

Joker's Wild

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*(with thanks to Amelia Rodgers)
This is a sequel to my story Joker*

As Alec Freeman reached the outer office, Miss Ealand look up at him, concern in her eyes. "It's starting again. He's had another package."

She fingered her pendant, an abstract design in gold that had been a present from her employer. Six months earlier it had been sent to Straker as her kidnapping led at the climax of a series of vicious practical jokes aimed at the Commander. It had ended with a real bomb but it had begun with a fake - a package just like the one that had arrived this morning.

Alec hurried on. He found Straker in the security section, picking over the remains of a padded envelope and its contents with the technician, Lewis.

"Can of snakes?" Alec asked.

Straker nodded. "I thought they might have booby-trapped it incase we got careless but no."

He looked up and Freeman was concerned to see there were already lines of strain around his eyes. He did not know what to say but fell silently into step at Straker's side as he headed back towards his office. The file on the previous incidents was already on his desk - not that it would tell them anything new. They had gone over everything, every detail, at the time. There was no evidence but that this was the work the aliens - or of anyone else, for that matter. Freeman inclined to the notion that a human it was behind it to but he had no idea who.

Straker threw himself down in his seat and indicated for Alec to get a drink from the dispenser if he wanted one. He did. He took a bourbon.

"I assume -" he told his boss "- that you are going to take safety precautions this time."

Straker nodded. "And so are you, Miss Ealand and... and anyone else who might get caught in the crossfire."

Which they both knew could encompass almost anyone in SHADO and perhaps beyond. Not a pleasant thought but the thing that worried Freeman was that for once Straker looked unsure of himself, his eyes wandering from the report to Freeman, the activity in the control room and on, unable to settle anywhere.

"I've got nothing to get my teeth into." he protested and Freeman had to agree.

A thought struck him. "What about this new psychological profiling stuff that they're bringing over from the States? You think Jackson could come up with something on those lines?"

Straker thought for a moment. "It's worth a try. I'll send these down to him." He indicated the file.

* * *

Freeman left to get on with routine. There was nothing else he could do.

Straker smiled to himself. *He'll think of something.*

On impulse, he decided to take the report down Jackson himself. It gave him something to do.

It *was* down. Jackson's office lay on the deepest level of SHADO HQ. Straker had heard some people compare the journey to the descent into hell. He thought that was slightly overstating the case.

Jackson was sitting in the corner of his office, engrossed in a medical journal. He looked up as the Commander entered.

"You have something for me? Good."

Straker slapped the file down on his desk, irritated by that predatory, unreadable smile. "I want you to tell me about this guy. Who is he? What does he want? Most of all, what's he going to do next? You can do that?"

Jackson flicked through the first few pages. "So it's starting again. How do you feel about that?"

"I want you to profile him, not me. Can you do it?"

Jackson blinked, surprised. "Of course. But I'm also responsible for your mental health, particularly your ability to cope under stress. Are you under stress? How do you feel?"

Straker sighed through gritted teeth. It *was* part of the man's job, part of the reason he had brought him into SHADO. "I'm not happy about it. It's a distraction, an annoying and dangerous one. I have enough on my plate without that."

"So you think you're overworked?"

Straker suddenly saw the psychiatrist as the Snake in the Garden of Eden, wanting him to take the apple so he could find out his and God's reaction. Straker picked up the file and slammed it back down. "I do my job. Do yours."

He walked out.

There was another job he was reluctant to do. Putting it off had been part of the reason he had gone to see Jackson personally. When General Henderson had found out what had happened last time, he had given orders that if it should start again he was to be immediately informed. Straker looked at his watch. Two hours twenty minutes since the parcel had arrived. That was near enough to immediately.

He made the call.

And Henderson said nothing. Nothing at all.

Straker cleared his throat. Was the man still listening? Was he there?

Finally, gruffer than usual, the General said: "You'd better come and see me. Now." and rang off.

Puzzled, Straker left the office. Alec caught him on the way out and insisted on going with him.

