

After more than ten years, Captain Susan Tanner has an assignment to pilot a ship. Is she being stalked because of her past, or her new assignment? She knows only that she can't turn this new assignment down.

Shadow Run -- Book I of The Ancients' War

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# **Shadow Run**

## **Book I of The Ancients' War**

The man's lips stretched tight over his teeth, and he barked a single word, "Traitor!" then lunged. His right hand flashed out in a vicious karate chop directed at Susan's head.

She snapped her left hand up to deflect the punch, and the man's callused knuckles drove into the white ceramic tiles an inch from her ear. Pulverized tile peppered her body as her right hand shot out to slam into his throat. She felt his larynx collapse beneath her prosthetic hand.

Pain mingled with surprise washed over his dark features, and he staggered back a step, then caught himself and again scanned her body. He had expected neither her speed nor her strength.

Before Susan could act, he renewed his attack. Spitting blood onto the white tiles at her feet, he again came at her, this time half-turning and kicking out and up with his left foot, his boot aimed at her solar plexus.

She sidestepped enough to avoid his kick, then planted her bare feet as firmly as possible on the blood-slicked tiles in Luna's one-sixth standard gravity and shifted her weight. In the same motion, she brought her right elbow crashing down into her attacker's knee.

Bone shattered beneath flesh and his face contorted in pain. He tried to cry out, but the only sound his ruined vocal cords could produce was a soft gurgle. He crumbled to the floor at her feet.

Propping himself up on one elbow, he looked into her eyes. His gaze sent a cold shiver up her spine; it held a seething hatred greater than anything she had ever before seen.

Then she saw it: an inch long, white, horizontal figure-eight tattoo on his left temple. The symbol for infinity.

Without another word, the man fingered the pendant hanging about his neck, and silently disappeared.

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# **Shadow Run**

**A. C. Ellis**

# 1

Even before she stepped from the shower, she knew the attacker would be waiting. No words formed in her mind, or thoughts that might be put into words—it never happened that way. Only a vague feeling that danger waited beyond the shower door.

She slid the door back and gazed at the man. His stance was that of a well-trained fighter, and although he stood only six inches taller than five feet, his frame was layered in tectonic slabs of muscle beneath a black, tight-fitting jumpsuit. The gold sword and shield of Base Security was emblazoned on the glossy fabric over his heart, and a pink scar an eighth of an inch wide ran from the outside of his left eye, down his cheek, to the corner of his mouth, standing out against skin tanned nearly black. All facial hair—including eyebrows and lashes—was absent, and his bald head reflected the bathroom's overhead light as if oiled.

*A belter*, she thought as her gaze darted to the stun pistol holstered on the man's left hip, then to the pendant suspended from a fine silver chain about his neck. The shape of a hen's egg and half the size of a closed fist, the pendant was fashioned from pitted dull-gray metal. Somewhere, sometime, she had seen another like it, but she could remember neither where nor when.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded.

The dark-skinned man did not respond. Instead, he looked her nude body up and down, as if sizing her up for strength and ability. What he saw was a six-foot-four-inch tall woman, apparently thirty years of age (actual age: forty-two), her body glistening with water droplets. Her breasts were high and firm, her hips not much broader than they had been twenty years before. Coal black hair falling to mid-back, eyes brown, features slightly Oriental.

What he failed to see were her prosthetics, and a fighting ability honed to perfection through years of training and discipline.

"Captain Susan Tanner?" he finally asked, his voice deep and strong.

She wanted to ask who *he* was, but she could not; her thoughts were blocked. His voice possessed a unique quality, a certain hard inflection she had not heard in many years. It actually *demand*ed a response.

"I am Susan Tanner—"

The man's lips stretched tight over his teeth, and he barked a single word, "Traitor!" then lunged. His right hand flashed out in a vicious karate chop directed at Susan's head.

She snapped her left hand up to deflect the punch, and the man's callused knuckles drove into the white ceramic tile an inch from her ear. Pulverized tile peppered her body as her right hand shot out to slam into his throat. She felt his larynx collapse beneath her prosthetic hand.

