

3 *Strike!*

Montreal - September, 1998

Cameron

IT IS ONE OF THOSE DAYS Montrealers have in mind when they say September is the best month. Air sings in the lungs at each breath. The sun is warm on bare arms. Cameron walks up the circular drive, aware of each blade of grass. The grass fades as he looks up.

Bruno is holding a clipboard and blocking access to the school. There are more papers and folders on the card table behind him.

“You gotta sign in. Even though I know who you are, Cameron. Security.”

“That’s new . . .”

“Well, we can’t take any chances. There’s lots of press around. I gotta see your card. Write down your number. Then you get this . . .”

Bruno holds up a badge. It has Cameron’s name, rank, and aircraft, as well as today’s date.

Cameron takes out his wallet. He is embarrassed by how long it takes him to dig out his card. He looks furtively at the line forming behind him.

“Don’t worry, Cam. Everyone’s the same. But if you don’t mind I think I’ll give a heads-up to the guys in line.”

“Sure . . .”

“OK, guys. Listen up. You’ll make this process much faster if you get out your union cards and have ‘em ready to show me.”

Cameron signs the attendance sheet and Bruno hands him a 5 ½ x 8-inch manila envelope full of papers. He wanders down the hall to the gym. It is already half-full. Cameron finds an empty folding chair about half-way back on the right wall. The first sheet in the envelope explains today’s security. Cameron’s eye is caught by the last paragraph: it asks each member to be alert to the people around him in the room. To check the badge of anyone he doesn’t know personally. To challenge anyone who seems suspicious.

Then there is a three-page analysis of why they are considering the present action. Cameron scans it. Yes, there it is, among other bullet points: recurrent Simulator failures.

“Messieursdames. Ladies and gentlemen. Votre attention s’il vous plaît. Your attention please. My name is Born Leader. I’m your Master Executive Council chairman. There is a lot to cover today, so let’s get moving. We’ll start with a look at the agenda for today’s meeting. You can see there is time planned for your questions and comments. If there is a point you want to bring up, please line up behind the microphone in the center aisle. I would ask you to keep your comments brief.”

§

“My name is Doug Fields. I’m a Captain on the Bus. The Ministry Of Movement is failing guys on the Bus for the flimsiest of reasons. Just the Bus, not the other airplanes. I haven’t failed a ride yet, but my friends all tell me that it is just a matter of time. I’d like to point out how stupid that is. Our competence and our confidence are assets. The company is just pissing it all away.”

The room comes alive with murmurs, then breaks into applause. Doug's cheeks redden slightly as he returns to his seat. The next speaker takes his place at the microphone.

“Hey. Fern Enthusier. Captain on the BigTwin. You Bus guys are just a bunch of wimps. If you don't want to fail all the time, why don't you just bid a real airplane?”

A deadly silence falls. Still, Fern looks satisfied as he regains his seat.

“Jean Luc. Premier Officier sur le Bus, et je vais le dire en anglais. If you can add, you gonna see dere are more of us Bus guys, hostie. Votez oui! Vote yes on da strike!”

There is a chorus of grunts, whispers, and scattered applause.

The next speaker drones on in French, making his point several times over. Born Leader waits politely until he pauses for breath.

“C'est certain, Louis. Je dirai qu'ils seront pas nombreux qui ne sont pas d'accord avec toi. But perhaps you could yield the mike to the next speaker . . .”

“Oui. Oui. Merci.”

Louis makes his way back to his seat. His seat-mates stare straight ahead.

Born Leader is good at keeping the meeting on track. The line at the microphone gets shorter. Soon it is time for the wrap up. Here, too, the chairman doesn't waste time.

“In your handout you'll find everything you need to vote on-line. The computers at Air Arcadia Pilots Association Headquarters are ready to go. The deadline is midnight tonight. Ladies and gentlemen, by tomorrow at this time we could be on strike.”

§

The union office in the terminal building has never been so full of

pilots. They crowd around a church-basement table loaded with cartons of donuts and a large coffee urn.

“Moaner. D’you buy all this for us?”

“Sure. I do you guys a favour once in a while.”

The door to the inner office rattles, then opens abruptly.

“A-shift. Line A. We’re on duty in ten minutes.”

Pilots with coffees make space for Bad Dog. His uniform is pressed and spotless; his shoes glow with spit-shine, the creases in his trouser legs are as sharp as he is in the cockpit. His voice is big.

“We’re going to line up for inspection. Outside in the hall.”

He opens the door. Steps out. Looks up and down the hall.

“All clear. OK, lose the coffees. Get your hats. Line up along this wall.”

Pilots line up for the wastebasket, taking a last chug or two. Brush themselves off. Straggle out the door to find a place along the wall.

