came, towards the manor. The guard was on my heels. Where had the second one gone? To warn the other bannermen patrolling the manor? The entire Gareth family? No, thefts would be trivial to them. I hoped. I slammed the hardwood door behind me. He couldn't stop in time: the door hit him with a heavy *thunk* on the forehead. He slumped to the ground.

First thought: Hopefully he doesn't remember me when he wakes.

Second thought: I just knocked a guard unconscious.

This wouldn't go unnoticed.

As for the second guard, he seemed to have given up. But if the Gareth men found their friend, then they'll likely report to Lord Ansel, putting our tenuous safety treaty in jeopardy.

I opened the door. The bannerman muttered incoherently.

"Sorry," I said. After checking for witnesses—just a few clucking hens—I grabbed the man by the underarms and dragged him to the wall. My belly wound screamed. Although my father's magic had sped along the healing process and probably prevented my untimely demise, lifting and moving heavy objects reminded me that I was not my old self. The bannerman was heavier than three packs of grain. My lower back ached and the bandages around my middle felt tight against the strain, but I managed to prop him against the rough stone.

He looked up at me, dazed. "You're..."

"Yeah, don't spread it around." I sighed. "I'll put them back. I promise."

I hurried back inside before he could further identify me and

strode confidently down the corridor. At least my treasures were safe in my apron pocket. I scooped out a handful of berries and stuffed them in my mouth, feeling immediately guilty. Taking them had been too easy. The kitchen staff had wanted to prepare blueberry pies for tonight. My belly was sated, like everyone else living in the manor, and I knew no one that needed them more.

I turned right at the next corner and headed for the kitchen.

A small, startled gasp gave away her position. There was nowhere to hide in the narrow corridor. Even so, I pressed myself against the wall and lowered my head. One person saw my face today—I didn't need more trouble.

"Kiera? What are you doing outside your room?"

I let out a loud breath of relief at the sound of Laoise's voice. "How long were you following me?"

"Long enough." She hurried for me, her straw-brown bouncing around her ears, hand outstretched. I clasped it, worried why she wasn't on the third level scrubbing the floors. If anyone were to find me, it would be Laoise. Only the dearest friend of the province's most notorious thief and scoundrel could take her by surprise.

"I was...going to the kitchen," I said, gesturing down the hall. "Do you want to—?"

She wasn't fooled. She reached into my apron pocket and drew out a fistful of evidence. "Why would you put yourself at risk? If you were hungry, you could have just sent for me."

"It wasn't about that. And I'm going to put them back."

She put her hands on her hips. "Give me the apron. I'll do it."

"No, please, Laoise—"

"Shh! Just do it, okay? You're lucky it's me and not...you know."

Laoise still had trouble saying my father's name—especially his surface name. Advisor Ivor Ferguson had been responsible

for the imprisonment of countless Freetors, all in the name of protecting his secret: that he was a Freetor himself and had climbed the social ranks to make a difference in the lives of all Freetors. But things hadn't worked out that way.

I untied the apron and carefully handed it to Laoise. She retied it around her waist. "I know you're just trying to add some variety to your life. I wish you could come wash floors with me. It's back-breaking work, but it's better than doing nothing in that closet chamber all day."

Such a Freetor statement if there ever was one. "I wish you would have been there with me. The confectionary was empty for just a moment. I waited for the two ladies to leave and then I reached up and snatched the berries and—"

She grabbed me before I could elaborate any further and pulled me down the hall, towards the cramped prison that was my quarters. "I already heard. You charged one of Lord Ansel's guards! Outside! Kiera, anyone could have recognized your face—"

"I didn't charge him, he chased me. And I'm pretty sure no one recognized me."

She stopped and rounded on me. I'd known Laoise my entire life. She was more than my best friend. She was my sister, and would have been for real, had my brother not been publicly executed for his Extremist affiliations. Her thin lips twisted with disapproval—so like her mother, Bidelia—as she shook her head.