Pain mingled with surprise washed over his dark features, and he staggered back a step, then caught himself and again scanned her body. He had expected neither her speed nor her strength.

"What's this about?" she demanded, putting as much authority as she could muster into her voice. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

As soon as she asked those questions, she wished she had not. It could not possibly do any good. Even if he wanted to respond, he couldn't. She had seen to that when she crushed his larynx.

But there were those whose job it was to obtain that information. Base Security would get to the bottom of this. They could extract information from *any* mind; they had the probe.

Before she could act on that thought, the dark man renewed his attack. Spitting blood onto the white tiles at her feet, he came at her again.

This time he half-turned, kicking out and up with his left foot, the side of his boot aimed at her solar plexus. She sidestepped enough to avoid the kick, then planted her bare feet as firmly as possible on the blood-slicked tiles in Luna's one-sixth standard gravity and shifted her weight. In the same motion, she brought her right elbow crashing down into her attacker's knee.

Bone shattered beneath flesh as his face contorted in pain. He tried to cry out, but the only sound his ruined vocal cords could produce was a soft gurgle. He crumbled to the floor at her feet.

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Without another word, the man fingered the pendant hanging about his neck, and silently disappeared.

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A fog of unreality descended over Susan's thoughts, and a tingling sensation began behind her eyes. She felt suddenly dizzy.

*Shadow Run*

She stepped around the spot where her assailant had lain only an instant before and staggered into the room beyond. Dripping water across the carpet, she went to the chair before the small wooden desk and sat as the tingling behind her eyes became a full-blown headache. With a sharp shake of her head she tried to clear the pain, but it did no good. The headache merely intensified.

Closing her eyes, she held her head in her hands and attempted to collect her thoughts. The headache, the dizziness, that feeling of unreality—she knew the dark man's attack had not brought them on. She could deal with violence. Since Aldebaran, nearly ten years ago, Admiral Renford had used her for myriad security assignments. Her superbly developed fighting ability and the power in her prosthetics made her a natural for such work, as did her ability to somehow detect coming danger, although she had never told the Admiral about that. On a number of occasions she had acted as temporary bodyguard for heads-of-state, and had often accompanied the Admiral and his family while they vacationed Earth-side. There were also her uncountable assignments as a diplomatic courier, transporting sensitive documents and various sealed packages. Many of these tasks had required violent action.

No, the belter's attack had not caused those symptoms. They were products of what had happened *after* the attack. They were brought on by the man's sudden and mysterious disappearance, produced when Susan's normally rational mind slammed up hard against the cold wall of something she simply could not understand.

She struggled with that for a few seconds, pushing against the wall, testing it, trying to break through into understanding. But she could not. And she realized she would not be able to function properly until she got beyond it.

There were questions she should be asking, certain steps she knew she should be taking. Yet those questions simply would not form, and the steps refused to fall into any sort of logical order. And, to make matters worse, the cobweb remnants of last night's nightmare pressed in on her thoughts—long past emotions and conversations, long dead faces—and her body began to tremble.

A multi-colored snowflake pattern blossomed in her mind. At first, it remained confined to a small, isolated corner, but quickly spread to fill her entire consciousness. Within seconds she began mouthing guttural monotonal syllables in a language she did not understand.

Along with her subtle ability to predict danger in her immediate future, the pattern and the chant had mysteriously appeared ten years ago, while she recuperated in the hospital after the Aldebaran incident. Although she did not

know precisely what the pattern and the chant were, they did seem to work. Somehow, they came to her aid when they were needed most, keeping her anxiety in check during times of stress.

She had never told her doctors—not anyone—about either the pattern and the chant, or her strange prescient ability. She did not dare.

The fog lifted from her thoughts as quickly as it had come, and within seconds she was filled with calm confidence, where an instant before there had been uncertainty and fear. At the same time, both the pain in her head and the dizziness disappeared, and her body ceased its tremors.

