

Pebble in the Pond

1

Toulouse, France - January, 1988

MONTHS IN TOULOUSE and Miles is still nowhere.

“Pedro, we’re going to be flying that bird back home in a week. There isn’t much time left.”

The supper dishes have been cleared away, but Pedro’s carafe isn’t empty. He swirls the wine in his glass.

“So – we’re going to draw lots to see who gets to be captain? We can do that in thirty seconds.”

“This is serious, Pedro. We have a mission.”

It is almost as if Pedro isn’t an Air Arcadia guy at all. The traitor swirls his wine again, tips it up, and drains the glass.

“Right. We don’t want to bend anything on the way home. Looks bad.”

Miles’s exasperation creeps redly up his throat.

“I’m talking about the Standard Operating Procedures. The SOP’s.”

“Yeah. You’ve written them. Single-handed. And they’re horseshit.”

“Jesus.”

Miles pushes his chair back. It makes a noise against the floor. It is a noise he doesn’t recognize, a French noise. French floor, French

chair. He doesn't get up. Pedro holds him steadily in his gaze.

"Fact is, Miles, there's no fucking way I'm going to sign on. Haven't you been listening to our instructor?"

"Jules? A bit full of himself, don't you think?"

"Sure. He's French. What the fuck do you expect?"

Miles does not smile. Pedro carefully pours the remaining wine into his glass.

"I don't see what Jules has to do with our agreeing on procedures. And we've got to agree."

"Says who?"

The colour has crept up into Miles' ears.

"Jesus, Pedro. Management, that's who. The Standards Committee. And they want procedures that are standardized with the other airplanes."

"But the SOP's don't have to be identical, Miles. The airplanes aren't identical."

"Where they can be they should be."

"I'll tell you what, Miles. You could fix your draft real easy. Just take out all the memorized drills. The Electronic General Actions Director has all that shit covered."

"So?"

"The point is, Miles, that with your procedures the pilot is fighting the EGAD. It's like both pilots trying to do the same task and nobody's flying the airplane. Remember the L-1011 that landed in the everglades? Three pilots trying to change a light bulb?"

"You can't tell me memorized drills aren't good."

"Sure they're good. But the Bus has them memorized much better than our boys can and she's gonna present them to you on

the screen whether you've got them memorized or not."

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"It has to do with assigning tasks, Miles. And on this airplane you have to let her be one of the players."

Miles pushes his chair back again as if he is going to make a move. He doesn't.

"So. That's what Jules is lobbying for?"

"See, that's what you don't get, Miles. It's not political."

The irony jumps out at Miles. Of course it's political. Everything is political. And this guy, this Air Arcadia envoy and representative, is in bed with the enemy.

"Jules works for Bus Industries, not for Air Arcadia. You work for Air Arcadia."

"Yes. And our job is to help keep our boys from pranging one of these things. We have to write SOP's that do that. Yours don't."

"Oh, come on . . ."

"Talk to Jules about the Mulhouse crash."

"You mean the airshow flyover . . ."

"Attempted flyover. Fly over and settle gracefully into the forest."

"So?"

Pedro drains his glass, considering a man who can dismiss a crash, total hull loss, and death.

"Three people died. If that machine had been as you say just like the other airplanes then a hundred and thirty-seven people would have died. You know what? The guy who designed this airplane was trying to make it pilot-proof. And he did, more or less. The guy is a fucking genius."

Miles shrugs.

“No, really. I’m not being facetious, Miles. The airplane is fabulous. But it’s not perfect. Look at what happens when it comes into conflict with Mulhouse Captain Asshole, who thinks he knows how to do a low pass just like in any other airplane but he hasn’t thought it through and he doesn’t know his systems so the auto-thrust is in *IDLE* and his punishment is that the envelope protection doesn’t let it stall and the high alpha routine puts his power up for him but it’s too fucking late the engines take seven seconds to spool up from idle so it settles gracefully into the trees wings level at the slowest possible speed and saves his sorry ass so he can go to court and go to jail.”