"Pretty sure isn't good enough. Your father asked me to keep an eye on you."

"Oh please. Don't tell me he expects you to report all my activities to him."

"He does."

"And you're...not...right?"

She crossed her arms. "Just the ones that matter. I know you

don't like being cooped up here like a prisoner. I don't like it either. But unless you want the Frostfires to know that you're here, and cause a whole bunch of problems for Lord Ansel, and eliminate that fragile alliance we've built with him..."

"I didn't mean to cause trouble." I really didn't. Lord Ansel's hospitality was the main reason we weren't rotting in the dungeons within the Marlenia City mountain castle—assuming there was enough of it left to rot in.

Two voices echoed besides our own in an adjoining corridor. I pressed against the wall instinctively until we realized they were standing still.

"We should go the other way," Laoise whispered.

I grabbed her hand and moved silently towards the voices. She didn't resist.

A high-pitched, wavering voice was pleading her case. "I was just—"

The deep, gruff voice with authority interrupted her. "It's too dangerous, Linnaea. Running around outside, as if you're a..."

"Laoise, is that the lord and his daughter?" I whispered.

We halted before the end of the corridor and peered around the corner. Indeed, it was Lord Ansel Gareth, patriarch of the manor and Baile Gareth itself, and his only daughter, Lady Linnaea. Lord Ansel had the face of a man who had seen war: grizzled, stern, with deep chasm lines on his cheeks and forehead. Lady Linnaea had no such stories embedded into her skin. I'd heard she'd never left the manor grounds in her seventeen years. Her long, fair hair had been braided down her back. She was dressed in one of her finer dinner gowns: unusual, as there was at least three hours until meal time—five hours until Laoise and I got the kitchen scraps.

"Please promise me you won't do this again," Lord Ansel said.

"I..." Linnaea was close to tears. "Can we speak about this elsewhere?"

"I found you here, so this is where you will answer me. Promise your father you will obey."

Laoise and I exchanged curious looks.

"Father—"

"I know how you feel about this," he said, not unkindly. His clothing rustled as he leaned over and kissed his daughter on the forehead. "If there was another way, I'd pursue it. Right now, our family stands to lose everything we have built over the past two hundred years if you do not yield and marry him."

Linnaea drew a sniffly breath and whimpered something in the affirmative.

"We can talk more about this—"

Laoise grabbed my arm and pulled me silently down the corridor, away from the arguing nobles. It wouldn't do us any good to be caught, not when Lord Ansel's patience with us was already stretched thin. There was another way to my quarters, a longer way around, that would give us time to speculate.

"I wonder who he's making her marry," I whispered.

"Probably some old noble in the East, or maybe the South. It doesn't matter. We'll be out of here soon."

"Why do you say that? Have you also plotted ten escape plans?"

"Just three. The servant girls are chatty. Doesn't leave me a lot of silent thinking time."

I grinned. "I bet your three are better than my ten. Well, nine now. The berries plan didn't work."

Thinking I was serious, she gave me an incredulous look, until I burst out laughing. She snorted, and I grabbed her hand, and together we ran like we used to, hand-in-hand through enemy territory, down the hall and up the winding servant staircase.

This was how it should be, when we were truly free. Once I had Keegan back, once my face was no longer feared, once we had a place to call home again...

Our laughter died as soon as we entered my cramped quarters. The Advisor stood at the window, arms crossed, staring out into the forest. His fingers tapped impatiently on his forearm. He didn't even turn to greet us; he knew it was me, returning from my forbidden journey outside.

"Kiera," he said. "Laoise, get back to the third floor. The scrubbing won't finish itself, and the other girls are far too curious about your frequent visits to the noble quarters."

"Yes, my lord," Laoise said flippantly. She squeezed my hand in a silent, well-wishing gesture and closed the door behind me, leaving me alone with Advisor Ivor Ferguson, or as he was known to the Freetors, Conal Driscoll.

The man who had abandoned me and my brother. And, also, the same man who had come for me when I had no one at Driscoll's End, and pulled the Silver Spear from my chest, saving my life.