The first clear thoughts to enter her mind were a string of related questions. Her attacker had been a belter—that much was clear—and his sharply filed teeth and the infinity tattoo on his left temple marked him as a member of the Society of Binding Light, a fanatic religious cult that had established a colony on Ceres more than a hundred years before. But why had he been in her rooms? How had he gotten past the door's spore-lock? Why had he attacked her, and why hadn't he used his stun pistol? Finally, how had he pulled off that vanishing trick?

That last question was the real stumper. One instant he had lain on the bathroom floor. The next he was gone.

But to where? And how had he accomplished it?

Again Susan thought of those whose job it was to ferret out such information. Her first task should be to contact Base Security.

She opened her eyes, then stood and went to the holo-phone on the far side of the room. As she entered the lens cluster's field, the device activated with a date-time display—two-foot-high glowing red letters and numerals hanging in mid air before her: *OCT. 3, 2187—0738*.

"Base Security," she said. "This is a priority emergency."

Instantly the date-time display disappeared, replaced by the three-dimensional image of a man sitting behind a small wooden desk. Perhaps twenty or twenty-five, he was dressed in a black uniform with white corporal's stripes on both sleeves and a gold Base Security emblem over his left breast.

The young man reddened, his eyes becoming large and round with surprise. He reached out to the controls set in the desk top and his image vanished, supplanted by the date-time display: *OCT. 3, 2187—0739*.

"Are you still there?" Susan asked.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm still here," the young man's voice said, issuing from thin air before her.

"Is something wrong with the equipment, then?"



*Shadow Run*

"The equipment is fine. I disconnected visual when I saw you weren't dressed."

Susan forced her sudden anger down. "Just a minute," she said, not bothering to hide her contempt. Earth-side, her nudity would have gone unnoticed.

She went into the bathroom, pulled a towel from its rack beside the shower, and dried herself. Toweling her hair, she returned to the bedroom and went to the closet. She dropped the wet towel on the bed.

Reaching into the closet, she took down a red Fleet jumpsuit uniform with gold captain's stripes on both sleeves. She stepped into it and sealed the pressure-sensitive fastener up its front. She drew matching boots from the closet and pulled them on, then fastened a utility belt containing numerous small pouches about her waist. She checked the middle pouch for her LIN/C, then snapped it closed again.

Log and Interface Neuro/Computer—a highly sophisticated, smart-card device functioning as both personal log and human/computer interface. An outgrowth of late twentieth century technology, at first the LIN/C had contained merely medical and payroll records, but later also held a complete service history. More and more was added, until by the year 2100 it included myriad sensors and a microminiaturized transmitter.

Each member of Fleet, as well as the civilian Survey Service, carried a LIN/C. It served as not only a personal memo and computer tie-in, but also continually transmitted a powerful locator signal to either the Fleet or the Survey Service computer on Luna through a network of satellites scattered throughout the solar system.

Again Susan positioned herself before the phone's lens cluster. Taking a final tug at her uniform, she brushed a stray wisp of hair back over her shoulder and announced:

"I'm dressed. You can re-activate visual now."

The date-time display vanished, and once again the young corporal sat before her. His face was still red as he cleared his throat and spoke.

"What can I do for you, uh, Captain?"

"I was just attacked in my rooms. You can tell me how he got in here."

"Attacked... In your rooms... Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." Susan glared at the young man's image. "Look—" she began, almost telling him what had happened. But she decided against it. The corporal would only kick it up his chain of command, and she would have to tell her story all over again. Instead, she said simply, "Get me your watch captain."

"Yes, ma'am." Again he reached out to the controls set in the top of his desk, and his image was replaced by the date-time display.

While she waited, she ran through in her mind what she would tell the corporal's supervisor. That a man had tried to kill her, then vanished into thin air? That sounded too improbable.

And yet, it was exactly what had happened.

Suddenly, she wondered if perhaps she might be making a mistake. The man who had attacked her had been wearing a Base Security uniform. Could there be a conspiracy of some sort to kill her—something in which Security was involved?

That was impossible! The thought was paranoiac.

Still....

The image of a large man of about sixty appeared before her, scattering those thoughts. He wore a gray flat-top haircut and Base Security uniform, and sat behind a desk identical to the corporal's. He smiled out at Susan in an almost fatherly fashion. After a few seconds of silence, he spoke.

