

“*Danke.*” It was the fourth time that day passing through the door and the fourth time saying “thank you” but Sonya didn’t mind the repeat. She was busy and tired but not ungrateful. Nervously, she patted the back of her bodice to make sure all the silver hooks were clasped, and then unconsciously dropped her gaze to her black-scuffed shoes. No ribbons were peeking out, but Hans might ding her for wearing a pair that was so dirty with the grime of the marley.

“Step right,” said Aelise.

“I remember; it’s just my feet that don’t.”

“Hug.”

“Yes.”

The two women embraced- the one sweaty, the other dry and warm- and Aelise limped off to collapse somewhere in the green room. It was hard to see her with the golden skirt and tiara, harder than Sonya had thought it would be. There were rumors of promotions skimming through the air but she expected that her name was not a part of the equation. She’d been injured for too long, forgotten too many little moments, and hadn’t made the right connections in time. Tonight’s performance was a typical one, but if she could get through it smoothly, then that would be a small victory one and a bit of news to keep her spirits from sinking.

Minutes later she was as sweaty as Aelise had been. Why was the water cooler always empty, always drained by those thirsty kids who incessantly crowded the stage?

“Sonya!” It was Deborah, the production manager, approaching with her headset askew and her eyeliner smudged.

“What? Did I- in the beginning I-“

“*Nein*, not that. Hans called up. He said he wants to meet with you in the studio during your break tomorrow. God willing.”

“If you’re sure...he wants me to go...”

“Listen, Sonya, you don’t need to be afraid of him. It’s Hans. Seriously.”

“This is my last chance.”

Sonya walked off pointedly, even though she knew that Deborah would have more to say on the subject of why Hans wasn’t that scary and why she should take more selfish chances. It was a familiar speech. Too many other company members had given it to her. She didn’t want to listen, stubbornly enough.

Suddenly, there was a loud popping noise and all the lights in the theater snapped off; the audience sighed and Sonya heard scattered groans backstage. This was the third time that the army had cut power during a show, and it was getting quite tiresome. They liked to do it particularly to intimidate the Union, since the Union refused to be taken under the protective umbrella of the government and instead insisted on remaining an independent arts organization. But the army also did it for practical reasons- there wasn’t enough power to go around. So the theater was the first to go. The stage crew was having to get used to working with the glowing tape for guidance during the blackouts.

Ten minutes passed without power. In the darkness Sonya flexed her feet and listened to the sounds of other dancers jumping up and down, trying to keep their muscles warm. The show would resume if power was restored within five more minutes. Jaan, the sound manager, timed it.

“Show’s up! We lost twenty minutes on this one.”

“Yeah, and I lost my week’s worth of coffee. My landlord just upped the rent, so I’m living off noodles and water.”

“You can always stop by my place, Dmitri. Have dinner with my family.”

“Can’t. I’m having visa problems. Gotta stay in my district until things clear up.”

Sonya remembered the immigration issues with a grimace and a shudder that ran down her shoulders. She had citizenship, but her fiancée, Dan, didn’t. He was confined to the American district except for when he visited the theater, for that was the one ground where all races were allowed to mingle. They were even having problems there, though, for she’d heard gossip about several of the children being quietly dismissed, in order to prevent a legal fiasco. Sonya hated it, hated the touchiness of the subject. No one wanted to admit it, but the prevalent question was always, “Are you a citizen? Are you loyal?”

She gave a last resigned look at the dim outline of the stage, then carefully made her way to the exit door. They weren’t supposed to attempt the long set of concrete stairs during an outage, especially with the gap that lay somewhere on the second flight. It was less of a headache to head outside and just go around the building to get to the dressing rooms.

The substantial crowd of dancers was shivering in the 2 degree Celsius temperature of the night. Sonya joined them, feeling her legs shaking underneath the poof of netting that was her skirt.

“Jacket?”

“*Ja, bitte!*”

“Here; it’s not mine.”

*“Danke.”*

Sonya reached out and took the soft fleece that Bernhard offered. Quickly, she slipped her arms through the openings and snuggled her chin deep into the collar; she inhaled the strange scents of sand and hay that it carried. In the morning she'd have to find a way to return it to whomever it belonged to.

She followed the shuffling herd, all dancers being led by Jaan's flashlight, to the stage door. The dressing rooms would be dark, too, but the solar panels would give enough light for her to collect her belongings. Just as she was about to take the dark walk down the hall along with her fellow employees, she paused and tapped Lise, the receptionist, on the arm.

“Lise? Do you know whose jacket this is?”

“Mm, fleece, that looks comfortable.”

“It is. But whose is it?”

“Not Dan's?”

“No, he wasn't here tonight. Someone just handed this to me.”

“Is there a name on the collar?”

*“Ja.”*

“Whose?”

“Ari Sasaki...who's that? Is he a crew member?”

“Oh, Ari! How sweet!”

“Who is he?”

“You’ve seen him, I’m sure. He’s a student at the School. Polite, quiet...often holds the door for you up at the stage.”

“Oh- I- yes. Thank you.”

“Stay safe. I’ll be praying for you and Dan, for tomorrow.”

“*Danke.*”

Yes, she did know the owner of the coat, though she hadn’t realized it at first...