



The Audition

"Red Riding Hood?" The voice of Tom Thumb, Grimm Academy's drama instructor, cut through twelve-year-old Red's thoughts like a woodcutter's ax slicing into a willow tree.

Startled, Red dropped her Academy Handbook. *Thwap!* It hit the floor. The pages of the script she had tucked into it scattered.

It was Friday in third-period Drama class, and Red had been quietly rehearsing her scene as she waited backstage for her turn to audition. She was trying out for the lead role in the upcoming school play, *Red Robin Hood*. It was her first time auditioning for a play. But, hey — why not think big?

She would have auditioned for last year's play, too, but she'd been unable to fit Drama into her schedule until this term. Rule 56 in the Handbook: *You must be enrolled in Drama class to be eligible to try out for school plays.* Still,

she'd been acting all of her life — even if it was only in private for family and friends.

Sweeping the script pages and handbook aside with one ankle-booted foot, Red hastily called out a reply through the blue stage curtain. “Coming!”

Her heart hammered inside her chest as she straightened her red cape squarely over her shoulders. Then she pushed her way through the heavy velvet curtains and stepped up to the front of the stage.

“Don’t be nervous, don’t be nervous, don’t be nervous,” she whispered to herself. The auditorium’s acoustics were perfect, so anything she said in a normal voice onstage would be heard throughout the room.

Mr. Thumb, who was no bigger than . . . well . . . a *thumb*, hovered in the air only a couple of feet away from her face. He wore a hat made from an oak leaf, and a thistledown jacket that he was very proud of. It had been given to him by a fairy queen! Riding an iridescent orange and black monarch butterfly, he was a dramatic sight as he fluttered back and forth above the lights at the edge of the stage.

He’d come here once upon a time when Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm had founded the Grimm Academy, as well as the realm of Grimmlandia, as a safe place for all fairy-tale and nursery-rhyme characters to live.

Mr. Thumb and his butterfly buddy, Schmetterling (which was the German word for butterfly), were both actors who had traveled all over Grimmlandia before settling down to teach drama here at the Academy. They were famous!

After consulting the little vellum paper list he held in his tiny gloved hands, Mr. Thumb glanced up at Red. "You're auditioning for the lead? The role of Red Robin Hood?" His voice was as tiny as he was, so he used a silver thimble as a bullhorn to make himself heard.

"What a coincidence!" the butterfly exclaimed in a tinkly voice that reminded Red of wind chimes. "Her name's practically the same. Must mean she's meant for the role!"

Hope rose in Red, and she sent the butterfly a wobbly smile. Part of her Drama grade depended on her audition performance. But more than anything, she wanted that starring role. Acting was her dream. And like Schmetterling had said, the role of Red Robin Hood was *made* for her. She loved the character and was sure she could bring it to life, if only she was given the chance.

Mr. Thumb frowned at the butterfly. "Her name is not the same at all, Schmetterling! *She's* named Red *Riding* Hood. The character in our play is a girl named Red *Robin* Hood. Completely different."

The Drama instructor signaled someone in the back of the room. Red blinked as a spotlight as bright as a hundred candles suddenly found her.

“Ready when you are, Red,” said Mr. Thumb.

“Good luck!” the butterfly told her. With that, the two of them zoomed offstage.

A waiting silence fell. Blinded by the spotlight, Red could see only dark shapes filling the auditorium seats. Those shapes were people. Some were students who’d already auditioned or would soon be auditioning. Would they compare her performance to their own? Judge her? How would she stack up?

“You can do this, you can do this, *youcandothis*,” she muttered under her breath.

And she knew she could. Really. She was a drama-queen-and-a-half when it came to acting. Nothing made her happier than to act out bits from her favorite stories and plays for her BFFs, Rapunzel and Snow. Last night she’d even rehearsed her *Red Robin Hood* scene for her newest BFF, Cinda (short for Cinderella), who’d just started at the Academy this term.

Still, Red had never auditioned on a real stage before. In front of a big room full of people. Her hands and knees shook.

“Ready when you are,” Mr. Thumb repeated from somewhere in the darkness beyond the stage lights.

“O-okay.” Red’s mouth felt as dry as an old leather trunk.

All at once, every single word she’d memorized flew out of her head as if riding away atop Schmetterling. How grimly frustrating! She knew this *Red Robin Hood* scene by heart! She’d practiced her lines so many times, she could almost recite them backward.

Seconds crawled by like hours. From the back of the room, one of the dark shapes coughed. The sound echoed throughout the auditorium. Red just stood there, feeling lost.

“I — um — I,” she stammered.

Tendrils of her long, dark curly hair, which had glittery red streaks in it, were sticking to her forehead. The spotlight was making her hot and sweaty. Why, oh, why had she worn her cape? It was making her even hotter. Should she take it off?

As she reached to do just that, her stomach clenched. She’d only eaten a single bite of the knick-knack paddy-whack pancake-stack Mistress Hagscorch had served for breakfast in the Great Hall that morning. Had that one bite made her sick? Or maybe she was simply too hungry to concentrate. Or too nervous.

“Red, are you okay?” It was Mr. Thumb’s voice again.

“Sure. Fine. I —” But suddenly, she felt weirdly dizzy. She smiled brightly into the darkness. Then before she could finish her sentence, she crumpled onto the stage floor.