"I'm Staff Sergeant Evans, Captain. How can I help you?" His voice was deep and pleasant, and without thought Susan returned his smile.

"An attempt has just been made on my life," Susan responded, "here, in my quarters."

"So I've been told." He looked down and to his left, obviously watching a display set in the desk top. His face wrinkled in a frown. "We haven't received record of the occurrence from the Fleet computer yet."

"I wasn't wearing my LIN/C."

The staff sergeant's gaze snapped back to Susan and his frown intensified, further creasing his features. "Why not?"

"I had just stepped from the shower."

He nodded. "That is unfortunate. So, the Fleet computer doesn't contain a record of the incident." He was silent for a few seconds, then said, "But my locator readout shows you are wearing it now. Tell me what happened. Meanwhile, I'll send an investigation team out to inspect the area for physical evidence." He nodded to someone outside the transmitting holo-phone's field of view.

Susan told Evans about the attack, and the smart-card in the pouch at her waist transmitted to the Fleet computer not only everything she said, felt, remembered, and thought about the experience, but also her pulse and respiration rate, pupil dilation, galvanic response, and several other physiological indicators. That transmission would constitute her legal statement, colored by her perceptions and emotions, in lieu of a record of the

*Shadow Run*

actual occurrence. It would be forwarded almost instantaneously to the Base Security computer.

"Could it have been a case of mistaken identity?" Evans asked when she had finished her story.

Susan shook her head. "Like I said, he used my name."

"You confirmed it to him?"

"I had no choice. He used the Voice."

"Then it's lucky you crushed his larynx when you did. And you say he simply disappeared?"

She nodded.

Evans frowned and his gaze narrowed. He was silent for a few seconds. Finally he asked, "How long have you been on Luna, Captain?"

"Nearly eight hours. I arrived on the shuttle just before midnight."

"And what brings you here?"

"Fleet Admiral James Renford sent for me from Earth-side. I have an appointment with him this morning."

"You are on the Admiral's staff?"

"That's right."

"Here on official Fleet business?"

"Yes."

Evans nodded. Even if Susan knew more, she could not tell him, and he knew it. "You just sit tight until my people arrive," he said. He punched a button before him and his image vanished.

The date-time display read 0744.

\* \* \*

Susan went to the chair behind the desk and again sat down. Instantly she resumed the line of thought she had started a few minutes before: *Was* there a plot to kill her?

If, in fact, such a conspiracy did exist, she doubted Evans was involved. Although she did not know why she should, she trusted the staff sergeant. Of course, that did not rule out someone else in Security, and *that* might explain how the belter got into her rooms.

She didn't bother to wonder why someone might want her dead. She had made many enemies during her career in Fleet—one simply did not perform the kind of work Susan had for the past nine years without making enemies—and those who might want her dead, for one reason or another, could be counted in the hundreds, if not the thousands.

Then there was Aldebaran.

Her steps echoed loudly as she walked the well-lighted corridor in an awkward gait that marked her as one no longer accustomed to Luna's one sixth standard gravity. Ahead, the corridor curved hard to the left, hiding until she was nearly on it the single door she knew was located at its end. An occasional ventilation grill broke the finely finished metal walls, but there were no doors on either side.

Susan was almost an hour late for her zero-eight-hundred appointment with Admiral Renford, but that could not be helped. She had not even stopped by the officers' mess for a morning cup of coffee, a ritual she had practiced religiously since accepting her commission nearly twenty years before.

The Admiral had an assignment for her. Lieutenant Krueger, Renford's administrative assistant, hadn't given her so much as a hint when he'd called Earth-side three days ago—security didn't permit even the intimation of what an assignment might be until the briefing—yet Susan caught herself hoping it was a shipboard command. Perhaps now she would again be permitted to journey beyond Luna's orbit as both ship's pilot and commanding officer, something she had savored only briefly ten years ago.

That thought sent a shiver of both fear and excitement coursing up her spine. She had consciously suppressed all thought of shipboard command since Aldebaran. Yet, before each assignment, her hope was renewed. Might this be it? This time, would Renford offer her a ship and a crew? Could she actually take such an assignment?

