

VOLINETTE'S SONG

This is a sample chapter of Volinette's Song by Martin F. Hengst.

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Chapter One

"I said NO!"

Volinette pushed the lute back into her mother's arms with more force than she had intended. There was a dissonant twang and snap as the neck of the heirloom instrument broke free of the body.

"Now look what you've done," Reanna said, her lips set in a thin white line. "Your grandfather's lute, ruined."

"I'm sorry." Volinette was sorry. She remembered sitting on Poppy's knee, watching his fingers dance across the strings while his rich baritone rolled along with tales of battles long past and loves lost. The memory of those evenings by the fire, listening to him sing and play, were some of the best of her childhood.

Poppy was a famous minstrel, just as her mother was, and her father, and her sisters and brother. In fact, as the youngest child in a family known throughout the Human Imperium for their beautiful music and fine performances, she had been expected to know every word of every verse and every note in every score. That hadn't been much of a feat for Volinette. She seemed to have a head for music. She could almost see the notes as they were being played and hear the poignant words of a ballad in her head a moment before she had to sing them. Her mother said it was a family gift.

Even so, she hadn't wanted to follow in Poppy's footsteps. Music didn't speak to her like it did to them. The screaming adoration of throngs of fans quickened their blood and pushed them further in pursuit of their art. It just made Volinette nauseous. The first time she'd been up on stage in front of a thousand people, she'd burst into tears and fled to the dark comfort of the trees at the edge of the village.

"I'm sorry," Volinette repeated after a moment's hesitation. "But I'm not Poppy, I'm not Father, and I'm not you. I'm not a bard or a minstrel. I don't want that. I don't want to 'carry on the line.' I want...no, I NEED to do this!"

"Don't be ridiculous." Reanna's voice was sharp but low. Her eyes darted around the courtyard where they stood, checking to ensure that no one had overheard their heated conversation. Her mouth snapped shut as she watched a young man pass by them. He nodded to them, and Reanna offered him a curt bob of her head. "What you NEED to do is stop this foolishness and come home. It isn't too late to fix this mess you've made. Father will help if you'd just go to him and beg forgiveness..."

Volinette stared at her mother in stunned silence. She felt the first prickles of tears behind her jade green eyes and forced them back. She refused to stand here in the shadow of the Great Tower of High Magic and blubber like a little girl with a skinned knee. She'd passed her fourteenth nameday not too long ago. She wasn't a child any longer. It wouldn't be too many more years before she was expected to settle down with a husband and turn her thoughts to adult matters. Even so, the insinuation that she should go crawling back to her father and ask his forgiveness, when he was the one that cast her out in the first place, was appalling.

"Beg forgiveness?" Volinette's voice cracked as the question squeezed from between her lips. "For what? For being a...what did he call it? Oh, yes, I remember. A carnival monstrosity. Please, Father, won't you forgive me for something I can't control and you couldn't beat out of me?"

Reanna's hand moved so fast that Volinette didn't realize she'd been slapped until her cheek began to burn with painful intensity. She raised a hand, her fingers stroking the lightly tanned skin with its almost imperceptible smattering of freckles across her nose and high cheekbones. The flesh was hot, a reminder of the sudden and unexpected assault. The tears that she'd been holding at bay seemed very close now and Volinette fought with every ounce of control she had to keep them from slipping from the corners of her eyes. She was afraid that if even a single tear stole past her guard, she might not be able to stop the deluge that would follow.

Volinette closed her eyes, humming the chorus to her favorite song to herself. The song flowed through her, helping her clear her mind. She could feel the vibration of the song in her throat, and it helped center her in a way that few things did. Once she'd finished the chorus, the threat of tears had retreated, thwarted by the music that steadied her. The music she loved was something private. Something inside her that responded to the melody and the rhythm. Not the flowery, cloying stuff that her family belted out to the wild applause of their fans.

Looking up at the great obsidian tower glistening in the summer sunlight, Volinette smiled. She could feel the power of the place humming just below the surface of the physical realm. The Quintessential Sphere infused all things, flowing outward from the Ethereal Realm and passing through everything. Every blade of grass, every person, every leaf on the trees. The Sphere influenced everything and left an imprint on the world that existed beyond what mortal eyes could see. There was no way she could be sure of winning a place in the Academy of Arcane Arts and Sciences, but she had to try. She was a vessel for the power of the Quintessential Sphere, and the thought of exploring that power, the power that had been forbidden to talk about, quickened her pulse in a way that music never had.

For years she had been forced to keep her communion with the Sphere a secret. Her father was terrified that if people found out about the freakish skills his daughter commanded, it would impact their bookings and the life to which they'd become accustomed. The family coffers were packed with gold coins earned by their musical talents. Though she was expected to contribute, Volinette would sneak away as often as she could, haring off into the wilderness on her own. She was more at home among a quiet copse of trees than a concert.