"He didn't ask for you."

"All the more reason for going."

Straker shrugged and let him.

Outside, in the car-park, Freeman stopped. "Last time it went from the parcel to a paint bomb, which -"

"Was attached to the car while I was in Henderson's office. You're wondering if we should take some security?"

"I was wondering if Henderson was involved."

Straker glared at him. "You're paranoid, you know that? More paranoid than I am."

Freeman shrugged and carried on. "But yes, I do think taking extra man along wouldn't hurt."

Straker was also still speaking. "Henderson might be a pain in the neck but... Can you see him having the imagination?"

Freeman looked thoughtful. "You've got a point there. And the extra man?"

"I'll get one of their people to watch the car. The last thing they want is to look slack. Come on, the same goes for us."

He pulled open the driver's door - and was hit in the face by a blast of gas. Choking, he threw himself out of the way.

He could see nothing, his eyes streaming with tears, but he felt Alec beside him in a moment, pulling him away from the car. He could hear running feet advancing on them. He tried to speak but all that came out were coughs and splutters.

Alec was shouting for medics and security. Straker hoped there were only SHADO personnel are round.

But no, he heard Freeman explaining to someone: "It's some joker who didn't get his film produced. He's got it in for Ed."

Already Straker's eyes were beginning to clear, blurred and watery shapes appearing. By the time they got him down to the medical section he could tell the difference between figures and furniture. That gave him hope that there was no permanent damage. He did not bother protesting as the medics ran their tests, bathed his face with some kind of liquid and slipped an oxygen mask over his mouth. That eased the fire in his chest. He could probably talk soon, though for the moment he left that to Alec.

"What is it, Doc?"

"Some form of tear gas. Nothing to worry about, we've got it under control. Uncomfortable, though, I bet."

Straker was tempted to nod.

The doctor did some more tests and left. Only Alec now remained.

Straker pulled the oxygen mask a few centimetres from his face. "Better tell Henderson." He had managed it first croak, to his pleasure and surprise. "Are you nodding? I can't see details yet."

"I'm nodding." Alec replied. "I'll... get Miss Ealand to talk to him."

Straker snorted. "I'll be able to see him - call it after lunch."

"OK."

He could see the large shape of his friend heading for the door. Then he turned back.

"Ed?"

"Yeah?"

"You know what this means?"

It was Straker's turn to nod, reluctantly. "It means the joker has - at the very least - access to the studio. It means there's a fair chance he's a member of SHADO."

* * *

Henderson arrived at the studio soon enough to suggest that his driver had been speeding all the way. That being the case, he seemed to have curiously little to say.

"You alright?" he barked.

Straker was bleary-eyed and sore but he replied with a confident, if hoarse: "Fine."

He had been about to go back to his office. Now he was stuck in the medical section, feeling at a distinct disadvantage.

At that moment, Jackson walked in. "I have a preliminary report, Commander, though the details will take longer."

Henderson bristled at the sight of him - not an uncommon reaction but he had been the man's boss before Straker had poached him. The General put a hand out for the report. "Let me see that."

Jackson smiled slightly, his snake-like smile, as he gave it to him. Then he turned back to Straker.

"How you feeling *now*, Commander?"

Straker scowled. "We'll discuss that later. Get me those details."

"Of course." The voice was smooth. "But we should talk."

He nodded to Henderson and went out.

Straker watched him go, turning back to the General in time to see him shudder. He noted it, surprised, but said nothing.

Nothing.

This was turning into a stand-off - yet again. Why could he not get on with his boss? They had been friends, once.

He made an effort. "Can I help you, General?"

Henderson grunted. "I just want to be sure you can cope." He flicked through the pages of the report. "It's not exactly the same this time?"

"Seems to be more aggressive. Second attack last time was paint."

Again silence.

Finally Henderson tossed the report to him. Then, with a "Keep me informed.", he left.

