

1981

The great thing about time is that it goes on.

Arthur Eddington (1928)

Chapter 1

Awakening

Lieutenant Shawna Whitney never awoke easily, even on the best of mornings. And this was the second morning in a row that she opened her eyes remembering next month's tragedy. She was shivering. Trembling and sweating silently in the damp room.

It wasn't the kind of dream that cleared and was promptly forgotten. Instead, Shawna remembered next month's tragic accident in Hangar Two as clearly as last week's chewing out by Colonel Penland. It was an accident that she had relived for weeks now. Hangar Two was a memory as much as a nightmare. Stark reality from the future. She didn't dwell on Colonel Penland's tirade from the past each time she awoke. But Hangar Two, the future, occupied her mind.

This memory of the future was an injection of adrenaline. The memory thrust itself upon her, and it was not the first time. But still she sweat, and still she shivered. And as always, it quickly passed. Familiarity promoted acceptance.

The morning boded frustration the moment it began. Shawna could push Hangar Two from her mind -- she was an expert at concentration. But those C-130's were already inbound, and it would be a day of confusion. Rotation day meant new aircraft, and worst of all, new people. Those Herks couldn't fly all the way across the Gulf of

Mexico without some kind of major mechanical problem, and today would not likely be an exception.

Shawna brooded about the upcoming day for a moment longer and then swung her small frame out of bed. It was still half-dark. The noisy window air conditioner had thumped all night, and it was still blasting its musty odor. Another day in paradise -- hot, humid, and unchanging. The Panama dawn seldom varied, but she still pulled back the curtains and stole a peek. Cumulonimbus clouds, thunderstorms in-waiting, straddled the orange glow on the eastern horizon. The jungle canopy of lush dark green in the distance was partly obscured by ground-hugging evaporation fog. Her hair would be in for a curly day.

Shawna Whitney, age 24, Air Force aircraft maintenance officer -- now there was a joke. Her mechanical expertise was nil. When her old Ford sputtered, Shawna would pull over to the side of the road and raise the hood, but only in the interest of personal safety. Then call the Auto Club. If only there was an Auto Club here.

But she was a competent maintenance officer. Being an MO involved basic communications management, both technical and personal, and her job never put dirt under her fingernails. That was fortunate, since Shawna sometimes self-described herself as from the school for the mechanically declined. But she was professionally from the school of the systems manager. She could keep up with the best of the maintenance officers in front of the Colonels. It seemed wise to kid along with them when they picked on their "girl MO". That didn't mean that it didn't bother her.

No makeup today. It was a waste of time in the Panama drip. The bike ride to work was about two miles, and that was all that it would take to get her sweating in the pre-dawn sauna, and the chances of getting rained on in that brief ride were one-in-two this time of year.

Lieutenant Shawna Whitney was ready to go, dressed in her fatigues. Maintenance Control was pretty informal at Howard Air Force Base, at least in terms of dress. If she had to leave the comfort of the office air conditioner for a trip to the flightline, the sweat would be a lot less obvious in fatigues. But today she hoped to stay secluded in her little control room. Most days, except for lunch, she did just that. But this was C-130 rotation day.

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Biking out of the bachelor officers quarters, she generated her own breeze, her fatigue hat still dry at the headband. Shawna's nearly-

black hair was approaching regulation limits, but that too was not watched as closely here as elsewhere in the Air Force. She kept her hair short most of the time. It was a lot cooler that way. But now her hair was nearly shoulder length and more wind-blown than curly. She wore it pulled back into a bun with a red cloth tie. The tie wasn't exactly within regulation limits either, but the Air Force was working hard to avoid scaring off its women. Shawna took full advantage of that fact.

As the first downhill grade began, Shawna let her bicycle coast. The air felt cooler now, as she picked up speed along the winding street. Her path was deserted as she glided through the married officers housing area, mansions by Air Force standards; old, solid tropical homes with sprawling lawns and huge frontal gardens filled with white Angel's Trumpet and orange Birds of Paradise.

The low-pitched whine of the bike's headlight generator buzzed against her rear tire, increasing in pitch as she picked up speed. She tugged the right handbrake just a bit, and the squeal of the rear brakepad against the metal rim momentarily eliminated the background chirping of the crickets. Not too fast, because the stop sign was approaching. Caution was the goal of the morning. At least that seemed like a wise way to start.

At the bottom of the long hill, the base spread flat all the way to the jungle horizon on the far side of the runways. The sun broke from behind a puffy cumulus cloud. Shawna's bike had coasted the whole way, but now it was time to start pumping. Already Shawna could feel the sweatband of her hat pushing moist against her forehead. It wasn't entirely due to the heat of the sun.