

A VIOLET FIRE



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THE CHRONICLES OF AVIGNON
TRILOGY BOOK I

CHAPTER 1

I count everything again, almost obsessively. Rope. Hooks. Ointment. Arument cloths. Six scrap metal knives. Bread and water for the next three days. My chest is still tight as a reluctant sigh passes my lips. This is it for me. The last chance I have to reclaim what's left of *my* life.

The cool, night air is already starting to give way to spring's warmth. The heat passes through the rips of my spent tunic, relieving my goosebump-afflicted skin. Sunrise will soon be upon Nightingale and its stifling walls. A new dawn rising over the same cage, over the same shriveling hope for a new world. I rub my eyes, not wanting to start. The hardest thing to do is start. Nevertheless, I force the rucksack over my shoulder, stand, and carefully calculate my direction before taking off into a sprint.

Running is something I've always enjoyed during the *blood-conditioning* periods, but now... it's a run for my life. I have to go faster, perform better at an exhaustive pace to make it to the walls on time. Still, it should work.

God, I hope it works.

When I first started mapping out this escape plan six months ago, I never actually thought I would make it this far; blood pumping, stumbling through the forest, too early to be allowed out of bed, and too far off the beaten path between the *cages* and the school to have a good enough excuse as to why.

If I get caught, I could maybe convince them that I just like to run. But really, who would believe that?

Should be another fifteen meters at this deathly pace before I reach the Eastern Wall. My dirtied, bare feet pound the earth soundlessly as I dodge sticks and leaves. Here, stealth is the difference between life and death.

The tiny anklet that I made out of twine and steel—back when I first arrived at this hell—whips my skin softly in sync with my breaths, reminding me why I never stopped fighting for this moment. Because the day I made the silly thing, was the day that I lost all hope in *him* to secure my future. The day I decided I would never be like the rest of the humans here.

An endless whirl of gray and yellow aspens fill and flee my vision as I weave between their spindly bodies. The forest floor begins to change from dark and misshapen shadows to the distinct outlines of grass, rocks, and bushes. Although horribly painful, I speed up my pace.

Snap!

A breaking branch to my left.

Skidding to a halt and falling to a crouch, I say a silent prayer.

Don't move. Control your heart. Force down the reaction.

I apply everything I'd learned from *before* about Essence Dissonance—a defense mechanism that allows a human to remain hidden from *highly sensitive predators* by controlling their body's natural responses to fear. I'm pretty good at it because I'm the only human getting herself into situations where it's needed.

I listen and wait. The sound was one of its kind and now only silence remains, worrying me more than it should. My knuckles are almost as white as an albino squirrel when a

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red-breasted robin darts out of the brush. It stops after a few hops to look up at me before scavenging for a worm. I refrain from letting out a snort as I start to run again, willing the adrenaline from the bird encounter to seep out of my pores. A few more moments and I'll be at the wall. That much closer to freedom.

A thousand demons release me from their noxious grips as I arrive at the forest edge.

God is on my side.

No one is around, as I hoped... and expected. Through my forbidden research at the school, I learned that once a month the Eastern section of the wall is left unguarded, but only briefly at sunrise in order to tally up the energy stored from the solar panels. The panels line every part of the wall and provide what little electricity that we *do* get at the school, although most of it goes to conditioning the offices of the professors, since humans aren't exactly the priority around here—or anywhere.

I kneel at the forest brink. All that lies before me is freshly trimmed grass and a massive wall made of brick and mortar. A vermillion light catches my eye off of the top corner of a solar panel. *The sun is rising.* I push off from the ground and sprint for the wall. Like wine-stained cotton, if anyone were around they would see me, plain as day. It would be over. My red hair and tunic were not made to blend in with the budding grasses of Cain's spring. When I hit the wall, I flatten myself against it. Breathe it in. Listen to my surroundings.

Nothing.

I recoup before quickly going to work unraveling the rope and fastening the grappling hooks. I propel the hook upward with well-practiced precision. The rope loops several

times around the titanium arm before the hook snags its lip – releasing a stagnant breath from my lungs. I finish by tying the loose end around my waist.

