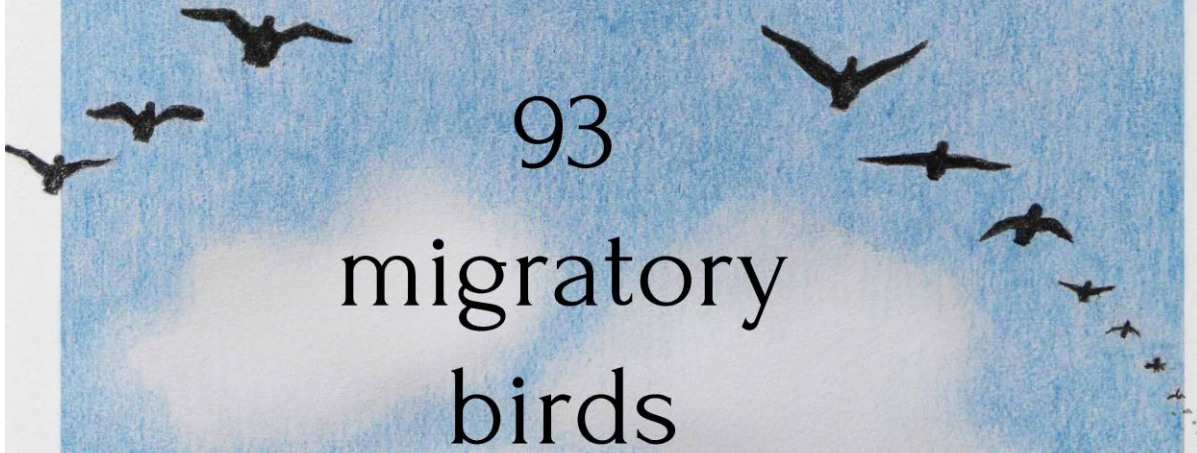


Catalin Pogaci



93

migratory
birds



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COVER: ZUZANA KONECNA

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Instead of a preface

This book is the second in a possible series through which I am trying to preserve a few pieces of aviation history in literature. The first book is dedicated to the IAR 80. This one is with and about the IAR 93.

Whether it was a good or bad aircraft, I do not know. Some say yes, others say no. It was manufactured under conditions of general austerity, while people were starving and everyday items were not available in stores. Where could resources be found for the aviation industry?

Like the 80, it was an aircraft born out of necessity, made in a hurry, and which turned out better than expected.

Could the project have been developed further, matured, and become what was truly intended? Yes, it could have. But that didn't happen. An aircraft less than twenty years old was simply taken out of service, some airframes having only a few hours of flight time. The Serbs are still using and modernizing them. Would they have been useful as weapons? Who knows... For the Serbs, they were.

Strangely enough, unlike the IAR 80, about which I found plenty of information freely available on the internet, this was not the case with the 93. Photographs are scarce. There are probably private collections, but I did not have access to them. The same goes for testimonies. Perhaps because it was an aircraft that flew (thankfully!) only in peacetime. Stories like "this is how I came and launched a missile" are nowhere to be found. Maybe I didn't look hard enough. Maybe I should have dug deeper, asked more people.

It's okay. What I couldn't find, I made up with my imagination, an imagination that had to work a little harder than on *80 flights*.

Don't forget: this is a work of fiction. Don't take the figures and dates in it at face value. They are close, but they are not the real ones.

The summer of 1987, above the road leading from Craiova to Drobeta, at three hundred meters in the air

The [IAR](#) followed its swallow-like flight, flying low, following the twists and turns of the roads and taking care not to hit high-voltage cables. In the front cabin, [Titel](#) was working hard. He was the active pilot. He had the plane in his hands. The second cabin was occupied by [Petrișor](#), actually Petre, but as he was a small man, his comrades first called him Petrică, then after deep and spiritual thought they settled on Petrișor. They couldn't make him any smaller. He wasn't exactly a gnome. Admittedly, he barely fit within the weight and height limits of the ejection seat, but that didn't mean he was an incompetent pilot. The jokes kept coming.