And left Straker distinctly uneasy. Something about his behaviour had been different from his normal gruffness. Perhaps he also wished that they could restore their friendship. But, much as he might wish that, that was not what the Commander thought it was.

"It's just an impression" he told Freeman later, in his office "but..."

"But what?"

"I think he knows something."

Freeman frowned at him. "You think he's behind it? Set it up? Some kind of test?"

"I considered that." and his expression showed it had been serious consideration. "I can't quite believe... You know, I can't quite believe he'd get Miss Ealand involved. You or me but not her. No, but he knows something. How do we get it out of him?"

Freeman grinned. "I can think of -"

"Alec! I want serious suggestions."

"I've got some very serious suggestions." but he was chuckling.

Straker shook his head, permitting himself a slight smile and leaving that line of inquiry open. He turned back to Jackson's report. It told him little he did not know. The joker was probably male, technically competent, had an active (if warped) sense of humour, bore a quote and was close to Straker. That last was becoming increasingly apparent.

He sighed. Perhaps the full report would tell him more.

He turned back to Freeman. "You think we can set up some kind of sting?"

Freeman took a step forward. "If you're thinking of leaving yourself exposed -"

"You have any better ideas? Because I am not going through this again. Stop, start, stop, start every few months. I can't live like that and neither can SHADO."

He had allowed more of his anger out than he had intended to but he assumed that Alec had already guessed how we felt. He did not look surprised. He looked... concerned.

"Don't go all over-protective on me, Alec. I need to get this over with. SHADO needs to get this over with."

Alec had to agree. It was bad for security. It was bad for morale.

They put their heads together, knowing they had to keep any operation to the absolute minimum of people. Neither of the other colonels were included, not even Miss Ealand. What they did not know, they could not be accused of leaking. Besides Straker and Freeman, four security people were involved in watching the Commander - two of whom had still been in training six months ago. None of them were told a word more than necessary.

And Straker went about his business as if nothing was happening.

It was fine while he was down below. He hesitated as he left the office. He could see Miss Ealand watching him.

He turned to smile at her. "How are you doing?"

She smiled back, weakly. "I'm fine, sir. Just fine."

And we're all lying to each other, he thought.

He went out to his replacement car, a blue Jaguar with more than the usual options package. Its homing device was not tuned to any standard SHADO frequency.

He was not going home - another team had been sent there to neutralise the almost inevitable trick. Instead, he was going to pay a surprise visit to SHADO's training school. There was no point in making these things easy for his tormentor. After that, once his place had been given the all clear, he could go and get some sleep. If he could sleep. Waking up to another day of this was not exactly his worst nightmare but neither was it something he was looking forward to. It was, he had to admit, wearing him down.

Miss Ealand, though she did not know it, was being carefully watched by a security team who knew nothing of the rest of the operation. And Colonel Freeman was also unaware of his guardian angels.

Straker smiled at that thought. If Alec did not spot them, he could bawl him out. If he did spot them, he could bawl the security team out. It gave him something to look forward to.

He arrived at the old mansion that housed the training school and went through it like a dose of salts. Everywhere people jumped to attention or put that little extra effort into what they were doing.

He was pleased with the result. "I'll give you ninety eight per cent. Not bad on a snap inspection. Next time I expect it to be a round one hundred."

He went away feeling a little happier. SHADO was good. SHADO was the best.

And his security team were good enough that he caught no sight of them. His heart trembled a little. What if they were not there? What if they had been dealt with already? Or were part of the joker's plan?

Then he would face the joker alone and beat him.

I don't know whether that's paranoia or over-confidence, he thought to himself.

But he still hesitated at his front door.

Lewis came out to him. "Colonel Freeman ordered us to stay until you arrived, sir. It's all clear."

"Thank you, Lewis. You can go now."

In a few minutes, Straker was alone. He wandered around his front room, stopping to pick out a record at random. He was not bothered which, he just needed some background noise.

Then he went into the kitchen, wondering if he could be bothered to cook. There were a few things in the store cupboard but nothing seemed particularly appetising. He made a pot of coffee and left it at that.