She could not think about that; she couldn't permit herself to think about it. Pushing the line of thought from her mind, she allowed the events of the past few hours to rush in to fill the void. Those events still seemed all too improbable. Why had the dark man attacked her? Who was he and how had he disappeared?

So many questions, yet not one answer. Nothing substantial to which she might cling.

The Base Security investigation team had arrived at Susan's quarters shortly after she got off the phone with Staff Sergeant Evans. The petty officer in charge had been a tall, thin girl who hadn't looked old enough to be

in Fleet, let alone in a position of responsibility. The girl called Evans, and he talked to Susan again, telling her she could leave. He said his people would let themselves out when they were finished.

Evans had not really been that much help. He had wanted to help, but he simply did not have the answers to her questions. He couldn't even say for certain that the man who had attacked her was not a member of Base Security. But he had promised to keep her advised of anything he might uncover during his investigation, saying he would call if he discovered something significant.

Susan knew Evans was simply humoring her. Without actually saying so, he had given her the impression he did not believe her story.

But then, how could she expect him to? She was having trouble believing it herself.

A bright red holographic sign shimmered before her as she approached the door at the end of the corridor, driving all thought of the morning's happenings from her mind: *JAMES RENFORD, ADMIRAL, FEDERATION FLEET—COMMANDER, THIRD SQUADRON*. The sign vanished and the door irised open, then hissed closed behind her as she stepped through. She sank an inch into the waiting room's plush Fleet-red carpet.

Lieutenant Philip Krueger sat behind a large wooden desk, paging through a six-inch thick stack of computer printouts. He was broad of shoulder, large boned, blond, with clear blue eyes—an extremely good-looking man of approximately twenty-five, dressed in Fleet red.

Susan had had considerable contact with Lieutenant Krueger during the past few years. Not only was he Renford's administrative assistant, but he also served as liaison with the Admiral's Earth-side staff. He had taken Susan to dinner a few times when he was Earth-side, but he was definitely not her type; although he was always a good dinner companion, he was a bit too impressed with himself for Susan's taste.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," she said as she approached his desk.

The young lieutenant looked up and frowned. "The Admiral's waiting, and he's not happy. You'd better hustle your butt on in."

Fighting down her sudden anger, Susan stepped to the door beside Krueger's desk. He had been too near power for far too long, she decided. So long, in fact, that he was beginning to believe *he* held the reigns of that power.

And perhaps, in a sense, he did. One thing was certain: Krueger was not a man to cross; Susan had seen many a higher-ranking officer dash a promising career on his hard personality.

The door irised open and she stepped through, into the huge office beyond.

\* \* \*

Nearly a dozen Rembrandts, El Grecos, Monets, and Renoirs hung on the walls, along with the works of a few artists Susan had never before seen. She knew all the paintings were authentic, and she knew that the Admiral had twice again as many hidden away somewhere.

The two men standing behind a large, ornately carved hardwood desk looked up from the computer monitor set in its top as Susan entered and snapped to attention. They seemed approximately the same age—about sixty—and both had salt-and-pepper hair and slightly slumped shoulders. *From carrying for too many years the burdens of military and para-military bureaucracy*, she thought.

One man was tall, only an inch shorter than Susan herself. He sported a well-trimmed mustache and wore the red jumpsuit uniform of the Federation Fleet. On his sleeves were sewn the gold stripes of an admiral. He was James Renford, Susan's commanding officer.

The other was Fredrik Hyatt, director of the civilian Survey Service.

Although Susan had never before met Hyatt, she knew him from his many appearances on holo-vid, as well as his considerable reputation. His eyes were dark and piercing, his cheekbones high and pronounced, and he wore his hair cropped close to his skull. He was the shortest man Susan had ever seen—shorter by almost half a foot than the man who had attacked her in her quarters—and his build appeared unbelievably frail in the powder blue Survey Service uniform.