'Did you bring your pillow with you?'

'Give him a flight manual to put under his butt!'

The manual was as thick as a church prayer book.

'See if they've chopped wood in the canteen. Take a log from there and put it on the seat.'

'Are you flying solo today? Have you brought your periscope?'

He had heard it all before. He didn't care. He even laughed when he heard a new and funnier one. To be fair, from the second cockpit he could barely see over Titel's head, even though the two seater had the rear seat raised specifically for this purpose. Not like in Migs! Well-designed plane, man! Too bad it was full of operational problems. But he didn't need to see outside. He knew both the plane and Titel perfectly. He knew he could trust him, and the instruments were enough for him. He was an ace at instrument flying.

'Well, if he can't see over the dashboard!' his brothers in arms teased him. 'Of course he gets only good grades at instrument flying. He's got his head buried in the cockpit!'

Petrișor watched the flight with satisfaction. Titel was doing excellently. He had nothing to reproach him for. Low-altitude check ride! That was the mission. Just as he glanced at the instruments again, he felt himself suddenly pressed into his seat, saw the [variometer](#) make a spectacular jump, joining hands with the [G-meter](#), and Titel muttered the unannounced maneuver into the intercom:

'Damned [pickle jar](#)!'

Titel may have had his occasional quirks when flying, but one thing about him was well known: he could do several things at once. And he did them well, without getting confused.

One day, while driving, a [Dacia](#) car cut him off at an intersection. Calmly, Titel pulled his steering wheel with one hand, honked the horn with the other, spat through the half-open window without splashing it, while his mouth uttered...It doesn't matter what came out of his mouth! All this at the same time, in half a second.

'Only a pilot can do that!' Petrișor said proudly from the back seat of the [Oltcit](#), where he was still clutching the handle in the ceiling spasmodically.

'Or a taxi driver!' suggested Titel's wife, who was sitting in the front seat, horrified by what had come out of Titel's mouth and also clutching the handle above her head spasmodically.

'What's going on?' Petrișor asked over the intercom, looking around in fear. 'Why did you swerve like that?'

'There was an idiot with an [Alouette](#)! Didn't you see him?'

'No!' said Petrișor, surprised.

'He flew right under us!' Titel replied wearily, as if to say, "Forget that idiot!"

'Let's see him!'

'Do you really want to catch him?'

'Yes! I want to see him!'

Titel shrugged. The [93](#) made a 180-degree turn with its left wing on the ground, a [G-loaded](#) semicircle, enough to make them both gasp.

'Slow down, that thing's flying at a hundred kilometers per hour.'

'Roger,' Titel complied.

'Where is it?'

'We'll find it...'

It didn't take them long. A cold flash revealed the helicopter's bumblebee flight, skimming the trees.

'Open the [airbrakes](#), we're overtaking it!'

'Do you think we can fly in formation with him?' Titel barked.

'No, I just want to see it better.'

The 93 couldn't possibly fly as slowly as an Alouette, even if the helicopter was flying at maximum speed. But, to the great surprise of the two IAR pilots, the speed at which the two aircraft were approaching each other was not that high. Either the ones with the pickle jar were in a hell of a hurry, or they were flying a different type of helicopter, a faster one.

'That's not a pickle jar!' Petrișor gave his verdict after they had overtaken the heli. 'Do another lap so we can take another look!'

Titel complied, this time also consumed by curiosity. They had seen a kind of Alouette, but more elongated and painted in colors other than those they knew. It had no visible markings, or at least they hadn't seen any.

'Forge, Sledgehammer Two-Two!'

'Go ahead Sledgehammer,' they heard the flight controller's voice.

'Forge, we've come across an unidentified helicopter at low altitude. We're twenty kilometers southeast of [Drobeta](#)!'

'Sledgehammer, Forge, what kind of helicopter?'

'Military, judging by the paint job, but we haven't identified the insignia yet.'