The doorbell rang.

That had to be one of two people, Alec or the joker. (From a brief moment, the thought flickered through his mind that they might be one and the same person. He stamped on that instantly, feeling guilty for his disloyalty.) He almost hoped it was the latter. It was Alec. He was carrying fish and chips.

"Anyone else and I would have brought a bottle. As it is -"

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. But if I don't eat, it's because I'm not hungry."

Nevertheless he tucked in, covering the meal in salt and vinegar in the English manner, though he did insist on turning the food out of the newspaper onto plates and eating with knife and fork.

"Newspaper is for a park bench, Alec."

"Whatever you say."

His friend was watching every move he made and every word he said. He decided to get back to business. "Anything to report?"

Alec shook his head. "Moonbase caught a couple of strays an hour ago. No trouble. On the other matter, no, nothing. He's making us wait."

"Nothing from Jackson?"

"Same goes there. Pass the salt."

He suspected Alec might have stayed all night but he turned him out about half past ten. He was grateful for the company but any longer and he would have been admitting that there was a problem.

He slept well enough to wonder if Alec had doctored his coffee.

The next morning was bright and warm unlike his mood. He ate some toast, the smell of the previous night's meal still hanging in the air, and left for the studio.

All the way along he kept thinking: *will it be today? Will it be now? There should be one more before he goes for the big bang.*

There was a car broken down by the side of the road, a woman looking under the bonnet. It was so obvious a trap that it probably was not one, just a coincidence. Nevertheless, he ignored her. She could find a phone box or a house nearby.

He could phone from the studio, make sure someone found her.

He slowed as the car approached a blind summit. A slight bend, one more small hill and he would be within sight of the studio. He had to remind himself that he was not safe there at the moment. He wondered if his office -

He saw the line across the road and braked before he knew what it was.

Too late, he was over it. The tyres blew. He lost control. The car, with a mind of its own, swerved towards a tree.

He braced himself.

The car hit the tree, throwing him forwards. The seat belt jerked across his chest, his head stopping short of the steering wheel.

He took one deep breath and then was out of the door. Was that the whole trick or did the joker have something more lined up? He suspected the latter but he had no idea where the attack might come from.

At least the homing beacon should tell SHADO he had stopped abruptly. If it was still

working.

Without clues it was hard to know what to do but he had no desire to go back and check the device. Instead, he did the obvious thing and walked towards the studio. One hand was on his gun and his eyes were constantly moving, scanning for anything out of place.

He heard a vehicle up ahead. A rescue already? Or an attack? It was probably just some passing motorist. He stepped closer to the side of the road. Should he head for cover?

It was a Harlington-Straker equipment van. He stepped forward, then checked himself. The joker was at the studio.

Jonas stuck his head out of the driver's window. He was heading up the protection team. "Alright, sir?"

Straker outlined what had happened. "Get me back to the studio and get someone to clear the road. We don't want any civilians getting hurt. Have you called Colonel Freeman?"

Two of the team, Deng and Fredericks, got out and jogged up the road to the barrier as Straker climbed into the van. Jonas passed him the radio handset.

"Colonel Fr -"

A flash hit Straker's eyes, followed a moment later by a blast powerful enough to rock the vehicle. He knew already that his men were dead but he was out and running towards them before he knew what he was doing.

He stopped. There could be a second device.

He turned to Jonas. "Get a full security team here. Inform Colonel Freeman. And inform General Henderson."

Then he walked calmly towards the bloody wrecks that were his people.

* * *

By the time Alec Freeman knew what was happening, Straker was already on his way in. He went up to meet him, picking up a message from a sombre Miss Ealand that Henderson would soon be with them.

Ed said nothing when he arrived, striding past him into the office. Alec fell into step behind. What was there to say? Two dead and every chance there was a traitor - or a madman - in their midst.

Jackson was waiting in Straker's other office. "How do you feel now, Commander?"

"Have you got that report?"