Looking up with determination, I leap and latch on, positioning my feet against the bricks. I trained for this. During the recreation periods when everyone else would sew or paint in an effort to eventually please their masters, I would train, run, make weapons. Something much more worthwhile, in my opinion. We were only allowed this free time so as to perpetuate a feeling of happiness, which apparently increases our overall blood quality. Not complaining though, I loved making knives and dreaming of a day when I could finally use them.

I reach the metallic arm of the panel and hoist myself over it with ease, my rucksack hanging off my shoulders. The girth of the panel presses uncomfortably into my back until I shuffle out from underneath its plane. The edge of the wall now looms only inches above my head, so very close, and I rest a moment to try to stifle the building anxiety.

I'm almost there.

My elbows and shoulders send my body over it with ease, and I land in a squat on the dirt-ridden walkway on top of the wall. Cautiously, I stand. Small barrels and crates, used for sitting and slacking off, line both edges with half-consumed synthetic packs resting upon them. I find the horizon and take in, for the first time in ten years, a view that isn't obstructed by walls. The muscles tighten in my face, and one of the biggest smiles I've ever felt spreads across it, victoriously.

As I assess the plan for my descent to the other side, a strange, stinging pain emerges from the palm of my hand. I glance down and nearly double over with panic.

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Blood.

I quickly duck down, simultaneously covering the small, yet deeply drawn cut with my mouth and tongue. I curse at myself as fear festers within me.

It must have been while climbing... on a jagged piece of stone or something.

Trying to keep calm, I fumble through my bag for the arument cloths.

This would happen. At the tail end, when I'm this close.

I unroll the cloth and wrap it around my bleeding palm. Arument cloths have the godsend ability to dissipate any traceable scent of blood. Although they were mainly developed for the female students' monthly cycles, they are also able to solve these kinds of problems. I wrap it tightly, and as I think I'm safe, a deep male voice shoots out from the north.

"This way! She's on the wall!"

My heart threatens to stop.

What? They shouldn't have been able to scent me with only this. I must have miscalculated their time away from... or, or my own time scaling the wall –

Wait.

An idea forces its way through my frantic thoughts as more shouts fill my ears, closer than I could have ever imagined. I grasp a knife out of my bag and cut the rope, fastening another hook to the free end and aiming at a large tree branch on the outer side. It hooks, and I breathe again. Another shout. *Way* too close.

They're here.

It's now or never.

My fingers shake violently, tightening their hold along the chipped ledge of bricks. The earth radiates in swirls of

yellow and green below, so far down that the bushes and trees are a blur of paint strokes. Stifling vignettes encompass the outer rims of my eyes as I grapple with the weight of what I'm about to do. I seriously might die.

"I found her!" A voice pierces the void, only meters away.

No, not yet. I try to bargain with anything in the world beyond willing to listen, sweat traveling down my neck in streams. *I'm not ready. I'm not –*

The weight of their presence grows heavier, bringing with it the animosity of a plague; a terror that I take all the way down to the marrow of my bones; a seeping cold that is bristled with thousands of tiny needle-head points, sending fire along my spent arms and shoulders. It blasts its way down into my soul, threatening to obliterate every ounce of resolve that has landed me here, along these steadfast bricks, amidst my escape from the Stratocracy of Cain—amidst my escape from the *vampires*.

"A red tunic? She must belong to Zein! It'll be our heads if we lose her!" One shouts from afar—but not too terribly far, if even my human ears can sense it. Unlucky for them, I did belong to Zein, but not anymore. My mind clears as dark anger replaces fear.

In mere seconds the vampires would be upon me. With their inexplicable speed and inhuman reflexes, I will be dead if I don't drop now.

I step out.

The hardest breath I have ever taken escapes my lips as I push off and spiral into oblivion.

To hell with this life, I decide.

I would rather die of a broken neck from this fall than be forced to sit prim and proper as a docile host.