Thump!

Next thing she knew, she heard the hum of flapping wings close by. A bug was buzzing around her face. With her eyes still shut, she batted her hand at it. *Whack!*

“Whoa! Watch it!” a tinkly voice called out.

Red’s brown eyes popped open just in time to see Mr. Thumb and Schmetterling whirl off in a spiral, surprised looks on their little faces. *Oops!* She’d smacked them away!

As she watched, Mr. Thumb lost his seat and began to fall. Luckily, Schmetterling recovered quickly and zoomed over. Mr. Thumb landed astride the butterfly.

“Wh-What happened?” Red asked, looking around woozily. She couldn’t figure out why she was lying flat on her back on the wooden stage.

Slowly, she became aware of the circle of students around her. Their faces wore a mixture of concern and alarm as they stared down at her. How embarrassing that they were all seeing her like this, stretched out on the floor!

Not only that, they'd just seen her whack the teacher. A mistake like that couldn't be good for her Drama grade. But that paled in comparison to botching her audition!

Red tried to push herself up. Her arms were all tangled in her cape. Her entire top half was wrapped up like a red mummy.

Creak! Someone kneeled behind her on the stage and looped a strong arm around hers.

"Hey, I always thought you were a little dizzy, Crimson," a boy told her in a low voice as he helped her up to a sitting position. "You didn't have to faint to prove it."

Wolfgang? It had to be. That boy was always calling her by red synonyms instead of her real name. Which was so annoying. He'd started doing it last year when they'd had Calligraphy and Illuminated Manuscripts together. Apparently he'd noticed all the different names for shades of red ink. She was taking the class again this year, but not by choice. Her teacher had insisted on it since her penmanship was grimmtrocious.

Now that she was sitting up, Red fought her way out of her tangled cape. Then she looked over her shoulder at Wolfgang. She could hardly believe it! Mr. Anti-social — being nice? But there he was, a teasing grin lifting one side of his mouth.

“Name’s Red,” she mumbled. Of course he already knew that. They’d both been going to Grimm Academy since first grade.

Wolfgang’s grin widened. Why had he helped her? He hardly spoke to anyone. Ever. He didn’t show up at GA parties. He hadn’t even attended the ball Prince Awesome had given at the Academy last weekend. He didn’t have many friends. Probably because he mostly ignored everyone. Wolfgang seemed to prefer hanging out on his own in Neverwood Forest. Where anyone with half a brain “never would” go. Basically, he had a reputation as kind of a loner.

Still, in spite of all that, lots of students seemed in awe of him. Probably because he acted all cool and confident. The way Red wished she had acted a few minutes ago while trying to audition for this play.

In a hurry to put the whole episode behind her, Red leaped to her feet. She stumbled a little in her cape as she took a few steps forward.

Wolfgang to the rescue again. He stood and grasped her arm, steadying her. He was a lot taller than she was, so when he tilted his head down to look at her, a curtain of brown hair fell across his face. With a flick of his head he flipped it out of his pale gray eyes.

“You okay?” he asked. Although his eyes were teasing as always, he really did sound concerned. Or maybe he was pretending for some reason. After all, he was a gifted actor. In fact, he’d been grimmazing as the second lead in last year’s play, *Peter and the Wolf*. Word was that he could shape-shift, too, though Red wasn’t sure if anyone had ever actually seen him do it.

“Uh-huh,” she replied. “I’m fine now.” Still feeling embarrassed about her fainting episode, she snatched her arm free.

Immediately the friendly, teasing expression in Wolfgang’s gray eyes faded. He tucked his fingers in his back pockets and hunched his shoulders. His head dropped forward, so that his hair shadowed his expression, and he took a few steps backward.

“Wait —” She took a half step in Wolfgang’s direction. She should thank him. He’d been trying to be nice after all. And in her embarrassment, she’d been kind of rude in return.

“S’okay,” he said. “Glad you’re feeling better. See you, Scarlet.” With that he ambled off, acting all casual like she hadn’t hurt his feelings.

“Red! My name’s Red,” she corrected, frowning after him.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Thumb asked.

She looked over and saw that he and Schmetterling were hovering just out of reach. Probably afraid of getting accidentally whacked again.

Pushing her dark curls back, Red nodded. She wished the crowd of students around her would leave. The way they were staring made her feel like a bug under a magnifying glass. She caught Schmetterling's sympathetic glance. He could no doubt relate to that feeling!

"What do you think happened?" she heard someone whisper.

"Stage fright, I bet," a boy replied.

"Yeah, some people can't handle the pressure," said a girl with a British accent.

Red pretended she hadn't heard the comments. Though the first thing was true, she hoped the second one wasn't. She was no weakling!

"Sorry about fainting and about whacking you both," she apologized to Mr. Thumb and his butterfly. "It was a reflex action."

"No worries," said Schmetterling. "We've been booted out of enough theaters in the past to be accustomed to a certain amount of reject —"

"Ahem!" Mr. Thumb interrupted. "Apology accepted," he told Red.

She smiled, relieved, but she still couldn't believe what had just happened. She'd fainted. Failed her audition. What a nightmare! Acting had been her dream forever. But maybe she'd only been kidding herself. Her heart sank at the thought. Was it possible that she wasn't born to be on the stage, after all?