

Excerpt from The Game: Beta Testing (Fractured Memories Series) by A. Dalcourt
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The auditorium was buzzing with nervous energy and excitement. Students were dressed in various costumes suited for their pre-determined roles, while dramatically rehearsing lines. Every year, like clockwork, the theatrical entertainment festivities were put on and aired across the nation. Funding was provided to the schools based on the number of viewers they manage to capture during a two-hour timeframe.

Since entertainment was rare and considered by the former regime to be a time waster, this special event was often the only time the average person could lose themselves in a different world, as long as it followed strict guidelines and government approved scripts.

In past years, the Academy pushed out, on average, three teams. This year, though, there was an inundation of willing participants. This could be due, in large part, to Seth's involvement in this year's production.

He had been asked to participate in previous years and had always managed to find a scapegoat, but, this year, he took the bullet for a friend. Sadly, the sentiment backfired when both of them ended up punished, because someone like him 'should know better than to stick his neck out for trouble makers'.

To make matters only mildly more annoying, he later learned that his friend had been innocent of the crime and had been covering for another friend. That friend, jealous of the attention that the punished were receiving, joined the troupe in order to show off how amazing he was.

"Got all of your lines memorized, Mr. Hero?" William chided, nudging Seth in the ribs. William was shorter than Seth by foot. He had wild brown hair, which he was intentionally growing out to spite his father. His dishevelled appearance, he felt, would give him that bad-boy look that girls would find irresistible.

He had to commend William on his attention to such details. He seemed to instinctively know what it took to get what he wanted. He, on the other hand, felt like he was constantly guessing at people's motivations. At this time, he focused on doing the best that he could and maybe he might have a bright future ahead of him.

Seth had dark, shoulder length hair, which was within acceptable parameters of the school code. He had an athletic build and only in the recent years had he begun building muscles over his otherwise wiry frame. He was quite pleased that no one would have thought him as ever being the sickly child that he had been, always just one step ahead of death. For the time being, he was healthy and strong, though he feared that his old friend would one day return.

Seth nodded as he looked at himself in the mirror and adjusted his costume. "Nicole must have wanted to practice that kissing scene with you like a million times. You think Astral was jealous?"

"How could she be? She didn't turn up at any of the practices." He thought she was a little more responsible than that. He had taken the time to practice his lines and dedicate them to memory, and paid careful attention to the direction offered by his team leader.

"I heard she's with a different group," William whispered as though it was a massive conspiracy theory designed to keep the three of them apart.

"Who's with a different group?" Nicole asked smiling a wide toothy smile. Seth knew that she meant to be genuinely friendly, but he found the exposure of her teeth unsettling. The gesture didn't lend itself as happiness

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at seeing a friend, but, rather, it was more like that of a predator baring her teeth, pearly and big. Did she put something on them to make them so glossy? The way her lips moved, as though trying to avoid contact with each other, he figured she probably did apply something to her teeth.

“Earth to Seth,” she sang, trying her best not to be offended by his lack of attention.

“Sorry, go ahead,” he replied politely, forcing his eyes to move upward to her eyes. She was a faux blond, but took enough care to hide her dark roots. Her hair had been styled in a late 1920’s look and set as an immovable mass, a picture of perfection.

“A bunch of us are planning to get together tonight for a little after party celebration. We would like it if you’d come,” she offered again.

If it was anything like her one-last-late-night-practice-session, he could do without. He could see William quietly trying to get his attention. His excitement at the opportunity was almost palatable. He had no idea that the invitation was meant only for Seth, though he suspected if he invited William along, the young student would completely miss the hesitant acceptance that would no doubt follow. He smiled politely and nodded, “I would like to bring a guest if that’s okay.”

William’s eyes glisten brightly in thanks. He had hoped that the ‘guest’ was vague enough that other assumptions could be made. He watched the flashes of emotions play across Nicole’s over powdered face: irritation, indignation, and finally acceptance as she devised a work around to her false assumptions. She didn’t even notice William, so he assumed that she figured that he intended to bring Astral, who was rarely seen without him during her free-periods.

He hated large gatherings. He’d show up with William, set him loose on the gathering and then disappear while the young student made a spectacle of himself.

“Great!” she tried to sound more excited than she felt. She moved in closer to him, her body only a few inches from his own. She added in a seductive tone, “I’ll see you later,” then tried to move in for a quick kiss.

He turned his head quickly, causing her to miss her intended target, kissing him on the cheek instead.

Her hips swayed invitingly as she exited the dressing area. She cast one last glance over her shoulder and winked before vanishing into the chaos.

“She so wants you,” William teased.

“She’s not exactly subtle is she?” Seth sighed.

“What’s your problem? She’s so hot. If I were in your shoes I would-“

“You’d finish before you even got started,” Seth finished.

The lights dimmed, signalling the five-minute start before the production. It was good timing, too, because this was not a conversation he wanted to carry on with William, of all people. He reminded him of a horny Chihuahua, dick hanging out and begging for a little touch. He found it revolting.

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Seth pulled on his jacket. It was long, dark blue velvet and cut him off at the ankle. It accentuated his height, now past the six-foot mark, but did little for practical combat. His shirt hung open revealing his bare chest. His pants were a little too tight, making it a little difficult to walk properly. Overall, he felt that this combination of apparel was more of a fan service than playing to any historical accuracy.

Much of the cast bore equally outrageous fantasy costumes. For a moment he pictured Astral happily pretending to be a sheep somewhere. It seemed to be the general consensus that an Enhanced student shouldn't even be in the production and therefore deserved as little screen time as possible. After a bit more thought, he figured she'd more likely be trying to get the sheep to revolt against their shepherds in a humiliating, but perfectly just, spectacle.

The auditorium was filled with translucent spheres just big enough to hold a fully grown human being, while offering a few extra feet to provide that sense of space. Each dome would project a predetermined setting and each character could act within that field independently of the action taking place in another. The computer would dictate the camera angles. Most of the script had determined in advance which shots would occur and when, similar to a professional broadcast production. There was always lingering human element acting behind the scenes, ready to take control in case the algorithm failed in some way.

He assumed his position within the auditorium.

The world around him vanished as a brilliant white dome surrounded him. A booming voice filled his world. "In a far off land where magic is real and princesses need saving..."

The world shaped itself. He stood at the foot of a dark foreboding castle. Lightning streaked across the sky, revealing the silhouettes of several crumbling towers. In one of those, his princess was awaiting rescue. If this hero had any sense, he would just go back home.