During the last Spring Festival, they had been blessed with a free night. Volinette's father normally had the family working every night, so the open time was an unexpected pleasure. Sitting around the fire with the other performers who traveled with her family, she'd entertained a few of the children with a couple simple spells. They were no more than cantrips, really. Easy spells that anyone with innate magical talent could master. A tiny firebug that danced to a tune she whistled. A colorful shower of harmless sparks. Nothing that could have hurt anyone. At least, not anyone other than Volinette. She would never forget the savage beating her father had

rained down on her under the pretense of her own safety. No one could know, he'd said. They wouldn't understand. They'd be afraid of her.

After that night, Volinette had realized that her father wasn't afraid for her. He was afraid of her. She'd also realized that there was no place for her in a family that was more concerned about their reputation than the wellbeing of the people who made the music possible.

Through clandestine meetings with friends and acquaintances made through years of traveling performances, she'd kept an ear out for the news that the Academy of Arcane Arts and Sciences had opened a Trial of Admission. As soon as she'd heard that the School of Sorcery was open to new apprentices, she had gathered her belongings and approached her mother, all but demanding that she accompany Volinette to the Great Tower. All she needed was her mother's mark on the registration chit that would allow her to participate in admission proceedings. Then they could be done with each other.

"You'll be rid of your little problem soon enough, Mother." Volinette was still looking at the tower that pointed up into the heavens, but she spoke to the woman shifting from foot to foot in front of her.

Almost as if Volinette's words had touched off the action, the great silver bell at the top of the tower began to peal, calling those who would compete for a place in the Academy to assemble. Volinette ripped her gaze away from the tower and tried to smooth down the unruly shock of golden-brown hair that seemed to stick out every which way no matter what she did with it. Not that she spent that much time bothering with it in the first place. She hefted the small sack that contained her meager belongings and slung it over one shoulder. Without looking back, she strode toward the entrance to the tower.

"That's my cue, Mother. Time for a performance of my own."

Volinette walked across the courtyard, her head held high, her chin thrust belligerently forward. Don't show any fear. The mantra of her family seemed particularly apt in this case, so she grabbed it and rolled with it.

A page met them at the wide doors that led into the massive entry hall of the Great Tower of High Magic. Once inside, he led them through a labyrinth of smoky glass corridors, commenting on various displays, pieces of art, and artifacts as they went. The page was obviously bored with his rote recitation of facts and dates, but Volinette was nothing less than fascinated by the wonders they passed.

The bored young man ushered them into an immense subterranean chamber. Volinette recognized it from descriptions she'd read in books. One advantage to traveling all over the Imperium was that every sizable city had a library where she could lose herself for hours while avoiding her family. Her hours in those libraries were often spent studying all manner of trivia pertaining to the Orders and their trappings, including the room in which she found herself.

This was the High Council's Concordance. She gazed around the room in rapt awe, trying to take it all in at once. Never in her life had she seen such ornate furnishings and decorations. The walls were draped with brightly colored tapestries depicting scenes from the Orders' varied pasts. Each was expertly woven, with meticulous attention paid to every detail. Each hanging that Volinette looked at was more captivating than the last. It was almost as if she were there, inside that moment in time that the artist had chosen to represent.

An exquisite obsidian throne dominated the head of the room. Its intricate detail was the life's work of a dozen master craftsmen and mages, by the look of it. She took a step forward and faltered as she felt its latent power wash over her. She gasped and stumbled backward, finding surer footing where the strange power of the throne didn't affect her as much.

The tables, where the Masters would sit when the Concordance was in session, were arranged in wide semi-circles in front of the throne. There was a hint of roses in the air, but Volinette saw no evidence of fresh-cut flowers anywhere in the room. Large oil lanterns hung from stout brass chains anchored in the glass ceiling, casting circles of pale orange light on the floor and helping to warm the vast chamber.

Volinette ran her hand along one of the tables. They were ancient and worn smooth, almost soft to the touch. She'd often imagined what it would be like to be a Master in one of the Orders. Being in the room where the most important business of the Quintessentialists was conducted only intensified that curiosity.

Becoming a Master in one of the Orders was her heart's true desire. To harness and control the power of the Quintessential Sphere and travel the Imperium to right wrongs and help those in need. However, those days were a long way off. There would be much studying and many trials before that could become a reality.

That was definitely putting the cart before the horse, she scolded herself. She hadn't even been accepted into the Academy yet, and here she was, making grand plans for what her life would be like, as if her success were merely a formality. She battled against that self-doubt, gnawing at her lower lip as she took in the grandeur of the room.

Though she'd been forbidden from practicing her spellcraft in public, she'd stolen as many moments as she could to flee into the depths of the forest to be with her true love. There, at least, she couldn't be seen and punished for such an errant affair. Still, there were many things she didn't know, and within the walls of the Great Tower she would be expected to learn and control real magic. Powerful magic. Forces that could kill.