Titel completed the next 360-degree turn, focusing on the helicopter.

'I'll report to headquarters, Two-Two, keep your eyes on it, don't cross the [Danube](#)!'

'Roger!'

The 93 made another pass, with the flaps and brakes deployed.

'Watch the airspeed!' Petrișor muttered. 'If you lose her here at this height, we'll crash.'

He was concerned about the low altitude. The helicopter was flying less than a hundred meters above the ground, and they were following it. Slowly. Exhaustingly slowly, a flight regime in which the plane did not respond well.

'Sledgehammer Two-Two, Forge. It seems that Mirage has also reported seeing an unidentified target intermittently where you are. Do you have visual contact?'

'Affirmative, it's a helicopter vaguely resembling an Alouette.'

Pause. Petrișor imagined the commotion in the command centers, transmitted up the chain of command. Meanwhile, they made another 360-degree turn so they could stay behind the intruder.

'Look, it doesn't even have a tail rotor!'

'It does. It's in a fairing, same as [Uncle Nicu's helicopter](#) has it! And it's piloted by a woman.'

'Wave to her, what are you waiting for!'

'Sledgehammer Two-Two, Forge.'

'Continue Forge.'

'It's a Serbian helicopter, maybe a navigation error.'

'Roger. What should we do to it?'

Another pause.

'By the time they make up their minds, it will have crossed the Danube!'

Indeed, by the time they got their answer, the helicopter had crossed the river. Disgusted, Titel made a turn and climbed eastward.

'If that guy keeps this heading, he'll cross the Bulgarians too.'

'*That gal!*' Petrișor corrected him.

'Sledgehammer Two-Two, Forge!'

'Loud and clear, Forge, go ahead!'

'Two-Two, don't do anything to him! Come back home.'

'Roger, Forge,' said Petrișor obediently, thinking to himself, as if we could do anything to him now that he had crossed the border...

The 93 headed for [Craiova](#), the place where she was born.

Two days later, on the road from [Caracal](#) to Craiova, on the ground

The intersection wasn't big. Two roads crossed in the middle of a field, bordered by tall poplar trees. A [Trabant](#) car was slowly advancing on one of them. The driver seemed indecisive, as if he were looking for something.

The other road was also busy. Another car was moving slowly and uncertainly. Like destiny, both were slowly but surely approaching the intersection.

It is unclear whose fault it would have been. The point is that both cars arrived there at the same time. One of them pulled out in front of the other. An acrobatic maneuver followed, resulting in the catastrophe being avoided, a furious screech of brakes, as much as a Trabant can squeal from its wheels, and the cars stopped a short distance from each other on the side of the road.

'Goddamn you, you idiot!'

Angry, one of the drivers, the one in the Trabant, dressed in an aviation uniform, grabbed a stick he kept sacredly in his car, the one he used to prop up the hood so it wouldn't fall on his head when he filled up with gas, and rushed out, slamming the door.

He immediately noticed that the other driver had had the same idea. He also had his club. He was also wearing an aviation uniform.

Both had lieutenant stripes. This detail calmed them down a little. They studied each other more calmly, smiling crookedly, trying to make it seem like the clubs were there only because they were in their way and they couldn't open the doors because of them. Behind them, the Trabant purred obediently, idling.

'If we weren't wearing the same uniform, I'd beat you up!' one of the accident candidates muttered through clenched teeth. 'But as it is', he continued, 'it's not appropriate. It's not officer-like.'

He threw the stick into a ditch.

'At least if we were to get into a fight, you should know that I had the right of way,' he added, conciliatorily. 'What are you doing in this field? Have you come out to graze, Comrade Lieutenant?'

Seeing that he was unintentionally adding fuel to the fire and that the person fate had brought his way was once again turning up his nose, he decided to change tack again.

'My name is Sebastian Kiş,' he said, extending his hand and thinking that it was not an inappropriate gesture, especially since the man in front of him had the same rank on his epaulettes as he did. 'I am honored!'