“Tu n’a pas compris, Jean-Luc? On n’est pas ici pour bavarder, hostie.”

Jean-Luc gives the Sergeant a sheepish grin and gets into the line beside Cameron. They are stretched along the inside wall of the fourth-floor hall, shoulder to shoulder.

“The order doesn’t matter, guys. Just do it. Stand straight. Eyes front. We’re not going to go downstairs and look like fuckheads.”

The military guys try to bring it back. Cameron tries to remember movies he has seen about the military.

“Rod – what part of eyes front do you not fucking understand?”

Rod straightens up and looks at the wall.

“... and the hat. Lose the lean.”

Rod straightens his hat.

“You’re not Captains in this line. There is no seniority. There is no authority except for yours truly. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

“OK.”

Baddy swaggers down the line. He stops in front of Cameron, who is doing his best to stand straight and look at the wall.

“Cameron!”

“Yes?”

“Yes WHAT?”

Cameron combs desperately through his experience.

“YES SIR,” he says, as loudly as he dares.

“Fucking right.”

Bad Dog continues down the line, stopping momentarily in front of anyone showing the least sign of sloppiness or attitude.

“In five minutes we are going downstairs. We will be in public view. We may be on TV. We will look at no one. We will speak to no one. We will look straight ahead and walk.”

He paces the line some more.

“You have no doubts.”

Cameron’s mind fills with his own doubts. *We’re not doing this for our customers. Not for the company, that’s for sure. Even our fellow employees. No matter their solidarity. They’re just laid off without pay and they get nothing. This is for us.*

“Not in this line.”

He’s right. No doubts. Banish the doubts.

Bad Dog continues his pacing.

“You will speak only to me, and only if addressed. I will speak to the public and the media only if absolutely necessary and refer all questions to Born Leader.”

He continues walking the line and looking us in the eyes, daring us to look at him or to look aside, daring us to loose our focus on the far wall.

“Born Leader is our spokesman. Our only spokesman. Understood?”

The hall sounds like an echo chamber.

“Yes es ss sir essir!”

Baddy paces to the head of the line and turns.

“You will follow me down the stairs. When I give the signal we will march directly to the designated area. It is about 40 feet. You will follow me around the circle. We will be marching counter-clockwise as seen from above. The perimeter is marked with small x’s of red tape on the floor. When I step aside you will close the gap and keep walking.”

He has his hand on the knob of the stairway door.

“After ten minutes I will join you and call a halt. I will give the order for about face. You will pivot on your left heel. I will call, *Line A, march*. Then we will be marching clockwise. Our shift is thirty minutes. Any questions?”

Silence. Baddy opens the door.

“LINE A, MARCH!”

§

It is hard work. People are watching. With eyes front you catch only glimpses of your surroundings. You can’t look, so you think harder. You ignore the fixed stuff and try to remember the new stuff flashing by in your peripheral vision.

Bad Dog is marching alongside Cameron.

“LINE A, HALT!”

“LINE A, ABOUT . . . FACE!”

Cameron pivots. *Shit, left heel! At least I didn't collide with Bad Dog.*

“LINE A, MARCH!”

Something is happening about twenty feet away, over toward the elevators. A media scrum is developing around Born Leader. There are tripods with extensions and TV lights on top. A boom mike is being wielded by a guy in navy blue sweats and sneakers. *Just keep marching. Don't look.*

Suddenly the lights come on and bathe the scrum in washed-out white light. Born Leader is being interviewed. There is an occasional flash from a still camera.

After what seems like no time at all, the bright lights are out. *Wow, those TV interviews are short. But he'll come across. In whichever official language.* Line A continues the clockwise march. Cameron tries to sneak a peek at the clock.

My feet hurt. How much longer?

Cameron is aware of a solitary flash behind him. He glances over at the guys coming the other way. They are looking around, losing the eyes front discipline. Another flash.

As he rounds the second right turn the TV lights come on again and he is looking straight ahead at Boy Wonder.

Cameron has to turn right again. Behind him in line, where Cameron was twenty seconds ago, Rod catches the moment, his head held proudly straight.

Maybe Rod can fill in the blanks for me. Boy Wonder out here on the Departures Level of the Terminal? What is he, VP of Inflight Service?

Bad Dog is marching alongside Cameron again.

Left heel.

“LINE A, HALT!”

“LINE A, ABOUT . . . FACE!”

Cameron pivots on his left heel. It feels good. He has managed to be at one with his brothers in arms.

“LINE A, MARCH!”

Only ten minutes to go.

The lights are out. The media people have got what they want.

The last ten minutes are long. Nothing is happening. Finally Bad Dog is back, walking with them. Cameron stays in line as it leads him out of the circle and back to the stairs. They climb, thinking of coffee and donuts.