

Joker

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"There's a package arrived for you, sir." Miss Ealand reached under her desk to get it. Straker raised an eyebrow and looked across at Alec Freeman.

"It's probably some film student's show reel." Freeman said.

But the package turned out to be a fat Jiffy bag addressed in capital letters. Straker turned it over curiously. He began to peel the flap open. And stopped, tensing.

"What is it?" Freeman asked.

He showed him. A thin piece of copper wire was poking out. "I'll take the back elevator down to the security section. Tell them to prepare for a bomb."

Freeman began to protest but had the sense not to follow him out. The thing had come safely through the post but that did not mean it would complete its journey without detonating.

Even as he carried it, he was curious. This was not the alien's style - even taking into account their admirably varied approach to getting rid of him. Could someone else want him dead?

In the security lift was an armoured compartment, designed for holding suspect items securely. He placed the parcel inside and locked the door. The lift descended. When it reached the bottom he rolled the compartment out. Lewis from Security was there to meet him. He transferred the box behind the armour plating of a security cubicle, observing it on the high resolution TV screens before using the remote manipulators to open it and retrieve the parcel for investigation. Straker retired behind the toughened glass shield of an observation window and let him get on with his job. Freeman joined him.

"Nasty things, parcel bombs." Alec commented. "You never know who they're going to kill."

Already they could see Lewis was not getting the expected results. He frowned and bit his lip, plainly puzzled.

He spoke via the intercom. "I'm going to try opening it."

Straker nodded. The man knew his business.

He worked the flap open and pulled out a cardboard, plastic topped tube about the size of a baked bean tin. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled the top off.

The canister exploded into a mass of plastic snakes flying in every direction.

Straker blinked. He could not quite believe his eyes. It was a relief to see the other two were equally dumbfounded.

"Is that it?" he asked.

Lewis went over the items again but he had to nod. "There's just that one wire. It must have been deliberately placed to make it look iffy. Somebody's got a nasty sense of humour."

A joke. An idiotic joke. Straker could feel the anger rising but he clamped a lid on it. It was not worth it.

Freeman spoke to Lewis. "Give it a thorough going-over to see if there's any indication who sent it."

Straker shook his head. "Forget it. We have more important things to do."

He strode out. Alec followed a moment later. A long enough moment for him to suspect his order had just been countermanded. He said nothing. Alec was just being careful.

The next day was no better. He came out of a particularly unproductive meeting at Henderson's office with a head full of mutinous thoughts. Why couldn't the man see what his penny pinching might ultimately cost? But it was that *might* that did it. He had no proof.

He snatched open the door of his car and was hit in the face by a spray of paint. He spluttered, tasting it. Only paint, nothing worse.

He wiped it from his eyes and inspected himself in the wing mirror. He looked like someone had dumped a gallon of ketchup on him.

He glanced around. He could either go back into Henderson's office looking like an idiot or drive to the studio looking like an idiot. He chose the latter as the lesser of two evils. He used his ruined jacket to wipe himself off as much as possible, checked under the car and under the bonnet for any other little surprises and drove off.

He was in the shower, in the changing rooms beneath the studio, when Alec found him.

"Are you okay?"

"I think I'm going to have to cut this out of my hair." he replied peevishly. "And my skin is raw from scrubbing. Add to that the fact that half the studio saw me -" He stuck his head over the door. "I'm making a fuss over nothing, aren't I?"

"Maybe not."

He looked at Alec curiously. "They're just practical jokes. Annoying but -"

"But why?"

He gave a final rinse of his hair, wrapped his towel around him and came out. "You have a theory?"

"Maybe. I'm probably... It's probably just some prat with a grudge but it could be serious." He passed Ed's clothes over as he dressed and continued. "If they -" (Straker knew who he meant by they.) "- could undermine your credibility they could seriously damage SHADO. You know we run on morale."

Straker nodded thoughtfully. "So we cover it up."

"That's exactly what we don't do. You try and cover it up and you'll end up tying yourself in knots. You'll make an idiot of yourself without much help from them. No, you tell people. Tell everyone. SHADO get the whole truth, the studio get as much as they can handle. We even tell the press if we have to. Get their sympathy."

"And Henderson?"

Freeman pulled a face. "He doesn't have any sympathy. We avoid telling him."

Straker chuckled. They headed towards the security section, where the paint bomb was being investigated.

Lewis showed them the disassembled parts. "There's nothing here that can't be bought over the counter but the way it's put together is extremely sophisticated. Even if someone could come up with this themselves - and they might - it seems like an awful lot of hard work for a prank."