'Tiberiu Rădulescu!' came the short and somewhat unenthusiastic reply. 'The honor is mine.'

Sebastian Kiş saw Tiberiu's gaze soften somewhat.

'I think we're heading in the same direction, aren't we?' he asked, leading the conversation.

'I don't know,' Tiberiu replied cautiously. He had been taught not to disclose any information about his profession to anyone. And since traveling to the unit was part of his mission order, putting him in a position of being *on a mission*, which was as official and related to his job as it could be, it was not appropriate to disclose information to the first person he met, even if that person was also a pilot. What if it was a trap? What if he was a spy, or worse? What if he was someone sent specifically to spy on him, to see if he kept his mouth shut? He had heard of such cases in military school.

Sebastian burst out laughing, guessing his thoughts, but then he thought about the same thing. What if the guy in front of him was someone who was sent to interrogate people? But here in the fields? Why not?

The sound of a choking engine brought him out of his reverie.

'Sorry,' he said hurriedly to the other man, heading for his car. 'If the engine cuts off, it won't start again'.

He stopped with his foot on the accelerator in an expert gesture, pressing it gently, revving the engine. The Trabant's engine resumed running, spewing clouds of blue smoke from the exhaust. Sebastian stuck his head out the half-open door and yelled over the noise of the engine, which he kept revving intermittently.

'Goodbye, comrade. And pay more attention to the road!'

He put the car in gear and sped off, leaving the other man standing there in the middle of the field. And yet, a little later, they met again.

The same day, the flight briefing room of the 68th Fighter-Bomber Regiment, Craiova Airfield.

'Major, let's recap. You claim that the helicopter had no markings and was piloted by a woman. How did you notice this? You know, at speed, people can be mistaken,' added the man with feigned understanding. 'I don't understand how you can determine whether someone is a man or a woman from a single glance, especially when that person is wearing a flight helmet.'

Titel looked wearily at the man in front of him. They had been repeating the same thing for about two hours. As if on cue, it seemed to Titel that the [intelligence officer](#) was siding more with the helicopter than with them. After they had made a high-class interception at low altitude, totally by chance, and reported the unauthorized overflight of the country's territory by an unknown helicopter with no markings, everyone, especially [Urechi](#), the counterintelligence officer, was looking for a fault in their report. That wasn't his real name, but he hadn't earned his nickname for nothing. First of all, he was from counterintelligence, and by the nature of his profession, he had to know everything that was going on in the unit. The bad part was that he seemed more interested in what everyone was doing in their private lives. Militarily, he could barely tell an IAR-93 from a [Mig-21](#).

Rumor had it that back in the late 1970s, when a 93 crashed for reasons that were still undetermined, Urechi had been part of the detachment of [blue-eyed enthusiasts](#) who had been sent to the scene. The plane had crashed in a field near Craiova. Nothing was left of it.

And yet, the cheerful group had rushed through the gate of the unit, all in their black Dacia cars, and stopped right in front of another plane propped up on jacks in front of the firing range for adjusting the auto cannons. Urechi got out with a flourish, circled the plane, and exclaimed:

'Come on, it's not too badly damaged. I think it's made of good steel! Where's the pilot?'

The confusion was later cleared up, with difficulty, and later, he was permanently detached or transferred to the unit.

Titel lit another cigarette and expertly blew the smoke through his nostrils.

'Comrade Captain, let's not beat around the bush. I've already told you everything I know. You also have the written report. I understand that the situation has already been clarified above. It was a navigation error by the neighboring crew. I know it was a woman because they have a specific flying style. You know, just like the way they drive. Have you seen how women drive? You can tell from a distance that it's a woman behind the wheel. They fly the same way.'

The [C I guy](#) seemed to understand, although it was clear that Titel was teasing him. He even agreed with Titel.

'Yes, Comrade Major, I think you're right,' he said, his face lighting up. 'I hadn't thought of that. I never imagined they were the same in the air. I can recognize my wife when she's driving from a kilometer away.'