"Father," I said, unable to avoid Laoise's infectious sarcasm.

He faced me then, unable to contain his surprise. It was hard to know what to call him, but maybe it didn't matter. I would have died at Driscoll's End if my father's strange magic hadn't plucked me from Lady Dominique's grasp. Thanks to him, I was alive. The wound from the Silver Spear had nearly healed under his care, although it would leave a nasty scar. Yet because of him, I was trapped here, forced to do nothing while he spun webs of deceit with Lord Ansel, instead of searching for Keegan.

My husband.

"What were you thinking, Kiera?"

Just when I thought we'd come to a mutual understanding—a respect, even—he had slipped back into patronizing me.

"I shouldn't be lecturing you." He let his arm fall to his side with a threatening snap. The garish clothes once afforded by his station were gone. Now he wore the guise of a merchant. Ivor

Ferguson in his most basic form, before he became the Advisor to the Holy One so long ago.

"Are you going to explain yourself?" His shoes scuffed on the stone floor. "If you're listening at all. That would truly be a miracle from the man-god."

My mouth was dry. A conversation with my father was like a sparring match. I had to be quick with a witty reply lest I become burned.

"I have no explanation," I said truthfully. Although I'd mostly recovered from Lady Dominique's fatal blow to the stomach, I barely slept. Keegan was out there somewhere, and every plan we conceived to recover him seemed more childish, reckless, or impossible to pull off.

"If this is a cry for attention, Kiera, you needn't continue. I'm here."

He meant to be comforting, but he sounded frustrated.

"I have to do something," I said finally, gritting my teeth. Staring out the window at the forest kept me grounded. Looking at my father now would send me spiralling, and I had a history of letting my anger get the better of me.

"I know you're worried about—"

"I'm beyond worried about Keegan. What if he's dead?" I thumbed the violet cloth wrapped around my forefinger, the symbol of our marriage. A union no one but his man-god had witnessed, and thus, could not be proved. "What if he never wakes up?"

The magic of the Silver Spear came with a steep price. Although the Freetors could handle the ancient weapon, it was deadly to anyone born on the surface. Something I wished we'd known before the enchanted frost overtook Keegan, causing him to fall into a death-like sleep. I glanced at the Spear, wrapped in brown tattered cloth, sitting on the desk as if it were a gift.

I caught the flicker of sympathy on my father's face. "We'll

find him, Kiera. I promise. You're not making this easy on me. While I'm constantly searching for reasons for us to stay under this roof and keep Lord Ansel from bending the knee to the Frostfire family, you're acting like a child."

"I can't stay cooped up like this while he's out there, probably being tortured by her." I could barely bring myself to say her name. Lady Dominique Castillo. The woman whose face and name I stole to capture Keegan's heart. Now, she had his frozen body and the kingdom under her thumb, with Lady Sylvia Frostfire's help. "I have to keep my skills sharp."

"By stealing berries?"

"I was going to put them back." That was the point of the exercise, after all. How much could I steal from the kitchen without attracting attention? Now I knew the answer. Not enough.

"We have already stretched Lord Ansel's hospitality."

"He won't throw you out," I mumbled. Though that wasn't necessarily true. With Keegan being the last of his line and with his whereabouts unknown, Lord Ansel didn't have to adhere to the treaty his ancestors had formed with Keegan's family. It was only because of my father's influence—and possibly because of Lord Ansel's distaste for the Frostfire family—that we were safe at the moment. But there were still people suffering directly under the Frostfires' hands within occupied Marlenia City. It pained me to think of those who had died because they remained publicly loyal to Keegan and me, instead of submitting to the invaders.

"Lord Ansel has called a gathering tonight," my father said as he shuffled for the door. "I want you to stay here until then. Perhaps I can convince him to hear your apology."

"My apology?" I blurted. All I wanted was to keep my skills sharp. To not sit here in this room and rot with the artefact that had stirred up this mess. "I didn't mean to cause trouble. I... really do...appreciate your help."

