

The S Factor

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*This is a sequel to my story **Sick Leave**
Contains some adult material.*

"Hello, Alec. Come to check on the new recruit? And Colonel Foster as well. Welcome to the Academy."

Freeman snorted. "Posh word for it."

The three men were standing in a computer lined room at the heart of the old house that was now SHADO's training school. Harris, the head technician, was standing by an observation window opposite the door. Paul Foster walked across and peered through the glass.

"So this is what it looks like from the outside."

He shivered slightly. Inside the other room, Kate Allen was going through the final and toughest stage of her three-month course - the virtual reality survival test. He watched in sympathy as she struggled weakly against the all encompassing electronics.

"How's she doing?" asked Freeman.

Harris rubbed his hands together. "Remarkably well. She's had very good results all along. A little weak on the physical side but I understand she's in line for a desk job?"

Freeman nodded, watching her, and Harris continued.

"Shouldn't be a problem then. And her S factor is through the roof."

Foster turned. "S factor? What's that?"

Freeman shook his head in mock weariness. "Remind me to post you down here for a spell."

Foster grimaced and repeated the question.

Harris answered: "It's not an exact measurement - more an art than a science - but it's the best predictor of how far up the ladder someone will go. Is made up of things like guts, intuition, lateral thinking, sheer bloody-mindedness -"

"We talking S for Straker, aren't we?"

Freeman chuckled. "He's the perfect 100."

"And you're second?"

"98." He grinned smugly. "I think you're 93 -"

"94." put in Harris. "And Colonel Lake is - perhaps I shouldn't say."

Foster grimaced again. "Better than me?"

Alec patted him on the back. "Comes to us all, I'm afraid."

"Ah, yes, well..." Harris looked both embarrassed and amused.

There was a long pause.

Eventually Freeman told him: "Go on, then."

Harris did. "Assuming nothing untoward happens - and it shouldn't at this stage... she's 99."

Freeman opened his mouth but for moment nothing came out. Finally he chuckled and muttered something under his breath. Foster thought it might have been "Attagirl".

* * *

After three hours checking paperwork, Foster felt like he had been through the endurance test himself but it all had to be in perfect order before Straker - and more importantly Henderson - arrived. He had just passed the last piece over to Alec when the call came to say they were there.

Henderson was in an unaccountably good mood, grinning to himself and refraining from picking nits. It had to mean trouble. Foster glanced at the others but they seemed as perplexed as he was.

It was right at the end of the meeting that the General dropped the bombshell. Harris came in with another sheaf of papers he passed to the Commander.

"They're only the preliminary results, sir, but I thought you'd want to see them."

Straker glanced through them, smiled and pushed them across the table to Henderson.

He pushed them away. "That's the other thing, Commander. I do not intend to let you hire your paramour."

Straker went as white as a sheet. Freeman turned the colour of beetroot and started to splutter.

Henderson stood up and walked towards the door. Straker followed him. He spoke too quietly to be overheard but all Henderson did was shake his head smugly. He carried on out to his car. Straker returned to the table and placed his head in his hands. In a matter of minutes his chances of happiness had been destroyed.

Then he straightened up, his face too cold and too calm.

Freeman and Foster converged on him but at that moment the door reopened and Kate herself walked in, hair still wet from the shower. She took in the scene and hurried over to them. The two colonels stepped back and Straker rose to greet her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

It took him two sentences to explain.

"Can he do that?"

"He can even stop the wedding if he wants to. Maybe that hasn't occurred to him yet. I'm sorry. And you've done so well. The report recommends you be made a colonel."

She shook her head, thinking. "There has to be a way it out of this. He took you by surprise but... Tell me, is he the old-fashioned type who finds women hard to deal with?"

Straker nodded. "You don't know how many times I've co-opted Ginny or Miss Ealand to contain him. You're not thinking of tackling him yourself?"

She sat down. "I have a few arguments up my sleeve and he doesn't know me. Maybe I can convince him."

The door opened once more. It was Harris. He had slipped out after Henderson had made his pronouncement.

"Excuse me, sir. I thought you'd like to know General Henderson's car has broken down."

Straker frowned. "That's very convenient."

"Yes sir, isn't it?" He broke into a grin as he left the room.

"Lateral thinking?" asked Freeman.

"Or just revenge?" asked Foster.

Henderson stormed back in. "I need transport."

Kate stood up, turned to him and smiled sweetly. "Certainly, General. Where would you like to go?"

He looked like the top of his head was about to blow off but it was quite clear he was not going to get another offer. Kate strode past him and he turned to follow.

* * *

Internally Kate Allen was fuming but she had spent too long in PR to let it show. How could the man be so petty and spiteful? Had he always been like that? Now she had to charm him. Had to, for Ed's sake. She had always been a bit of a snake charmer.

She led the way to her little blue sports car. She was glad that unlike SHADO cars it had no phone. They could travel in peace. She ushered him in and he sat down up with a grunt. She got in her side and drove off.

* * *

"Do you think she can do it, Alec? You think I'm being fair to let her try? She's giving up so much for me."

