

# 4 Voices

*Montreal - October, 1998*

## *Boy Wonder*

THE NEW CEO PACES his still unfamiliar corner office. He feels like he has been thrown to the dogs.

It has been his life's ambition to run an airline and here he is and this is all he wants to do. Run it as best he can, just as Horace did. But Horace didn't have this life-threatening force bearing down on him. Horace didn't have Ziggy Birnbaum and the Jade corporation trying to take it all away the minute he stepped into the job.

*I am real, you know.*

Boy peers out the big northwest windows, toward 24R. Nothing. Just heat shimmers above the runway.

Horace did a heck of a lot in his five years. But he also had opportunity in that bilateral. He saw the opportunity and he took it. He brought this company into the modern age.

*Boy! Puppy! Listen!*

Panhandle Pete had it right, back then, talking to Congress. What'd he say? *It will be a goddamn miracle if anyone makes*

*any money in this business ever again.* Something like that. His foresight didn't stop the U.S. Congress from de-regulating the airlines, though. And we haven't made any money since, not any of us, at least not for more than a month or two and anyway it's been one at the expense of the others, a zero-sum game or worse. Yeah, he saw it, all right. He saw the bankruptcies. Except he didn't mention the frenzy of mergers and acquisitions, all supposedly in service of those elusive profits. Those profits are gone. And now Horace is gone too.

*So is Father. But I am here, Boy. Talk to me.*

Boy stares determinedly at 24R. He walks out to the corner of the room, where the windows meet, and looks northeast. A Boeing BigTwin is over the approach lights.

I'm hearing things. Do I go to a doctor?

He watches the flare, the core exhaust from the JT9-D's joining and augmenting the heat shimmer on the runway. He waits while the puffs of smoke from the tires drift away.

I haven't got time. Besides, it's too risky.

Boy wheels around, challenging the office space.

"OK, I'm talking. And I feel like a fool. Who are you?"

The room is stubborn, unyielding. Boy sits down behind his desk, thinking how he will arrange the office.

*Arcadia, Boy. I am called Arcadia.*

Boy sits still, looking at his hands on the desk.

*I am the airline.*

"And you can speak to me?"

Boy says it in his head; he tries not to move.

*Yes, Boy. I speak to all my presidents. I always have. Sometimes they hear. I still talk to Father.*

He thinks over what he knows: the 1930's, the beginning of Trans Arcadia Air Lines.

“Your father – the Minister of Everything.”

*Yes.*

Boy sighs. There is too much to do.

I knew about the debt. I saw how Southern Gentleman let it creep up in his two years at the helm. Heck, the stock price is half of what it was a year ago. I'm ready to deal with that. But this Jade thing? It came out of left field. A takeover bid? In my first month here?

And I don't know my way around the government up here. Not well enough, anyway. I need help. I'll start with Larry Tennyson, our legal guy. He's Arcadian born and bred.

*You miss Horace, don't you?*

“Yes. But I knew he was going to go.”

*Southern was supposed to be here longer. Isn't that so?*

“Yes. The strike. It came out of the blue.”

It blindsided us all. But it was my opportunity. Sure, it was too soon. But who ever said this would be easy sailing? The job is a test, everyone knows that. Hell, life is a test. And now I'm hearing voices.

*Just me, Boy. You hear me because I am real.*

Do I have to answer? She said *sometimes they hear*. Maybe I'll be one of those who doesn't.

*I'm not sure that's what you want.*

And why not? Why the hell would I hear if I had a choice?

*We're in crisis, Boy. Southern didn't hear me.*

Starry Skies was brilliant. Worldwide consortium of airlines. Southern was right to join. Now the whole world has our back.

You don't screw around with Air Arcadia, boys. Starry Skies gonna mess with you. Gotta keep that in mind. Things are global now.

Boy looks around. The office is reassuringly real.

Except there's also the other consortium. World Unity. World Unity and Starry Skies, battling it out for world dominance. God, the arrogance of our business world. Wonder what Panhandle thinks about that. I'd love to go down to Texas to one of his barbeques. Chat a bit. Just don't have time. Besides, that would just be fun and he knows Congress but he doesn't know the government up here.

*You can chat with me.*

"You said Southern didn't hear you. Who did? Besides your father?"

*Ben, sometimes. Chauncey, often. And Horace. Bless him.*

It's hot. Boy loosens his tie, shifts in his chair. Think about what's different in Arcadia. The Forward Party and the Backward Party. Crown Corporations becoming publicly traded companies. The Ministry of Movement with its finger in many more of our pies than the FAA down down south. And Minister of Movement David Punctilious. There's something about that sucker. Gotta be careful. Can't run my airline fighting him.

*Otis Lemming took my Ben away.*

Otis Lemming. Another Minister of Movement. That's history. Took my Ben? Ben Plat, she means.

Boy grabs the thick binder and checks the index. He leafs through. December, 1975. Ben Plat eased into retirement. He reads. Closes the binder with a sigh.

*Be careful of MOM, Boy.*

But Air Arcadia has always been the darling of the Forward Party. Carrying the mail. Carrying the Members of Parliament back and forth to their ridings. Joining this vast country together, and all

that nonsense. Except – is that still the way it is?

There was a clue two weeks ago. Minister Punctilious was carefully circling the subject without really saying anything, as only he can. Baffling the people and the press. At the time it seemed like the Government was going to let Pacific Airlines International, the Proud Goose, go down in flames. Let their debt drag them down, out of the picture. Leave us to compete with BestJet.

Boy drags out another binder. Finds the text of the speech.

Reading it again it is obvious. *Made in Arcadia solution.* That's the clue. He's a politician. Is he going to let good Arcadian jobs vanish on his watch? Hell, no. Momma Minister is gonna get in the picture, break up the fight, impose some truce that pisses us all off. Made in Arcadia.

*But not for Arcadia.*

Yeah. See what she means. Not for her. And Ziggy Birnbaum was in on it. Shit! Ziggy is hooked in to the Forwards. He's got Patriot's money behind him and all of World Unity's, for that matter. Hell, Ziggy and his Jade Corporation are just a front for that money, the Arcadian face of it, so Punctilious can either look the other way or change the law. So much for the Forwards covering our back.

*They used to. In Father's day.*

“Yeah. So who can be trusted? “

*You can trust me.*