"Thank you," he said. "But saying it to me doesn't do you—nor any of us—any good. You must kneel before Lord Ansel. You don't have to speak in front of the entire court. You can speak after any visiting lords, merchants, and servants leave. We don't want to raise any more suspicion."

I sat on my cot and nodded. My father was right. He was almost always right. I just hated admitting it, especially to him. "Maybe if you were better at magic, you could give me a different face. That would solve some of our problems."

He smiled, and for a moment, I saw my deceased brother, Rordan. "Perhaps I..." Pausing at the door again, he turned. "Kiera, are you asking me to teach you magic?"

I hadn't thought of it that way. "No."

"You have no desire to learn?"

I shrugged. "I thought I had no aptitude for it. I wasn't chosen by the Elders when I was young."

"Yes. But you manage the artefacts just fine. The Elders strictly controlled magical knowledge, for good reason. Perhaps, if you wanted, I could...attempt to teach you."

My father had been trying to help me ever since I discovered he was alive. For most of our relationship, I didn't know his true intentions until after he executed his plans. Now, he was offering me a chance to control the force that defined the Freetors as a people.

"All I want is for my people to be free. All of my people." I stood, gripping the desk against the wall. "Many of our people fear magic. I don't oppose it, but every time a powerful magic wielder tries to do good, it seems like their desires become twisted. So...I can't say I'm that interested. No."

"Hmm," was all my father said. He opened the door to my prison. "I was hoping you'd say something of the sort. Perhaps you are more ready to learn than I thought."

* * *

Unlike the slippery tile floor that made heeled shoes loud and soft toes ideal, the gritty stone floor in the narrow mezzanine above the throne room left a thief no room for error. Every time I shifted my weight, the stone scraped beneath my feet, revealing my position to anyone who would care to look up. If I were down with the rest of the manor, it would only cause more problems. No, I had to remain up here, alone, watching the Gareth family conduct their weekly gathering until the time came for me to perform my apology.

The gathering room below was more like a converted dining hall than the ornate show of wealth that was typical of manors and castles. Instead of tapestries depicting the surface people as saints squashing the Freetors or slaying mythical animals, the Gareth family hung green and black banners over their drab stone walls, depicting their family crest: a large, shadowy beast surrounded by red thorns and twisted green vines.

Thirty-odd merchants, distant relatives of the Gareth family and other subjects living in the baile, chatted in low murmurs and filed into the room, stepping on a narrow, frayed red carpet leading right for the Gareth seat of power. Gatherings typically covered petty matters of state and allowed the lord to dole out justice for crimes and disputes, yet tonight tension thickened the air. How many of them had seen the ghost of the Violet Fox? How many of them knew that the former Advisor protected her, had risked his life to save her? How many of them believed that Keegan was alive?

There was only one throne and a green pillow on the seat, worn flat beneath Lord Ansel himself. He scrubbed his chiseled face, scrutinizing his approaching subjects. As they drew nearer to him, each one bowed, and he nodded curtly in acknowledgement to their loyalty.

Linnaea stood at her father's right side, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. Her braided hair had been pinned around her brow, making her innocent face seem more severe than usual. On Lord Ansel's left stood his eldest son, Wallace. Although twenty-seven, he looked far older, especially for a newly married man. His wife, Jemma, had entered with the merchants and the small lords. Her ringlets masked most of her face, though she looked young and content to stand next to her mother-in-law, Lord Ansel's wife Isabel. I didn't understand why Lady Isabel couldn't stand next to Lord Ansel. Did they not rule the baile together, even if it was Lord Ansel's namesake? The politics of baile lords had never been my specialty, though I'd patiently sat through my father's lessons, knowing it was important. I drew back into my hiding place, but not so far that I couldn't see the happenings.

"Where is Joel?" Lord Ansel asked.