She had no way of knowing whether or not the stories she had heard about Hyatt were true; the majority might simply be that vicious variety of publicity that invariably collects around those in the public eye. What she *did* know was that every year, for as far back as she could remember, Hyatt had received more General Fund money for his civilian Survey Service, while all other budgets, including that for Fleet, had been cut. Even during time of war, the Service was funded far more liberally than its military counterpart.

She saluted crisply. "Captain Susan Tanner, reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease, Captain," Renford said, returning her salute.

"Sorry I'm late, Admiral, but it was unavoidable. I was attacked this morning in my quarters."

The Admiral nodded. "I just got off the phone with Staff Sergeant Evans." He motioned Susan to a chair before his desk. "Tell me what happened."

As she sat, she looked to Hyatt, then back to Renford. "Is it all right to talk in front of him, sir?"

*Shadow Run*

"He should hear anything you have to say." Renford turned to the civilian. "Fred, this is Captain Susan Tanner."

"Mr. Hyatt," Susan acknowledged, extending her hand. Hyatt made no move to take it, but gave her a close once-over, not unlike the look the dark man had given her before launching his attack.

"You're sure I should talk with a civilian present?" she asked, withdrawing her hand.

"I'm sure," Renford said. "Let's have it, Captain."

Hyatt's sharp and calculating gaze never left her as she told her story.

\* \* \*

"...So I told Staff Sergeant Evans what I've just told you, then came straight here."

That wasn't entirely true. This time around, she had left out the part about her attacker vanishing into thin air. She told Renford simply that he had escaped; she had learned from Evans's reaction.

But had Evans said anything about it to the Admiral?

If so, Renford gave no indication. He scratched along his jaw line and opened his mouth as if to speak, then closed it again. Finally, he shook his head.

"This is the ship's pilot you told me about?" Hyatt asked, speaking for the first time since Susan had entered the room. His voice was extremely high pitched—much higher than it had seemed during his holo-vid broadcasts. *During the broadcasts, his voice must be electronically altered*, she thought.

"Uh, yes," Renford said, abandoning his thoughts with obvious reluctance.

"She's Art Tanner's daughter, then?"

The Admiral nodded.

Instantly, Susan thought of her father. He had been an admiral with Fleet, highly decorated during the Oromine rebellion. Both her father and her mother had died when she was two, in the New Year's Eve riot of '47.

"And she was in command during the Aldebaran affair?"

"That's right."

"I understand there was considerable physical damage," Hyatt said, and Susan looked down at her hands resting in her lap. For the first time in years, they felt unnatural, alien.

"Her arms and hands," Renford said, looking down at Susan, "and a metal plate in her head. But she's perfectly fine now. Her prosthetics are much stronger than flesh and bone could ever be." Without thought, Susan flexed her hands. "She can do things with them you wouldn't believe."

"And she hasn't piloted a ship since?"

The Admiral shook his head, his shaggy brows coming together in a frown.

Hyatt fell silent for a few seconds. Finally he said, "I don't think she's right for this—there's still too much publicity surrounding Aldebaran. And now, someone's trying to kill her."

"What you mean is you don't want any leaks," Renford said. "It might cause political embarrassment."

"Hang the political embarrassment," the small man squeaked. "I've dealt with it before, and survived. But you're right, I don't want any security leaks; I won't lose General Fund money over this."

"So, *that's* what this is all about."

"What else is there?"

The Admiral took a moment to calm himself, then said, "She can still handle your assignment, whatever it is. She possesses some rather unique capabilities."

"Has she been tested?"

Renford nodded. "She checks positive."

*Tested? For what?* Before Susan could ask, Hyatt spoke.

"I'm afraid I am at a disadvantage here. You know your people, and I don't."

Both men were silent for several seconds. Renford rocked on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back, while the civilian chewed on his lower lip.

Finally, Hyatt said, "I suppose I must trust your judgement. Have her orders cut." He glanced at Susan, again fixing her with his gaze, then looked at his wrist chronometer. Without uttering another word, he strode from the room.

\* \* \*

Susan looked up at Renford. The Admiral glared at the door as it irised closed behind Hyatt. For the first time since joining his staff, she saw disgust in his gaze. Perhaps even hate.