Volinette shuddered. Her father, when still pretending that he was afraid for her wellbeing, relished in telling the story of a young man from their village who had dabbled in magic he hadn't understood. The spell the boy had been working on backfired horribly, searing the flesh from his skull and killing him instantly. That could happen to you, he'd said to her. Wouldn't it just be safer to ignore this foolishness and do what you were born to do? She'd balked at the very idea.

Once he'd realized that Volinette wouldn't be dissuaded from her passion, he'd given up on her. Even when they crossed paths at home, he barely spoke to her. It was almost as if she'd been erased from his memory. He wanted to be rid of her as much as she wanted to become a Quintessentialist. Though her parents had been very careful to only whisper their fears in the deepest, darkest hours of the night, Volinette had still heard their heated arguments over her. No one in the family would be happy until she was gone. It had made the decision to commit to the Trial of Admission that much easier.

A handsome young man with an unruly shock of brown hair slipped his way through the crowd and came to stand near Volinette. He was tall and lean, with dirt under his fingernails and thick callouses that came from handling a plow. Volinette recognized him from his eyes. They were middling brown, the same color of the mud that caked the lower legs of his breeches. He lived in one of the farming communities that Volinette's family had passed through on their festival circuit. His face was broad and tan, with a crooked smile that made him seem younger than his years. He raised a hand in greeting.

"Hey Volinette! Surprised to see you here. Thought for sure you'd be soloing for the family by now."

Reanna made a strangled noise, but Volinette ignored her. Instead, she raised her own hand, returning the boy's salute.

“Sometimes even the purest note goes astray,” she said with a grin. “I’m so sorry, I can’t remember…”

“Baris Jendrek, of Wheatborne,” he provided with an answering grin. “Don’t worry. All us farm boys look the same after a while.”

He laid a finger beside his nose and winked at her. A warm flush crept across her chest and up her neck, making Volinette’s cheeks burn in a completely different way than they had just a short while earlier.

“Uh oh,” Baris said, sobering suddenly. “Show’s on.”

A reverent hush raced through the room as a diminutive figure in a night-black cloak entered. The sigils on the cloak were silver, but seemed to pulse with a radiance that could only be attributed to magic. The Head Master’s silver hair was pulled in a long braid that snaked down her back, standing out against black skin almost as dark as her cloak. It was a stark contrast to the royal purple robes she wore. Volinette knew, again from her beloved books, that there was no other Quintessentialist in all of Solendrea who wore robes of such a noble color. The purple robes were reserved for the Head Master of the Orders, and only the elected leader of the Quintessentialists could hold a claim to them. Maera climbed to the top of the platform and seated herself on the throne.

“Be seated, please.” Maera’s magically amplified voice bounced off the glass walls, penetrating the mind as well as the ear. She paused a moment, allowing enough time for the potential candidates and their families to settle. Then she continued.

“Welcome to the Great Tower of High Magic. You’ve traveled from the very edges of the Imperium to see your sons and daughters, your charges and students, participate in the trials that will determine this year’s apprentices to the School of Sorcery. Many of these young people come well prepared for the challenges they will face. However, some of them may yet be too inexperienced to prevail. It is to them that I put forth the following warning:

“The tests are not intentionally designed to cause harm. They have been refined over hundreds of years to judge and weigh the aptitude and knowledge of the candidate. They are, by necessity, more challenging than anything you are likely to have faced before. Each of you has the potential to be a future Master within the Grand Orders of Quintessentialists.

“I will not lie to you and tell you that no one has ever died during the trials. Unfortunately, there have been incidents beyond our best laid plans that have caused some hopeful candidates to pay for their dreams with their lives. However, we will do everything within our power to ensure your safe completion of the trials.

“Now is the time for you to decide. There is no shame in stepping aside today and returning later with more knowledge and experience. Decide to stay, or decide to go, but either way, you must make a decision that could change your life forever. Mothers, fathers, siblings, and sponsors, it is time to say goodbye.”

Maera stood up and cast an appraising eye over the crowd before sweeping down the small staircase and out of the room. Her exit seemed to spark a low murmur of excited conversation. Volinette dared to look at her mother for the first time since the Head Master had entered the room. Reanna’s lips were still set in the thin white line that they’d been in since they had been outside in the courtyard. There was a fluttering lurch in Volinette’s stomach, but she forced it away. She’d already made up her mind.

“Come, Mother, it’s time to finish what I’ve started.”

Volinette wove her way through the milling crowd toward an elderly Master standing near the doorway that led out of the High Council’s Concordance. In one arm, he hefted a stack of

parchment. In the other, he held an ornate quill. He smiled at her as she approached, and Volinette felt another flutter of uncertainty.

“I’d like to register for the Trial of Admission,” she said with more confidence than she felt. “What do I need to do?”

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