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The shrubberies below get ever closer in my spiraling plummet—a family of mesmerizing pinwheels spinning faster and faster within my vision, hypnotizing and fearless.

Suddenly, a sharp pain on my abdomen—the rope going taut—and a vicious sounding *crack!*

The rope is loose.

The branch didn't hold.

I'm falling to my death.

"Wavorly..." my mother's soft and celestial cries cradle me in my descent.

Even here, I remember?

"Wavorly, you must go," she said to me, crying and writhing from pain. "I can't hold it back much longer. Run."

As the brights of my eyes fade to black, I relive it. My consciousness slips and I'm there again, watching my mother suffer. Still, I wouldn't move. I wouldn't run. I wouldn't drag her down to the catacombs with me to try and save her; wouldn't turn and pick up a bloody knife to end the agony that she was to endure.

At eight years old, it was all I could do to watch without the saltiness of tears construing the last, perfect vision of her shining blue eyes, apple-blond hair, and her body, blanketed by a bloody shawl pinned at her breast. I watched her demise so innocently—back before I knew the wrath and ferocity of the vampires. Back before I knew, truly, what they could do to us humans. But even though I since have grown much older and wiser to their existence, much better at handling my past, it is still difficult to turn away from my mother's pleading gaze. I always try to find something different within her eyes—a new pathway into her soul, a new wrinkle to prove that she is aging with me. An elongated search for novelty to make me feel like I never lost her.

My younger self clings to her selfishness, always. Always. Never listening, never moving to aid the last loved one she would forever lose. After that moment, my mother roars a sound like the monsters from nightmares, her skin fading to the color of yellowed sickness. Then, and only then, do I run for the connecting basement. The catacombs.

The half terrified, half monstrous screams of her transformation into the *fallen*, fade behind thick, oak doors as I move farther and farther away. Her bellows are soon accompanied by the guttural laughter of the attacking vampires, and then all that's left is my ragged breaths. I knew it then, she was gone.

I find the door to the outside, like I always do, and for a brief moment all that I am is pure relief; a raw hope that rids the ice from my bones like hot water on a snowy day.

However, little do I mind the other side of the door where a lurking vampire waits for me. He grabs me after I naively open it, he shakes me, laughs at my terror as he muses how he will get my ligaments out of his teeth once he has finished draining me of blood. Everything in those moments is a blur. A disastrous blur of adrenaline and repression until my younger self is on the ground, unharmed. The decapitated head of my attacker—rolling across the dirt—beside me.

I turn, hoping to see human soldiers, Sorgan, Castrel, and the Guard of Avignon, standing victoriously over the bodies of a dozen dead vampires, only for that hope to be quickly shattered.

Another, much younger vampire stands over me. This one regally dressed in crimson robes—embellished with armor and chains, and steel fleur de lis.

"You think you can hide your dissent from a pureblood?" He speaks to the heap of flesh and guts now

strewn on the ground beside me, shaking the fresh blood off of his clawed hands.

“And you.” He turns to face me, eyeing me like a bug. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Later, I would learn this vampire’s name. One of the most feared names in all of Cain. Lord Anton Zein.



Overwhelming pain pulses from the top of my head to the ends of my shoulders as I wake. Unrefined screams bounce off the pitch-black walls and pierce my ears, sending waves through my skull. I manage to roll my eyes upward, desperately trying to focus on my surroundings. Long, crisscrossing bars from top to bottom are ahead of me, surrounded by walls of bloody stone. I’m in a cell—a dungeon. Lightning strikes of pain surge through my head as the screams start up again, forcing me to throw my back against the damp and sticky bricks. Lanterns of blue and green flicker, dancing along the shadowy corridors and flashing across my closed eyelids. Everything is singeing pain, a grating ache.

Where am I? What is-

Hold on. I’ve been here before. I recognize these howls. The Selection dungeons. A multitude of cells where they confine out-of-line supply students, and also where they keep their reserve pit of *fallen* beasts locked up in case they ever need an army of blood-thirsty super humans. I shudder thinking about them. We call the once-humans, or the humans who have been victimized by a vampire’s bite, the *fallen*.