"He's a strange one," she said, more to break the silence than for any other reason.

Renford nodded. "But he's one of the shrewdest, most intelligent individuals I've ever met."

Susan nodded noncommittally. "Why is he like that? Why such concern over General Fund money?"

The Admiral was quiet for a few seconds. Finally he shrugged and said, "You know the story of the Survey Service's formation?"



"Of course," Susan said.

Everyone knew the Service's history. It was started nearly fifty years before, by a group of Federation Fleet officers who no longer condoned a military presence in space. Humanity should be peacefully exploring the infinite frontier, they proclaimed, searching for signs of intelligent life other than humankind, rather than suppressing its own struggling colonies. They felt the human race could better use its time and talents seeking an intelligence that had not yet been discovered and had not even left a clue to its existence, but which they none-the-less believed did exist. Their conviction was so strong they quit their commissions in Fleet to form the Survey Service.

"Hyatt was one of the Service's founders," the Admiral said. "He was one of its first pilots, when General Fund money was tighter than it is now."

Again Susan nodded. "What was it you told him I'm right for?"

"A special assignment. He wants you to report to the Survey Service duty desk in Luna City by twelve hundred hours tomorrow."

"An assignment for which there are to be absolutely no security leaks."

"That's right." Disgust was again evident in Renford's voice.

"And just what is this assignment?"

The Admiral shrugged. "All Hyatt would say was that he needed someone with a background similar to yours—someone with extensive hand-to-hand training and experience in security. And he wanted a qualified ship's pilot."

Once more Susan thought of Aldebaran, and flashes of the nightmare entered her mind. "I'm no longer a ship's pilot."

"You're wrong," Renford said. "You were never stricken from the active roster. The only thing holding you back is your own lack of confidence. That's all that has *ever* held you back."

*He's wrong*, Susan thought. Although she had been vindicated ten years ago at her court-martial—it had been said more than once that she had done more for her crew than humanly possible, seeming to be in two places at once—she knew it had been a mere formality, a way for Fleet to save face in a bad situation. If they publicly stated that she had done nothing wrong in Aldebaran system, then she would *not* have, and Fleet's record would remain unblemished.

But she knew better. She alone knew the true extent of her guilt. She had come away from that court-martial a hero, receiving a decoration and several letters of commendation, but she had been living with her guilt ever since. She *was* responsible for those deaths. It had been *her* decision to run the blockade. And, although she'd had the opportunity to save at least a portion of her crew,

she could not remember making the attempt. Traumatic amnesia, the doctors had called it.

"I want you to keep your eyes open while you're in Luna City," the Admiral said, breaking into her thoughts.

She pushed the fear and doubt down into her subconscious. This was something she could handle—something she'd had experience in. "For anything in particular?"

"There's rumor that Hyatt is making another bid for independence. I want to know how close he is to achieving it."

Susan nodded. Every few years the Survey Service director went through a short period of giving rousing speeches on the holo-vid, and pumping great sums of personal money into the small but always existent Luna City independence movement. It would last a few months, generating considerable excitement in the press concerning the possibility of an independent Luna, then die down until the next time.

Personally, Susan liked the idea of an independent Luna. It was inevitable. But she worked for Fleet, and Fleet did *not* like the idea.

"How long will I be on loan to the Service?" she asked.

"It's an open-ended assignment."

She was silent for a few seconds. Finally she asked, "And what's this test you told Hyatt I passed? I haven't been tested."

"You wouldn't have noticed. If you had, it would have altered the results. It was simply a number of small, insignificant obstacles placed in your way over the past few weeks, to see how you would react."

She tried to think what those obstacles might have been. "I can't recall anything."

"They were everyday-seeming occurrences, but they were all carefully engineered."

"What were you testing for?"

"I don't know. I simply set up the circumstances according to Hyatt's instructions, then reported the results back to him. All highly mechanical."

She sat numb, not speaking, wondering how anyone could perform a satisfactory test when he did not know what he was testing for. And, still more incredible, how Renford could possibly recommend her for an assignment he knew nothing about.