"And yesterday's package?"

"Local post mark, no fingerprints, contents could have been bought from any joke shop. We won't get anything more from that."

It seemed that they could not make any progress. The word went round both SHADO and studio and he received plenty of sympathetic glances. He was not sure if he was grateful or resentful. He *was* grateful when Alec insisted on checking his home out and found the itching powder bomb attached to the front door lock. They worked very carefully to be sure that did not detonate.

"Am I seeing a pattern here?" Alec asked.

"If you are, they'll probably change it next time."

Alec checked the whole place out. He wanted to put a guard on his boss but Straker would not allow it.

"Then I would look like an idiot."

"Next time it might be Semtex."

"That wouldn't make me look a fool, it would make me look a martyr."

"It would make you look a bloody mess."

"Not funny."

"It wasn't meant to be."

Alec eventually left and Straker, more tired than he cared to admit, went to bed - but not before he had checked to see that no one had apple-pied it. Of course, he could stay below ground until it blew over but that would be admitting defeat.

He did not sleep well that night.

The next morning he restrained himself from arriving at the studio at the crack of dawn. When he did get in, he found Alec waiting for him outside the office. He was wearing the kind of reserved expression that meant a major disaster had happened or was about to happen. He did not bother with preliminaries.

"I came in early because I thought there might be a real bomb in the post."

"You went through my mail?"

Freeman nodded.

"Miss Ealand let you?"

Alec's expression darkened and he felt a chill pass through him. Something had happened to her. Alec handed him a plain, C 5 Manila envelope addressed in the same capitals as before. Straker shook the contents into his palm. A note, a Polaroid and a small gold pendant. He remembered buying it for her two Christmasses ago, an abstract design he thought she would like. She was wearing it in the photograph. She did not look scared. She looked angry.

The note gave the location of a phone box about twenty miles from the studio and a time. There were two more words: *come alone*.

"You're not going to, are you?" asked Alec.

There a thousand reasons why he should not but something in his instinct told him to. He allowed no argument. Two hours later SHADO was on full alert and he was alone at the phone box.

"They won't let her go." Alec had told him.

Maybe, maybe not. This was the fastest way to learn anything. He waited the last few moments before the phone rang.

He picked it up. A muffled voice on the other end told him: "Phone box outside the Post Office, Littleton. Three minutes."

Then they hung up.

He hurried back into the car and gunned the engine. He knew where he was headed but it would be a close call to get there in time down the narrow, country roads. He arrived as the phone was already ringing.

He leapt out of the car and picked up the receiver. The same voice: "Box outside Safeway, Linford. Five minutes."

That one was further. Again, it would be a close call. He threw the car round the tight bends. A Range Rover taking a corner wide nearly stopped him. He managed to edge round it without a collision. Again, he reached the phone box as it was already ringing. A woman was just going to pick it up.

He pushed past her. "Sorry. It's for me."

He had no idea what she was thinking.

"Outside the church, Beaton. Two minutes."

"But I don't -"

Too late. He had been cut off.

He did not know where this one was. He had a map of the area open on the passenger seat but it still took him a moment to find the village. This was going to be the closest call yet. He roared away, hoping the box would be obvious, hoping they might give him a little more time.

He was lucky, the road led straight to the village green and the church. The phone was not ringing. Heart pounding, he ran to it, afraid he might be too late. He wrenched open the door. A moment later, the phone rang.

He sighed with relief and started to chuckle. He had no idea why he was laughing. He heard the almost silent hissing of gas. Not yet understanding, he pushed at the door but it would not move. His body was convulsing painfully as he laughed fit to burst his lungs. He could not stop, could not control his body.

Laughing gas, he thought. How appropriate.

Then, as the anaesthetic took effect, he passed out.

Alec Freeman paced up and down SHADO control waiting for something to happen. Everyone thought Ed was the emotionally detached one but hit him at a weak spot and he would react stronger than most men. Freeman could not believe the decision to go after Miss Ealand had been made with his head rather than his heart.

He had been gone for four hours now. Freeman had had him followed to the first box. Indeed, they had tracked him as far as the second. He probably knew that. But Straker had also removed the homing device that had been attached to his car before he had left the studio - but too late for Freeman to realise. *Idiot.*

If something did not happen soon, Freeman would blow a fuse.

The phone in Ed's office rang. He dashed in and snatched it up.

"Yes?"

It was the main gate. Miss Ealand had arrived on foot. He gave the order for her to be brought over and went up to meet her.