"I think -"

Straker stared the shrink down as only he could. Jackson handed over a buff folder, smiled his predator's smile and left.

Straker threw himself into his chair - and stood again almost immediately as Henderson crashed in like a wave. Freeman felt like an outsider, an observer, as the two men glared at each other. It seemed like forever before one of them spoke.

In the end it was Henderson. "It's true? Two dead?"

Straker nodded. "It's true. The strip across the road was booby-trapped."

Silence again, palpable silence.

Then Straker spoke once more, cold and quiet. "What do you know, General? What aren't you telling me?"

Henderson blustered, not even managing to lie.

Then Freeman saw Straker go stiff. *He* knew something. He was skimming the pages of the report, which was still in his hands.

Almost to himself he muttered. "He's not even bothering to hide it. He wants me to

know." He looked up at the General. "Why?"

Freeman slipped the report from Ed's hands. He read the first page. Jackson... was describing Jackson.

It made an awful kind of sense.

Henderson was talking, still standing but his body slumped. "He came to me last year, proposed a test of your mental well-being. It all seemed perfectly reasonable. Just a few tricks, to see how you reacted. To see how close to the edge you were. It was never meant to be like this.

"I stopped it after the bomb. He swore to me it wouldn't have gone off but even so...

"When it started again..." The old man sighed. "Arrest him. Do what you like with him. I'll go to the committee. I'll carry the can."

Would he? Under normal circumstances Freeman would have doubted it but the General looked utterly defeated. He had got his own people, SHADO people, killed. He had lost his grip.

Straker spoke into the intercom, summoning Jackson. The man strode into the room, quietly confident.

"You have a question, Commander?"

Straker spoke quietly. "Why? Why real explosives?"

The man raised an eyebrow. "Would there be enough reaction otherwise? I assure you, they were perfectly visible. I'm sorry those men were killed but it was their own carelessness that did it. I do not feel I can be held responsible.

"But tell me, how do you feel now?"

Straker looked into his eyes for a moment, then turned away. "Alec, arrest him."

Freeman stepped forward.

Jackson was still speaking to the Commander. "You will give me time to finish my report? Before you have me executed? I assume that's what you're going to do."

Freeman shivered. "How can you be so cold about it? Your death, their deaths. Don't you feel anything?"

The psychiatrist turned to him. "That's a very good question but I'm afraid I'm not really in a position to study my own reactions. I should have liked to carry out a secondary study on you - I have made some notes to that effect - but I'm afraid there was never the resources." He turned to Henderson. "SHADO really is underfunded, you know, sir."

Straker had turned away completely. "Finish the report, I'll take it is your confession. Get him out of here, Alec."

Freeman led the prisoner away.

Later, after Henderson had gone, he found Straker sitting alone, writing reports. Top of the pile were two neat letters of condolence from the studio and a health and safety form. It would all be explained away as a production accident.

Ed looked up at him. "Was it my fault, Alec?"

"Your fault? How could it be?"

"Because I brought him into SHADO. Because I saw something useful in him. Because I went against everyone else's instincts, yours included. Because... Because of who I am. Do I attract trouble, Alec?"

Freeman sighed, got himself a whisky and sat down. "Anybody else and I would recommend we go out on a bender. You, I guess you want answers."

"I need them."

He shrugged. "I don't have them. Maybe you were wrong this time. You are not infallible, nobody ever said you were. Well, maybe they did... I only know you being you is not the problem, it's the solution. Usually." He sighed. "I assume Jackson will be executed? Do you want me to do it?"

Straker shook his head. "That's my job. I'm still having the other shrinks take a look at him. He'd be dangerous in a mental hospital... I don't know, I guess we have to get rid of him."

He looked down at his papers again.

Freeman put his hand on his shoulder. "You and I are going to take a turn around the lots and get some fresh air. Then you're getting something to eat."

Ed looked up. "Is that an order, Colonel?"

There was just the slightest sad smile in his eyes.

Freeman returned it. "Do you have anything better to do? No, don't answer that."