'You see, Comrade Captain, you see?' Titel echoed him. 'Can I go now? Are you done with me?'

'Yes, of course, of course, I'm done now. If possible, please let your colleague, Comrade Petre, come in for a moment.'

'I already told you, Comrade Captain. Major Petre didn't see anything from the rear cockpit. You know he can't see much outside because of his height. He had his head buried in the instruments.'

The irony went unnoticed once again. Urechi let himself be persuaded. Not for any other reason, but because he was tired of asking so many questions he didn't know the answers to, but he had to be careful with the aviators. They were all spoiled brats who had to be kept on a tight leash. Besides, he didn't have all day. After the helicopter was intercepted, the entire unit had been turned upside down for two days. Orders and counter-orders, rumors and counter-rumors, and he had to run around, find out, dig around, why this and not that, but if it was done this way, it couldn't be done any other way, but if it could have been done differently, why wasn't it done that way, and to top it all off, he also had an assignment from his wife to get a [Fa soap](#) from the black market dealers, because she couldn't wash with just any soap for her sister's wedding. The black marketeers knew him and served him every time. He forgave their underground activities because he needed them.

'All right, all right,' he muttered, watching Titel stub out his cigarette in the pile of butts in the ashtray. 'All right, Comrade Major. Thank you, thank you, you are free to go.'

Titel got up from his chair, stretched to crack his bones, and walked out slowly, without saying goodbye.

'Come on!' he said to Petrișor, who was waiting on a chair by the door.

'What, are you the only one allowed to tell stories?' Petrișor feigned indignation. 'I want to talk to Comrade Ure... er, Captain, one more time, too.'

'Come on!' Titel insisted, taking him by the elbow. 'I've already bailed you out, there's no need.'

Just then, the door opened and the counterintelligence captain walked past them, saluting.

'Good day, good day. Comrade Major, there's no need. Cheers.'

He quickened his pace down the corridor, looking at the floor, doing his best to get out of the two majors' sight as quickly as possible. He didn't like either of them and felt that they were constantly mocking him, but he couldn't bring himself to prove it. *I'll get you one day*, he promised them in

his mind, then his thoughts drifted back to the soap. Maybe this time he would get a bottle of brandy as well. He didn't have to show that one to his wife.

The two watched him leave, then slowly exited the building themselves. It was warm and pleasant outside. Summer. The alleys of the compound had freshly painted curbs. The trees, where the cuckoos sang their love songs, were also freshly painted in chalk half way up, to prevent pests destroying them.

'Comrade Major,' a shy voice called out.

'Which one of us?' Petrișor turned around, startled.

It was a soldier from the guard corps. His face was red and he was sweating, a sign that he had run all the way from the gate. The question confused him. He blushed even more, like a beacon light of [the ANs](#).

'Hello,' stammered the corporal, 'there are two, there is one, they are looking for you....' The soldier took a deep breath and clarified. 'There are two comrades at the gate. He *says* he has a *delivery* for you.'

'Ah, and where are they now? At the gate?'

'At the gate, sir.'

'Well, bring them in,' he said gallantly. 'You can find me in my office.'

'Understood, comrade major.'

The soldier disappeared, running.

'Maybe there are those new engineers,' concluded Petrișor.

'Maybe,' agreed Titel, lighting another cigarette. 'What a tiring day! I can't wait for today to end!'

'If only it would fly by!' Petrișor lamented with a sigh.

'Hopefully...' said Titel dreamily.

Unlike Petrișor, he was a stronger, more energetic guy. Two sinewy, strong, tanned arms, like those of a tractor driver, sprang from his broad shoulders, above which sat a clever head with lively eyes and sharply defined features. Deep expression lines furrowed his face, seeming to accentuate even more the man's strong but gentle character. Titel smoked a lot. He had a smoker's voice, but it was pleasant and resonant. They also called him [Pittis](#) because of this voice. Being from [Cluj](#), he was a calm, calculated, meticulous, and sarcastic man. A subtle, equally calculated and calm sense of humor completed his portrait.

