

In Check

©2017 by Zack "Snow" Podany

[Package location confirmed. Handoff is Ceremony.]

Agent Ross read the secured message on his mobile. The gray wolf had been tracking the digital trail of a BAAD smuggler using the alias Pocket Sand, currently believed to be supplying weapons of unknown origin to their thugs. The 'Ceremony' in question was an awards show featuring super hero fashions, the prize of which was a large ostentatious trophy. A brazen move to pass a weapon over on national television, but then that was Pocket Sand's M.O.

I need assets on site, he thought to himself, pulling up a database. Cross referencing the obtained guest list for the event with known heroes located one match, and luckily for him she was a designer in the contest. "Overwatch, this is Butterfly. I need the location of Snow Queen."

15 minutes later Ross was on the trail of a female snow leopard ducking in and out of the boutique shops downtown. There was an aura of certainty about her, how she moved and talked. Which is why it was rather out of character when her gait slowed and she started looking around trying to locate something before turning down a wholly unfashionable alleyway.

Snow Queen was a known member of MASKS, and they and HEEL didn't see eye to eye after all. Sure enough, as he rounded the corner a nearly invisible blade of ice pressed against his chin forcing his head to tilt back ever so slightly.

Piercing blue eyes regarded him from the shadows of the alley. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"I'm not here to arrest you Miss Farmon," Ross said calmly. The blade retreated but remained hovering nearby.

A quiet, frustrated growl rumbled. "So if it's not a business trip, pleasure?" Despite herself, the note of amusement in her voice was evident.

"I didn't say that. We have a common goal, we should talk somewhere."

Jenna Farmon walked into the light. "We're here now. Talk."

He turned to face her. "You're in the outfit design competition tonight. We have reason to believe the competition is rigged and BAAD is using the trophy to move a prototype weapon."

“So you want my help to get the trophy, is that it? And then I just turn everything over to you like a good little kitten?”

“Preferably, yes but I won’t force you. Contrary to popular belief, we’re on the same side Miss Farmon. If HEEL takes possession of the weapon we can study it, create countermeasures, possibly trace its manufacture. However, as long as the weapon is kept out of BAAD’s hands I would be satisfied. The choice is yours.”

Jenna was indecisive, and that made her irritated. She didn’t trust HEEL at the best of times, but she had to admit the agent was right about one thing: BAAD was their mutual enemy. “Let’s say I drink the milk, I decide to help you. What am I doing?”

Ross smiled a mirthless smile. “Making the decision. I’ll take care of the competition. You just needed to know what you were getting your paws on.” He handed her a plain white business card with a telephone number. “You can reach me here.” With that he turned and exited the alleyway back into the masses.

Night came. Getting into the event center wasn’t hard. BAAD didn’t have control of the building or the crew. Too many names on HEEL’s lists would draw attention. Instead they concentrated their efforts on the process and the prize. While the latter would be too difficult to compromise quietly and covertly, the former he could work with. The system that chose the winner was beyond his field tools to infiltrate, but the event center A/V system...

Jenna normally enjoyed this sort of affair; the flair and presentation that came with couture, but the presence of BAAD worried her. As a designer her role was to sit among the other designers in a line of chairs and nod approvingly or thoughtfully as models walked about in this year’s latest crime fighting fashions. Saving the city was a low paying job so designers like herself worked pro bono for heroes to gain exposure. Her designs on TV tonight could be in the news tomorrow and that’s when the paying customers start calling. That was her day job.

By most nights she became Snow Queen, the snow leopard with the command of snow and ice.

She didn't intend to become a hero, even with her abilities, but Golden Ghost's rebellion against HEEL and the COLLAR act earned her respect. It was her inspiration for her entry tonight. And yet here she was, thumbing the edges of the business card, ready to hand over an award to HEEL.

"And finally, our top award. Best In Show goes to," the announcer started as a drumroll sound loop filled entirely too much 'suspense time.' When the sound stopped, there was her picture along with her design on all the video screens. "...Whispers of Gold by Jenna Farmon of Minneapolis!"

Ross could tell, the announcer knew something was wrong by that pause when the winner was revealed. It didn't matter, the lion couldn't blow his cover if he had one, and his job was to repeat what was all around him. The trophy was brought out and presented to Snow Queen.

As she took hold of the award there was the sound of a charging electrical device, a loud snap, and she was on the ground holding her head. The trophy was still settling when ice spikes began surrounding the cat, pointed menacingly in all directions. The wind chilled and panic swept the room. Ross felt a vibe on his mobile and looked at the message he'd received just as a spike rushed past his ear shattering harmlessly on the railing behind him, others around not as lucky.

[Queen to Knight 1. Check.]

He tapped out a code and put the mobile up to his ear. "This is Butterfly. Code 9. Assemble the CAPES."