

81: Setting The Stage

“You shall go no further, foul demon!” A boy, clad in armor way too big for him monotoned in a robotic voice. He was no more than eight years old, yet the steel armor he wore was real. As was the dagger in his hand, that looked like a sword for such a small figure. And the realness of his armaments showed in a way that the boy could barely stand up straight and used both hands to keep the steel dagger above his waist.

“Grrrr-agh! You are no match for me, foolish hero!” Another boy growled at the armored kid who could barely keep his balance. This boy seemed not much older, maybe a year. Two at most. He was also a beastkin, type-cast for his role as a scary monster. He remained on all fours even when he talked, and was dressed in several layers of furs with strange, cracked black plates sewn own all over his garbs at random places, and a twisted black helmet that hid half his face. Clearly, he played the role of some monster or a bug.

“Take that! Gu-rah!” the ‘bug’ lightly pushed the armored ‘hero’ who unceremoniously fell on his back with a loud thud.

“Gasp! Oh no!” a dozen children cried out in make-belief horror.

The children stood upon a brightly lit stage. The stage was large enough to fit no less than a hundred people, should such a need ever arise. And the several dozen rows of seats that were placed in a semi-circle arc facing the stage could seat an audience of at least four hundred humanoid beings.

But currently, there was barely any audience present. A couple of maids sat in the front row. They had several trays of untouched food prepared in front of them: fruits, bread, cheese, thin slices of ham. The food was obviously not for the maids, but for those that were on stage. Or *someone* among them.

Two guards in plated armor, armed with long, sharp spears, stood at their post at the tall arched doors that were the entrance to the auditorium. Several more guards were spread throughout the auditorium, though none close to the stage itself.

“Oh no! Our chosen hero has been defeated!” One of the girls among the crowd of children exclaimed and turned toward a teenage boy beside her who had a golden crown on his head. He wore old, ruined clothes that clashed with the real gold crown on his head. A gray wig and a messy fake beard glued on his jaw suggested the teenager was playing an older man.

“What shall we do, king Selirius?” another child among the crowd asked the teenager with the fake beard.

“I do not know, nor do I care!” the bearded teenager declared and sniffed his finger, sliding it past his nostrils back and forth several times.

“It is hopeless!” another kid declared. “Left without a hero! Left without a leader! We are doomed!”

“But wait!” A girl cried out and pointed off stage with a trembling finger. “Who is that approaching from the distance?”

The kids looked to the side of the stage, where the girl was pointing, emphasizing their search by blocking their eyes from the non-existent sun. Strangely though, despite the fake premise and situation, a tinge of unease was present. A smell of true fear, that seemingly had no place in this playful children's play.

Several children were sweating, though the air in the auditorium was far from hot. In the back row of the small crowd, a few of them were even trembling and glancing at each other. The girl who pointed the finger could not stop her hand from shaking, as if a real monster had been approaching, opposed to the make-believe one that stood on all fours before them.

"Fear not for I am here!" A girl's voice echoed through the auditorium.

A pink-haired teenager walked on stage, followed by two more girls carrying red banners. The red banners displayed a single-color female figure that held a bolt of lightning in her hand above her head, ready to strike down those below her. All three girls wore armor, though the pink-haired girl stood out by far.

An undisputed beauty even at such a young age, the thirteen-year-old had her armor decorated with shining jewels. Even her braid—that collected her hair in a graceful, luscious ponytail—was pure gold with three diamonds at the top.

The girl stepped on stage with utter surety. She held her head high, her back perfectly straight. A slight smile, because she knew she was the best. The whole world belonged to her. The whole world was her stage.

One of the unremarkable boys in the crowd took a step forward and asked, "Who is this fair beauty?"

The pink-haired girl grimaced. Her perfect aura snapped as her face contorted in a rageful fury.

"THAT'S WROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOONG!" the pink-haired girl screeched like a banshee and unleashed a crackling wave of electricity straight at the boy.