Freeman took his eyes off the road and looked at Straker, slumped in the passenger seat. "What else can you do? Wipe her memory? Would that be fair? She knows what she wants and she knows what she's taking on. What did she call you? 'An uptight -'"

"You think I'm doing the right thing?"

"If you don't, I'll marry her myself."

And you don't know how close I am to meaning that, Freeman thought.

"But what if something happens to her? What if I have to put her in danger? I'm not sure I could make the same decision as I did with Johnny."

And I hope to God you never have to. "She's a SHADO officer, or she will be. If it was me or Paul or any of us, we know what decision you'd have to make. She can handle it."

"Can I?"

* * *

Henderson had sat in silence for five minutes before Kate asked the question. "What do you want for SHADO, General?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you want SHADO to succeed? Win?"

"Of course I do." he grunted.

"Then you've got a funny way of showing it." She looked at him. "You do realise that SHADO's success depends very largely on Ed? And that under present circumstances, Ed will burn out in the next few years? Alec does what he can but he has his own job to do. Ed doesn't eat properly, sleep properly, relax. He's running on empty."

Henderson harrumphed. "And you can do what, exactly?"

"Keep him alive. Or out of a mental hospital. I can take work off his shoulders and give him something to come home to. Not to mention making SHADO's cover more secure. Give me the lowest rank there is but let me be with him."

This was not exactly the charm she had intended. She was getting too emotional. She did not entirely think Ed would drop dead without her but he had the world on his shoulders, literally. He needed all the help he could get.

Henderson said nothing. She glanced at him again. He was staring straight ahead.

She sighed with exasperation. "What you want?"

"What would you give me?"

She only hesitated for a moment. "Again, what you want?"

She had known the price might be high but her heart sank as he slipped his hand onto her knee. Was he serious?

"You do realise that if Ed ever found out he'd kill you?"

"Would you tell him?"

No, she would not but it was better to bluff him. "Depends whether you paid-up or not. Is that seriously what you want?"

Her stomach turned over at the thought but if it was the only way...

* * *

The car phone rang. Straker answered it. He sat up straight as he heard the news, his melancholy subsumed by business. Quickly, he rang off.

"Incoming?" Freeman asked.

He nodded. "They're still tracking it. Might be headed this way. Put your foot down, we'd better get back."

* * *

They had agreed terms. Once now and once more the night before the wedding. That made it perfectly clear it was not her he wanted. He wanted to best Ed. He had left the door open for the future if she needed to bribe him again. She shuddered at the thought but the first time had to be the worst.

She pulled up on an isolated woodland lane.

"What now?" She wanted to throw up. At least it did not seem he needed her to pretend like him.

"Kiss me."

She did. It was like kissing perished rubber.

"Take your jacket off."

She did and began to unbutton her blouse. "Yes?"

"Yes."

She thought about asking if he had enough room. She had never worked out the mechanics of doing it in cars. If he did not know, he could work it out for himself.

He put his hand on her arm. "Stop."

She looked up, curious, waiting for him to give her further instructions.

He looked her up and down. "I was right, you're a tart. You'd do anything to get your way, wouldn't you? Do you really think I want an ugly whore like you?"

She smashed him across the face. "I'm a virgin. And you're a monster. *What on earth do you want?*"

"Nothing. And you are getting nothing for me. Drive me to my office."

"Get real." She threw the door open and strode out. It was easier than chucking him out. Then a thought struck her and she turned back. She snatched the keys from the ignition and walked away. She had a good idea where she was but she did not think Henderson did.

Almost in tears, she had no idea what she was going to do now - either in the immediate or the long-term future. Could there be any way of making a life with Ed? Could she tell him what had happened? She suspected the old man wanted her to.

Yet, in his own peculiar way, had he really been trying to protect Ed?

A sound broke into her consciousness. A UFO, dead ahead. Just when she thought things could not get any worse. Then a thought hit her. They were probably after Henderson. She was going to have to defend him.

She ran back towards the car. "See it?"

"What?"

"Up there." She had no time to point. She scrambled in. Nought to sixty in the best time the car could make. She had enjoyed her time on the skid pan but doing it in the real world was a different matter.

* * *

"We've just lost it." Freeman told Straker. "I thought it was coming for the studio but it seems like it's heading for the middle of nowhere. Why can't they be obvious for once?"

Straker laughed harshly. "Remind me to ask them. Any information?"

"Not much. Seems to be between here and the training school. Could go for either, I suppose."

* * *

Energy beams hit the road before and behind her. She swerved, turned right, turned left. It was quite fun - if she could forget what the stakes were. Now and then Henderson barked an order. She ignored him.

She was heading for the studio as the nearest safe place. She wondered for a moment if they could pass the UFO off as a special effect. Ed would know what to do.

What she wouldn't give for a glimpse of Sky One.

The old man grumbled away beside her as she threw the car around.

Then the tyre blew. She never knew how. She hung on to the wheel like grim death. There was a gap in the hedge. She pushed the car that way, half sideways. It ought to be softer than tarmac. Most things were.

They dug a furrow through the ploughed earth, stopping three car lengths into the field.

"Now we get out and run."

"I'm too old to run."