Titel was the commander of the Second Squadron. Petrișor led the Third. Titel was also the deputy commander of the regiment. Lieutenant Colonel Rozeșan, who was the full leader, was absent

from the unit that day. Therefore, Titel had the duty and privilege of receiving and sorting the newcomers.

'Let's see what's up with those two,' he told Petrișor.

They walked slowly toward the command building, sluggish from the heat outside and tired from the last two days. Together, they had more flying hours than the entire unit. [Zlins](#), [L-29s](#), [L-39s](#), [MiG-15s](#), [MiG-17s](#), the supersonic [21](#), and now the 93. They had flown or were flying all of them. In addition, for a short period, Petrișor had also flown helicopters. Their flights had not always been smooth sailing. Both had been tested in many circumstances.

The office wasn't spacious enough, but at least it was cool. Titel sat down at what he called *his desk* and lit another cigarette. Petrișor didn't smoke, so he opened the window.

'Are you crazy?' Titel spluttered in his Pittiș voice. 'Do you want the heat to come in?'

'And the air!' Petrișor added, ignoring him, opening the window.

A timid knock on the door announced that they had visitors.

'Come in, don't be shy!'

The door opened and two lieutenants appeared on the threshold. They weren't engineers. They were pilots. They both saluted according to regulations and exchanged words, competing to see who would speak first.

'Good day, allow me to report: I am Lieutenant Tiberiu Ră...'

'Kiș, and I am reporting for duty.'

Titel looked at them, then at Petrișor, then back at them, confused.

'Greetings!' he saluted correctly. 'Now, from the beginning. Who is who, but slowly and one at a time, not like [Laurel and Hardy](#).'

'Sebastian Kiș, sir, I have been assigned to your unit.'

'Tiberiu Rădulescu, me too.'

'My, my, two at once. What shall we do with them, Petrică?'

Petrișor studied the two from head to toe, slowly, thoroughly.

'Well, what can we do... we'll split them up. One for you, one for me.'

'Which one do you prefer?'

'Let me look at their faces to see which one is smarter. Mmmm,' he said a second later, after taking a quick look, 'neither of them impresses me. But you, go ahead, since you're smaller,' he said to Tiberiu, who was shorter. 'Come on, come to grandpa on his knees, recite a poem! Where

are you from and how did you end up here? Tell me, Rădulescu, how did you end up in Craiova? Why did they assign you here, to [Oltenia](#)?’

Sebastian burst out laughing, a short snort, which he tried to turn into a cough, without success. Tiberiu blushed awkwardly, without accepting the invitation.

‘That's how they assigned us, sir. To the 68th Fighter-Bomber Regiment,’ he managed to stammer, without realizing whether the people in front of him were serious or joking. He had dealt with majors before, but serious ones. It seemed that as a man advanced in rank, he became more and more serious.

‘Everyone in aviation knows that above the clouds there is always sunshine and that the sky is blue, but the higher you climb, the darker it gets, until the sky turns black,’ a colleague at the Military Academy had told him.

‘What do you mean?’ he had asked, not understanding.

‘I mean, the higher you climb in rank, the more of a bastard you become. What's so hard to understand?’

But these guys don't seem so bad, he thought, looking at Titel and Petrișor.

‘You've come to the right place! [Zaibăr](#) is as much as you can get, local, hot Oltenian girls as many as you want, or are you married?’

‘No, I'm not,’ Sebastian answered, shaking his head.

‘Lucky you,’ Titel slipped in, taking a drag from his ever-present cigarette.

‘Me neither,’ replied Tiberiu.

‘That's good. When the Oltenian girls see you, hold on tight! But in the meantime, go to the administration office to see how you'll be assigned sleeping quarters. I vaguely remember there was a studio apartment available for bachelors. This is temporary, until you get settled here and find something else. Once you're done with that, get yourselves ready, spruce yourselves up, and tomorrow at 6 a.m. in the regiment's briefing room. There, across the street, that ugly building. It's too late today to introduce you, and you've just arrived. Maybe you're hungry, maybe you're thirsty, you missed lunch at the mess hall anyway. There's a grocery store right next to the block of flats where you'll be staying. There's nothing in it, but you'll find it still open. Tomorrow, walk here, you don't need the bus. Just cross the street. Shave, look good, iron your uniform, cut your nails, understood?’