By her own immaculate standards she looked rough but it was mostly tiredness. He could see no obvious signs of injury. He pulled out a chair for her and she sat down gratefully.

"Before you ask, I saw nothing. They kept me in the dark or blindfolded."

"Fair enough but do you know where? Do you know if Ed was there?"

She shook her head. "But they gave me a message for you. High Top Field."

High Top Field? "That's it? That's all of it?"

She nodded. "If it means nothing to you, I suggest you look at an old map of this area. It sounds like a place name to me." She paused. "Have they got the Commander?"

"Probably. And before you say anything, it's not your fault."

He took her suggestion. High Top Field was on a hill the other side of the woods that backed on to the studio. It took him and Paul Foster less than five minutes to get there. When they did, however, there was nothing to be seen except an old scarecrow silhouetted against the sky.

"You think we're early?" Foster asked.

Freeman shrugged. Maybe he was being too optimistic but he had half expected to find Straker there. He had expected some further, final effort to humiliate him but...

He took another look at the scarecrow. Ragged clothes and a battered hat but there was something wrong about it. Something too stiff. He rummaged around to find a pair of binoculars.

The first thing he focused on was the shoes. Did scarecrows have shoes? The trousers were old, rough and baggy as was the jacket - but the hands were human and there was blood on the wrists.

He drew in a sharp breath. The scarecrow was tied to the bar not with rope but with barbed wire. He did not need to look at the face. He was out of the car and running across the churned earth almost before he knew what he was doing. He barely registered Paul following him. Even as he went, it occurred to him that the wire and the position it forced Straker into a were a deliberate giveaway so that he would be found.

It was a hard climb but he took it rapidly. He scanned the area for anything else he should see but soon his eyes returned to Ed. He knew he was conscious by the way he held himself away from the barbs - the thing that had given him away in the first place. Even so, the barbs had cut him at both wrists and neck. Straker turned his head slightly as he heard them coming and Freeman could see how badly his face was marked by pain and exhaustion. They had painted his face to look like a clown's, with big red lips, rosy cheeks and huge eyebrows. His lips moved as if he was speaking but Freeman could not hear what he said until he was nearly upon him.

"Get back. Bomb. At my feet."

He pulled up short and turned to Foster. "Go get a bomb disposal team and an ambulance. And tell Miss Ealand we found him."

Foster nodded and ran off down the hill.

"You too, Alec." Straker croaked but Freeman walked forward. He could see the device at his friend's feet.

"It's on a timer, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Can't see. But not long."

That would explain the wire. He might have struggled his way out of ropes or even broken the crossbar but with this he could barely move without shredding his hands. It made sense, in a vicious kind of way.

He had reached the bomb. The LED was flickering down from four minutes forty seconds. Far too short a time for help to appear. They must have been fairly confident of Miss

Ealand's arrival time - or else they had set this afterwards. He crouched down to get a better look.

"Alec, I'm ordering you -"

"If I defuse it, it proves I'm right. If I don't, what are you going to do about it? Now stop distracting me."

"One more thing. Miss Ealand?"

"She's fine. She told us where you were."

There was nothing alien about the device. It was complex and sturdy for a home-made bomb but in theory he ought to be able to defuse it. He could not see any anti-handling devices though its lack of a cover made it almost too tempting. At the back of his mind, he half expected it to hit zero then send up a flag saying *Bang*.

He carefully teased out one wire that went nowhere, then another. There was a real mare's nest of them. He traced a couple more that connected to unimportant parts. At least, he thought they were unimportant. That left half a dozen that could be the one to cut. Always assuming that cutting them did not set it off.

The clock was down to one minute thirty nine.

The tool kit in his pocket was tiny and the wire cutters hardly up to anything thicker than string. There was no time to run back for the larger tool box in the car. He gathered all the wires into a bundle, gripped them in the jaws, squeezed and hoped. They all parted.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

The LED was still counting down. He poked the innards but he could find nothing else. He had seventeen seconds. He could run. It would be the sensible thing to do, though he would not get far. He stayed where he was, still hoping he could do something to make a difference.

The display reached 0.00. Nothing happened.

Finally he could breathe.

He stood up, turning to take Ed's weight as he carefully unwound the loops of wire. Then he sat him down and helped him out of the filthy rags. His own clothes were underneath. Paul gave him a hand when he reached them. They wiped as much of the greasepaint off his face as they could, then carried him down to the road in time to see the ambulance arrive.

"You think it's over?" Ed asked on the verge of unconsciousness.

"Yeah, it's over." he said, fingers crossed.