Vampires are their own species, reproducing normally, and scientifically unable to completely change the genealogy of another creature despite all of that old age folklore. However, they do have some sort of natural bacteria within the venom of their bite that causes a type of deranged transformation in humans. One that leads to a rabid, insatiable need for bloodshed, as well as strengthened senses and abilities. Their debilitating howls of hunger wrack my skull.

My heart seizes within me as I suddenly remember. The throbbing across my abdomen where the rope was wrapped, the enduring headache, and the shackles binding my arms and legs indicate that I did not successfully flee Cain.

I've been caught.

Everything I worked months for to get me to the other side of those walls was in vain. Vomit laces the back of my throat as I'm forced to acknowledge that everything is over. No more chances. My head drops in between my legs like an added weight.

That side of the wall was beautiful – the lush greenery that was undoubtedly the exact same on the inside, was somehow brighter; full of life. My mouth twists as I latch desperately onto the memory of being on top of Nightingale's walls, feeling stronger than I ever felt before, watching a sunrise interrupted by only horizon. It was the first time I saw the sun peeking over the earth, and not the walls, since being admitted to Nightingale's School of Infantry Supply – since the day they stripped me of my name, "Wavorly Sterling" and made me into "Z29734" – since the moment that my life no longer belonged to me, but to the sovereign vampire who saved me that night ten years ago, Lord Anton Zein.

The pounding of footsteps appear and grow closer

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from the passage outside of my cell.

Great. Here it comes.

I keep my head down, hoping they will pass me and bother someone else. Too much to ask. The steps stop outside of the cell and I offer a glare to my visitor. A haughty and conceited Messima Mettingskew stands in the barred doorway. She's my Supply Culture and Etiquette professor, a real Class A type of crazy who exists only to rot out my eyes and ears.

"Oh, hello." I barely manage while faking a smile. "How's your day going?"

She smiles back contemptuously, but says nothing. That's a first, she's nearly always rambling on about something back at the school, as if anything they teach has any real significance. All the classes at Nightingale are a waste of time, and even the professors will admit it. One of the courses forced us to stand for an hour without making a sound, without shifting our feet, without moving our eyes. The lesson? To be as little of a nuisance as possible. Another forced us to recite Cain's Pledge for the entire period, and yet another taught us how to speak in rhythms and frequencies most befitting to our owners' sensitive ears. All of the mundanity lends to the real purpose of Nightingale: holding onto us until we are grown enough to not die after losing one meal of blood.

I battle Mettingskew's stare until another vampire steps out of the darkness. This one is a very light-skinned male with bright blonde hair. Unlike Mettingskew, who dons a typical Nightingale professor's uniform, this man wears robes of black leather, silver cuff links, and long chains sporting countless fleur de lis and emblems of Cain. A type of garb that all high messengers from the Heart of Cain wear.

This is the first time I've seen one in person.

Mettingskew sneers.

"This is the one we keep telling you about. The good-for-nothing," she says.

Bite me, I think to myself, only because I can't seem to find the strength to move my lips. I am sure she is able to read the response in my eyes though, because she proceeds to curve her wrinkly mouth down into a frown. It suits her better, anyway.

"The one that keeps testing Lord Zein's authority?" The blond male asks, analyzing every part of me. "It's a wonder she's still alive, after a fall like that."

She nods. "Lord Zein should finish the job. This is the third time she has done something like this. The second offense is always death, yet still he refuses punishment."

"Not for you to judge," the male replies. This blond holds power over her somehow.

"She's a menace," Mettingskew says lowly. "She could have very well instilled apprehension and anger within the supply. Luckily for everyone involved, she tends to stick to herself, but how can Lord Zein keep turning a blind eye to such? I know he is soft on his lot, but what does this say about—"

"Watch yourself," he warns. "Lord Zein informed me that he would determine her fate at the Distribution since he is already in route for the occasion, but nevertheless we mustn't question our overlords' decisions. We are far less knowledgeable than they." He then smiles. "If you are searching for reasoning, I would say perhaps start doing your job and keep the supply under control. Then maybe one day you will earn enough respect to be trusted with answers."