Joel Gareth was Lord Ansel's second son. I smiled beneath my hood. Rumour had it he was trysting with a Roamer girl. That would not be an ideal match, even for a second son to a small but prestigious baile. Laoise and I had speculated wildly about how long it would be before Joel ran away and joined the travelling band himself, before realizing what a hard, dangerous life it was.

Wallace Gareth muttered something to Lord Ansel and the old lord waved his hand respectfully. "Very well. We'll start. Thank you for gathering here today. I'll keep this short. The rains are supposed to come tonight and I know many of you are looking forward to the coming harvest."

The crowd chuckled politely. I glanced at my father, freely leaning against the far wall for all to see. He smiled good-naturedly at Lord Ansel and the crowd before him, as if the gathering had been in his honour.

Lord Ansel glanced at my father. "We have had a guest for the

past fortnight. An unusual one, at that. Advisor Ivor Ferguson."

My father bowed his head politely. "My title is likely forfeit, my lord, though I appreciate the gesture."

"As the Frostfires have not formally revoked it, I see no reason to stop referring to you as such, as you have kept me apprised of the situation, past and present, within Marlenia City." The lord looked suddenly grim. "Many of you have raised concern about my harbouring him here. Your words have not gone unheard. I have done my best to uphold the treaty my great-great grandfather signed with Killan Tramore.

"Advisor Ferguson has spent time in Marlenia City to determine if the last Tramore royal holds influence over the Frostfire family and requested their aid with the Freetor threat, or if the East's arrival in Marlenia City was, in fact, an invasion."

The Frostfires were so powerful; to admit that they had invaded would warrant punishment for sure. The crowd murmured at Lord Ansel's candour. I held my breath. Lord Ansel was acting cautiously. It was hard to know the truth when messages could be intercepted so easily. The Frostfires and the Castillos had burned Marlenia City's castle. They had murdered people in the street for their loyalty to the Tramores. At least, that was what we had heard. The fact that I had to sit here out of sight only made me more anxious.

I had to find a way back to the capital. To find Keegan, to defeat the Frostfires, to set things right for my people.

"After much discussion," Lord Ansel continued, "I have concluded that Keegan Tramore holds no sway over the Frostfires and that it is Emperor Leszek Frostfire, first of his title and name, along with his sons and Castillo family, who hold the true power in Marlenia City."

My father pushed off the wall. His face, normally a mask of self-assured smugness and secrecy, had faded. This situation was no longer in his control. "My lord..."

Lord Ansel held up a hand. "You have said enough, Advisor."

At least he knew when to fall silent, unlike me. My fingernails drove into my palms as my father drew back against the wall like a wounded animal. Rage boiled inside of me.

"Keegan Tramore is indeed alive," Lord Ansel admitted. "And it seems he is safe within the capital, according to reports from the castle. Though from Lady Sylvia's parade, we know he is not in optimal health. He may go the way of his father."

There were several sympathetic murmurs from the crowd. My heart pounded. The Holy One, Eamon Tramore, had been well respected and had reigned a long time.

"The Frostfires claim they took the castle to prevent it from falling into Freetor hands. Be that as it may, the Tramore colours no longer fly. Whether we enjoy having the Frostfires as our overlords or not, they are here, and no army is strong enough to oppose them. I am not concerned with such matters of resistance and Freetor raids. My duty is to protect my baile and ensure the continued survival of its inhabitants."

Many of the small lords shouted questions mixed with jubilant cheers.

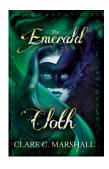
"Oh no," I whispered.

My father glanced at me. We were thinking the same thing.

"In that light, I have an announcement," Lord Ansel proclaimed. He lifted a heavy hand towards Linnaea, whose fiery, tearful gaze was downcast at the scuffed wooden floors.

"It is with great joy that I announce my intention to formally join the Gareth family with the Frostfires. My daughter, Linnaea, will marry Leon Frostfire this coming spring in Marlenia City." He cast a grave look in my direction, daring me to challenge him. "This will ensure the continued prosperity and safety of all those living in Baile Gareth."





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