"Tell them that. I doubt it's me they're after."

She got out of the car, went round the other side and dragged him out. She could hear the UFO coming in to land.

Suddenly she felt exhausted. The end of the training simulation was supposed to be re-invigorating but you were also supposed to rest afterwards. An hour earlier she thought she was struggling alone across a lunar landscape. She wondered if this was part of the test.

The alien craft was descending rapidly towards the far corner of the field. She pulled Henderson towards the gap where they had entered. Neither of them was moving very fast. They ran along the lane towards the house. It was only as they got closer she realised it was boarded up. There was little other cover except the sparse hedges.

"Are you armed?" she asked him.

"Of course not, I'm a general."

Ask a silly question. It meant there was nothing they could do except run and hide and they were not doing well at those.

A laser blast went past her. There was no way this was going to work. She glanced over her shoulder. Only one alien as far as she could see. A really stupid plan was forming in her head.

"Run for the house." she told Henderson.

Then she turned and ran back along the lane, directly at the alien. He pulled up, startled.

She shoulder charged him, knocking him spinning. He dropped his gun. They both dived for it. She got there first.

It had no trigger. Nothing she could find.

The alien had his hands on her wrist, forcing it round. She kneed him in the groin. He doubled up. Well, that was one thing they had in common with humans.

She ran her hands all over the gun. Finally they hit something. It fired.

The alien vaporised. The blast knocked her backwards, semi-conscious. She was not sure if the booming noise was inside or outside her head. She had obviously been standing too close.

She groaned and sat up. There could be another one. She ought to check. She felt more like lying down and going to sleep. She hauled herself to her feet and looked all round.

There was a flash of red, not towards the spacecraft but towards the derelict house. He was going after Henderson. She groaned again and hurried after him.

There was little cover down the lane but the hedge was between them. She sprinted as fast as she could, trying to get to the General before he did. Her lungs ached.

There was a gap in the hedge. She plunged through, scratched and annoyed. Where was he? Still ahead?

She raised the gun. She was still not sure how she had fired it but the alien had to be here somewhere.

She could see the back door of the house, surrounded by the overgrown remains of a garden. A child's swing rocked back and forth in the breeze. The alien was darting between the bushes. He was almost in.

He stopped, cocked his head, then turned to face her.

She dived for cover. He loosed off one shot then ran the short, unprotected distance to the doorway. The door was locked shut. He turned the gun on it. She turned hers on him.

Where was the trigger? She pressed the bulge of the butt. The door disintegrated as the alien collapsed.

She got up and jogged over. She was not sure how to tell if he was dead. He looked dead. She could shoot him again. She decided to check on Henderson, pausing to pick up the second gun as she passed.

Then she stopped. A thought had occurred to her. There was something more important to check on. She walked back across the fields, beginning to chuckle as she went. Entirely accidentally, without using any of the brains she normally thought of as her best weapon, she had achieved SHADO's Holy Grail. It looked like she had captured an intact UFO. After she had been officially kicked out.

Still, it would make a nice goodbye for Ed, something for him to remember her by. Not that she would be allowed to remember him, which hurt more than anything.

She reached the shiny metal cone and walked all the way around it. No obvious way in but that was someone else's problem.

Behind her she could hear the rumble of a mobile's engine as it came along the road. She went over to flag it down. Paul Foster jumped out and she briefed him, his eyes glazing over as he found out what she had got.

He shook his head and laughed. "Alec was right about you."

"What? What did he say?"

He grinned at her and walked off to inspect her prize, sending two men to retrieve Henderson and letting the driver radio in the good news. She remained behind - thinking, waiting. She knew Ed would be here in a few moments. Perhaps this would be the best note on which to leave him.

For a few minutes she was alone. Then she saw Henderson and his two minders walking along the road towards her. There was the roar of an engine and Ed's snazzy sports car swung round the opposite corner and pulled to a stop behind the mobile. He leapt out, closely followed by Alec.

"Is it true?" he asked even before he had reached her.

She gestured into the field. The smile on his face was worth anything she could give him. He inspected the craft minutely, then turned back to her. He glanced over her shoulder and his face turned hard.

She looked round. Henderson had arrived. He scowled at Ed, then even deeper at her. She took a deep breath, unsure of what he was going to say. He walked past her, touched the UFO. Everyone else stayed silent.

Eventually he turned to Straker. "You've got your new colonel. Now get me back to my office."

The collective sigh of relief must have been audible as far as the studio. The old man stalked off and one of the SHADO operatives was assigned to get rid of him.

Kate could hardly believe the way things had turned around.

Ed seized her hand. "Are you sure? This is your last chance to go back."

"Yes. *Yes.*"

Alec leaned in towards his ear. "Excuse me but - you did actually remember to propose, didn't you?"

Ed's look of surprise was almost comical. "Oops. I don't think I actually..."

He kept hold of her hand and there - in the middle of the muddy field - he went down on one knee. "Will you marry me?"

She beamed. It was real now. It was true. The future was fixed. "Yes."

He kissed her hand, stood up and got on with directing the retrieval of the UFO. She smiled, reinvigorated, as she worked beside him.