Pedro involuntarily sticks his right arm behind him, trying to shake off a strange tingling.

“And what is it, Miles? Ego. Blind ego. Thinking you know what you’re doing when you don’t. Thinking you’ve made the perfect machine when it’s just as perfect as you are and no more.”

The tingling is running down his neck. He brings his hand up to feel for wetness.

“Pedro, you just don’t understand how the head shed thinks. You haven’t been around . . .”

“No. You’re right. I’m just a fucking pilot. Then Instructor. Then Chief Instructor on the TriJet. So I don’t know shit about the subtleties of vice-presidential intrigue.”

“Jesus, Pedro . . .”

Pedro stares at his hand. It is dry.

“Miles – I’m here for a reason, just like you.”

Miles stands up.

“I need some shuteye.”

Pedro pushes his empty glass level with the empty carafe.

“OK. What the fuck. Goodnight.”

§

Ship 201, resplendent in Air Arcadia colours, backs slowly into a parking stand below the third-story window wall. Miles watches as the tug disconnects. The brilliant blue day surrounds him in his lookout, but there is no glare in the room. His eye is caught by a lander on 32 Left. Air Inter. Also a Bus. One of the first, probably. His eye comes back to ship 201. He is going to fly that pretty bird today. Going to be the first to fly it. First Air Arcadia pilot, anyway. Well, except for Pedro.

Miles feels a trickle from his nose and reaches in his pocket for a tissue. Wipes. There is some blood. He turns back to the flight planning room.

“Bonjour, Miles. Where ees he, Pedro? You have seen eem?”

How long has he been here?

“Bonn jour, Jewels. No, now you mention it. Didn’t see him at breakfast today.”

“C’est pas grave.”

Jules walks toward him, his footfall light on the carpet. He is small and elegantly dressed, dwarfed by the twenty-foot ceiling. Miles has trouble imagining him as a pilot. Jules glances at his wrist.

“One hour twenty-two before start. We have time. You have seen zee programme for today, Miles?”

“Yes, thank you. I have a copy.”

Miles waves the sheets of paper. Not 8 1/2 by 11, they have an unfamiliar aspect ratio. Centimetres, or something.

“Jewels, I have a question.”

“But of course.”

“I see our first approaches are visual with autopilot and auto-thrust off.”

“Yes. This ees to see she ees really an airplane. Before we get into all zee magique.”

“I’d like to see some auto-lands.”

“Yes, yes. You will, Miles. As many as you will want.”

Jules steps up to the flight planning desk and re-arranges some of the paperwork he has set out. He selects a sheet of sequence reports and offers it to Miles.

“As you can see, mon vieux, we have a perfect day where to begin our work. Passage of cold front. Northwest winds fifteen gusting twenty. Visibilité incroyable. Beau, beau, beau. Later we will do auto-land on one-four right. But not today, évidemment.”

“Trying to jigger the schedule, Miles?”

Neither man has noticed his approach. Pedro plunks down his own wad of paper on the chest-level, sloping desk.

“So, how do we start? Maybe CAT III ^[see Glossary] auto-lands with a twenty-knot tailwind?”

“Jesus, Pedro.”

“You know, just to see if the airplane can do it? That would show the test pilots a thing or two.”

Jules holds up his hands.

“No, no. Eet is fine. I explain to Miles we will do as much as he will want. Later on, when ze wezzaire. . .”

He lowers his hand to shake with Pedro, clapping him on the shoulder with his left.

“Bonjour, copain. Bien dormi?”

“Pas tellement. Je lisais.”

“Ooh, dommage.” Jules cocks his head. “Comment vas-tu?”

“Oh, ça va aller.” Pedro turns to the stack of papers he put on the

desk and fishes out a book. “Hey Miles – you read that book I gave you? This one?”

“Yeah. I had a look through it. Pretty technical.”

Jules inclines his head again to read the title.

“Ah, oui. Handling the Big Jets. Je le connais. Excellent.”