‘And blow your noses,’ Titel added.

‘Understood!’ mumbled Tiberiu.

'We'll see what tomorrow will bring,' Petrișor concluded. 'Good, now you're dismissed, but be welcomed here!'

To the amazement of the two lieutenants, the two majors stood up and shook their hands in a friendly manner.

'Major Cristian Codreanu, Titel, commander of the Second Squadron. You will be working with me, Mr. Kiș. I will take you under my wing.'

'Major Petre Năstase. You're mine, Comrade Rădulescu.'

The lieutenants enthusiastically accepted the outstretched hands, happy to be welcomed. They were about to leave when Sebastian suddenly turned on his heels:

'Comrade Major, may I ask you something?' he said timidly.

'Go ahead, young man,' replied Titel placidly.

'You know, I'm here by car.' There was a hint of emphasis in his words. A hint of importance, like in the words of a child who had just been given an adult task. 'Do you know if there is parking where you said we'll stay, or can I leave the car in the unit's parking lot?'

'Look at them, they even have cars!' Petrișor said admiringly. 'Man, these generations today are so cool. You can find parking anywhere you want. But what kind of car do you have, if I'm not being too nosy?'

Petrișor asked suspiciously. If it was an expensive car, he had to be careful. Maybe this Kiș was the offspring of someone high up. He knew what he knew.

'Oh, it's a Trabant, it's my dad's. He let me drive it here.'

Petrișor calmed down. He smiled. He had a particular smile, discreet, playful.

'Nice car! But you know what?'

'What?'

'Put another exhaust pipe on it, and if you need to, grab them both, lift the car up from the rear, and it'll work as a wheelbarrow.'

Tiberiu burst out laughing, a laugh camouflaged by a cough, as befits a superior.

'Dismissed, now. The administrative staff is waiting for you.'

The lieutenants rushed out the door.

'Bravo, in Olteci - City they come with Trabants,' they heard as they walked away down the corridor.

'So what, did you want them to come by helicopter, like Uncle Nicu?'

Titel fell into thought, remembering again.

'Man, what a hassle that damn jar was. It would have been better if it hadn't crossed our path. My hand hurts from writing so many reports. But what was that idiot doing here, across the Danube...'

'What jar, man?' Petrișor snapped at him. He was sensitive to topics involving rotors. 'Look!' He fired a warning shot threateningly. 'I was a jar pilot too.'

'Yeah?! It doesn't count. That thing doesn't need a pilot.'

Titel didn't care about Petrișor's sensitivities.

'But what does it need?' Petrișor asked, surprised.

'A housekeeper. To clean up.'

Seeing him confused, Titel continued.

'You see, that thing has an [*Ideal*](#) vacuum cleaner on its back. That's what it looks like. Like a pickle jar with an *Ideal* vacuum cleaner stuck to it. That's pretty much what it sounds like too. Like a broken *Ideal*. Have you ever had the bearings in its electric motor break? It sounds just like your Alouette. I'm glad you've come to the true faith, to a-e-ro-planes,' he said syllabizing and emphasizing the word, 'and not stuff that...'

They bickered like at the market... Both were tired, irritated, but cheerful.

Airport District neighborhood at number 9, the same evening

They weren't the only ones. A little further away, across the street from the airport, another existential *drama* was unfolding.

'Well, there's only one bed there!'

'So what? Let them put another one in!' decreed the administrative officer. 'Let them figure it out!'

Indeed, in the studio apartment they had been assigned, they found only one bed. Narrow, for one person.

'Oh, we have a balcony!' Sebastian declared admiringly, opening the door to let the musty smell out and some fresh air in. He wasn't too bothered about the bed. He was used to all kinds of living conditions.