I nearly bust out laughing at Mettingskew's crestfallen

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face, but stop short when I remember...

Zein is coming here. That's right. Tomorrow is the ceremony. The very reason I timed my escape the way I did was so I could avoid it. And now, after all this time, I will be forced to reunite with *him* again. My savior, captor, and... *owner*. I let out an audible groan and the two vampires turn their heads toward me.

Mettingskew growls. "I didn't bring you here to insult me, Narref. I'm following procedure. Needless to say, we've never had a situation like this before."

"This is the last day you have to sully your hands with her." His smile fades. "Then you can forget it ever happened."

Mettingskew crosses her arms as Narref studies me with roving eyes.

"As you know, the Days of Slaughter bestowed heavy misfortune upon the human genome diversity. Across the span of its two-hundred years, many lessers of our kind destroyed our natural food supply, forcing us to protect, feed, and breed the humans, as well as develop synthetic blood under Cain's honorable law," he says. "Disposing of humans, no matter their lack of domestication, seems like sort of a waste in these trying times, don't you think?"

I raise an eyebrow as Mettingskew bites back. "No. We dispose of troublemakers all the time for anyone with a crest on their robes. How is this case any different?"

As much as I hate her, she's right. It's messed up how the elite can get rid of endangered, yet unlikable, humans at the snap of their fingers. But who can refute the claim that their army of *fallen* beasts need to eat, too? I roll my eyes at the thought and notice the fumes that might as well be coming out of Mettingskew's pointed ears. Narref changes the pace.

"Have you not seen the rare traits that this girl

possesses? In all my years spent running the Distribution—watching our most elite decide upon the fates of their investments—I have never seen a red-haired and green-eyed specimen. He will most likely donate her to Saya's houses after he shows her traits off to the other *four*. You know, to make a political statement in the effort for posterity and the sort."

Of course, that sounds like something a wealthy, elitist asshole who wants to look noble and generous would do. Invest in my enslavement for ten years so he can show off my hair for ten seconds before using me as a power tool. I groan so loudly they both look at me again.

"Or, this may be the first time he sentences a human of his to death." Mettingskew runs her tongue over her teeth while glaring at me. "There is a first time for everything, right?"

Narref shifts his gaze back to the hall, chuckling. "Perhaps. Most humans are not so dull as to test his limits. Either way, I have seen enough to fill out a report. Let's go."

He disappears from my sight, taking his leave back down the hall. Mettingskew faces me. "Unfortunately, I'll see you at Distribution. With any luck, it will be the last."

I don't respond, which garners a scrunched brow of scorn from her. Eventually, much to my relief, she turns to follow after Narref.

I sink into the ground. In part from the pain and in part from the disappointment. So, I'm not receiving the well-deserved death penalty today. Which would be a good thing in any other circumstance, but given the unbearable pain from my falling off a huge wall... right now it's up in the air. What really gets me though, is the reason I'm being kept alive—for now, anyway. That Zein wants to show me off like

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some sort of trophy before he either turns me into *fallen* food or sends me to the hell that is Saya. What an *epic* purpose I serve.

I sink lower into the ground. I probably won't have another shot at escaping either. If they are smart, they'll keep me in here until Distribution, and most likely monitor me all the way up until the ceremonial judgement. A sole thought forces itself through the mess.

What if Zein's crazy enough to take me back to his castle? To be a part of his blood supply? My fingers clench into my palms. No, even if I manage to get into Zein's estate, no doubt I would find a way to get out. Enslavement is still enslavement, no matter how soft the chains.

Against my will, my eyes close. Amidst the fatal uncertainty, exhaustion becomes an all-consuming force, pulling me out of my pain and anger, and drowning me in darkness. I pass out to the roars of the very beasts that could be tearing me apart tomorrow.

KELSEY QUICK