“C’est un Anglais, Jules.”

Jules laughs.

“Oui. Mais quand-même, c’est – comment dirait-on? – la Bible du métier.”

“Yeah. I was reading it last night, Miles. After our little discussion.”

Miles doesn’t bite. He is studying the flight plan.

“So Jules. Where is the practice area?”

“West and northwest. Seexty kilomètres.”

“I still think we should start with a coupled ILS to 32 Left. It’s an automatic airplane. That’s how it’s going to be used on the line.”

“Still putzing around with the schedule, Miles. You should be ashamed.”

Miles does his best to ignore Pedro. This airplane is a tool for the airline. It will be used to fly ILS’s ninety percent of the time.

“No – I explain. Ees important. You see, Miles, when we use ze auto-thrust we must aware ourselves of ze mode.”

“The mode.”

“Oui. If you are do an approach eet must be *SPEED* or *OFF*. We start with *OFF*. First you see what ze pilot do, zhen what ze airplane do.”

“I told you yesterday, Miles. Captain Asshole. He had his auto-thrust in *IDLE* mode. That’s why he pranged. You would do well

to listen to our instructor.”

It is not only annoying, it is embarrassing. Pedro is fighting with him – and in front of a stranger.

“Excuse me, Pedro. We both work for Air Arcadia and we have a mission to accomplish. Please pull yourself together. If you can’t be civil you’ll have to recuse yourself.”

“Sure. So you can do exactly what you want. So you can take back those lame procedures you’ve written. Why the hell do you think they sent the two of us in the first place?”

Miles’ neck is red. He shrugs.

“The airplane requires a crew of two.”

Pedro stares at Miles, his face florid, acne scars showing strongly in whitish relief.

“OK, I’ll tell you why they sent us. For you, it was a kindness. They already fired you from that job – director of whatever the fuck it was. This was your chance to stay in the game and demonstrate you could be reasonable. Or maybe it was just thank you for services rendered.”

Pedro notices a small trickle of blood from Miles’s left nostril. He feels he can taste it.

“Me, it was balance. They know it’s all politics to you. That it’s all about where you wind up in the company. Me, I’m just a fucking pilot. I think that technical shit is important. I think standards and safety are important. I think it’s a matter of fucking life and death.”

Pedro pauses for breath. Jules lift his hands.

“Messieurs, messieurs, je vous prie . . .”

“Non, Jules. Je ne vais pas lâcher.”

Miles wipes his nose with the back of his hand, but he doesn’t look.

“That’s outrageous! And here, in front of Jewels!”

The blood is no longer a trickle.

“You want me to back off. To disappear. Well, I’m not going to give you the satisfaction.”

Pedro takes a rasping breath and moves closer to Miles, invading his space, face to face.

“I’m going to do what I came here to do and that’s to make God damned sure we take back an SOP that’s simple and unambiguous and make sure our pilots have the essential knowledge that Jules here is giving us and not let it get diluted by passing through your fucking corporate correctness . . . through your blind, self-seeking fucking . . .”

He stops.

“Ooh, mon dieu.”

Jules has looked back to his friend. It is as if nothing has changed, except everything has changed. Pedro’s face is slack. The animation that makes Pedro who he is has drained away.

Miles feels the blood running down his neck but he, too, is struck by the larger thing happening to Pedro. Whatever it is, Pedro looks surprised. As they watch, his eyes lose focus and glaze over as the spirit passes from him.

Jules manages to catch him. They both wind up on the floor. Jules hasn’t extricated himself.

“Miles. Vite. Téléphone. Zero. Wait for ze tone. Zhen fifteen. One-five. Pass me ze phone.”

Jules is still on the floor but he has got his leg out from under Pedro. He lays Pedro’s head down gently and grabs the bloody receiver from Miles.

“Merci, Miles. Allo? Secours médicaux?”

Miles looks around at the day streaming in through the slanted windows and the blood on his hands. At last we’ve got somewhere,

he thinks.