### 3

Susan arrived back in her quarters shortly after ten hundred hours and called out as she entered. The Base Security investigation team might still be about, and she wasn't entirely sure she could trust them.

They weren't in the bedroom. She checked the bathroom. The only evidence of the morning's violence was several shattered tiles at eye level.

Returning to the bedroom, she stood for a few seconds before the holophone's clustered lens array, just outside the sensor field. She wanted to step into the field, activating the device, and call Evans.

She almost did just that, but at the last instant changed her mind. Evans wouldn't have anything yet; he'd barely had enough time to begin his investigation. Besides, he had promised he would call if he uncovered anything.

*If* he investigated her story at all.

Meanwhile, shouldn't she begin packing?

No. The floater to Luna City wouldn't leave Fleet Base until zero-six-hundred hours tomorrow morning. She would get up early, perhaps four or four-thirty, and pack then. That should give her plenty of time.

Then what *should* she be doing? She knew she would have to remain in her quarters if she wanted to receive Evans's call.

Stepping to the desk, she sat and opened its drawer. She pulled out her chip carrying case—six inches by three inches by one half inch thick—and placed it on the desk top before her. Thumbing the case open, she scanned the neat array of a dozen garnet chips filed inside. Each chip measured less than half an inch on the side and a thirty-second inch thick, and each represented an entire book. Printed across their surfaces in nearly microscopic script were the names of the books they contained.

Most held history texts, a passion Susan had inherited from her father. Some contained biographies, while others were Fleet technical manuals. Only two chips were programmed with fiction.

She took her LIN/C from the pouch at her waist and positioned it in the center of the desk beside the carrying case, then removed a chip from the

case. It was a fiction she had started on the shuttle up from Earth. She placed it atop the appropriate contact spot on the LIN/C and felt it adhere.

Instantly images formed in her mind, sharp and clear, picking up precisely where they had left off on the shuttle. Again she sat in a one-man fighter, bucking turbulence as she dove into a planet's atmosphere. Behind her, a fighter of alien construction pursued.

With those images came other elements: she smelled the acrid scent of scorched air in her cockpit, heard the metal of her ship creak and moan, felt a trickle of sweat crawl itching down her back within her life-support suit. She could actually *taste* her own fear.

And finally, another's thoughts blossomed in her mind.

Suddenly, Susan *was* the protagonist of the story. She lived manufactured experiences, felt artificial emotions, thought synthetic thoughts.

This was a piece of fiction that should have grabbed her totally, holding her interest to the very end. It was a LIN/C adaptation of the twelfth book in a series written by a long-dead twentieth century author, a series that was quickly becoming her all-time favorite. There was plenty of action and adventure, and the main character was certainly someone with whom she could identify: a female captain in a Federation Fleet not unlike the one in which Susan herself served. The only difference was that intelligent races other than humankind were members of the fictitious Federation, while in reality humanity had not yet encountered another intelligence.

But today the fiction could not hold her attention. There was simply too much on her mind. Within a few seconds her concentration slipped, and the images, sensory impressions, and emotions ceased.

She removed the chip from her LIN/C and put it back in its case. After slipping the card back into its pouch, she returned the case to the desk drawer, then stood and stepped to the phone's lens cluster. She began pacing nervously, just beyond the activating field.

Again she toyed with the thought of calling Base Security, and again decided against it. It was ridiculous. Evans would call as soon as he had something, just as he had promised.

Who was she trying to kid? Evans would never call. He did not consider her story worth investigating.

This waiting was getting to her. There was so much nervous energy bottled up inside her it felt as if at any moment she would explode. She had to be doing something—anything.

She shuffled to the door. It irised open and she stepped through.

*Shadow Run*

Besides, she thought as she started down the corridor, they—whoever *they* were—might try again. They had already shown they could enter her rooms at will. If she stayed in her quarters, she would only make it easier for them. At least in a crowd she would stand a chance.

After more than ten years, Captain Susan Tanner has an assignment to pilot a ship. Is she being stalked because of her past, or her new assignment? She knows only that she can't turn this new assignment down.

Shadow Run -- Book I of The Ancients' War

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