'I'll sleep in the car! No way am I sharing a bed with you.'

Tiberiu stood like a pillar next to the bed in question, unable to take his eyes off it. After all, in his entire, not very long military career, he had never had to share a bed with anyone. Even in the large dormitories of the Military Academy, he had always slept in his own bed.

Gallantly, Sebastian offered to sleep on the floor.

'On this cement floor? You'll have your back screwed up!'

The studio apartment was spartan. Apart from the bed, it was furnished with a table and two chairs. The kitchen was tiny. So was the bathroom. Sebi checked if the water was running. It was. It was running too well. When he turned off the tap, the water continued to murmur.

'A 22 mm wrench,' Sebi muttered to himself. 'I think I have one in the car.'

Then he remembered:

'I'll go get my luggage. We'll see how and where we'll sleep later.'

Ten minutes later, a suitcase with worn corners had opened up in the middle of the room, and Sebi had started taking various things out of it. The first thing his fingers got tangled up in was a huge jar of [zacusca](#), which he placed on the table as if it were an invitation.

'If the major said we wouldn't find anything at the grocery store, that's okay. We're prepared. Try some!'

He also found some bread, which he put on the table, took out a knife, a spoon, salt, and an onion, which had perfumed his entire suitcase, but what did it matter that all his clothes smelled like onion... He was in Oltenia, after all...

'Come on, Tibi, eat up, why are you standing there like a bride! Can I call you Tibi? Tiberiu is a bit long. You can call me Sebi, here you go!'

He set the first example. He spread zacusca on bread and, with his mouth full, continued to rummage through his suitcase. To Tibi's amazement, Sebi pulled out a tape recorder. A Kashtan.

'Where shall we put it?' he asked.

Tibi didn't answer, completely stunned, so Sebi put it in a corner on the floor.

'Did you bring that with you?' Tibi asked, looking at how the tape recorder was set up.

He had wanted a Kashtan his whole life. Tibi was crazy about good music.

'Well, yes. It's the most precious thing I have. The suitcase can go to hell, along with all the clothes. We'll listen to some good music in the evening.'

He took out a few rolls of tape, which he carefully placed next to the device. Then he took out two pairs of headphones, also worn and torn.

'These are for camouflage,' he explained to Tibi. 'We can't listen out loud. We'll disturb the neighbors.'

He said the word emphatically, meaningfully.

Tibi said nothing, just nodded. He knew what he meant. Meanwhile, driven by hunger, he had spread some zacusca on bread and was tucking in. The sound of a jet engine caught his attention, prompting him to go out onto the balcony. From the sound, it was clearly a military aircraft, and he expected to see an IAR-93, but that was not the case. A white flash between the buildings and an elegant silhouette, like a dolphin, flashed before his eyes for a second.

'93?' Sebi's voice, full of zacusca, could be heard from the room.

The plane had disappeared in the blink of an eye, hidden by the gray buildings. Tibi regretted that they weren't on a higher floor, but only on the first.

'I thought there would be no flights today. Maybe the weather probing aircraft,' Sebi continued in the room, fiddling with the tape recorder.

'It wasn't a 93,' Tibi told him as he entered the house.

'But what?'

'I don't know. I've never seen it before. It was a white and red plane. It looked a bit like the L-39.'

'What?!'

Sebi's eyes widened. He boasted that he knew all the military aircraft used by the [SRR](#). But a white plane, like an Albatros, that he didn't know?!

'Maybe a Mig-17, something...' he said unconvincingly. 'You didn't see it right.'

Tibi shrugged.

'Maybe... But that washing machine of a 17, it definitely wasn't!'

He wasn't in the mood for discussion. The zacusca was good, and if the plane was from Craiova, he was sure to see it again in the coming days. Besides, Sebi forgot about the subject.

'Here, put them on!'

He had just finished with the wires and the tapes and was offering him the headphones.

'What's this?'

'Listen and you'll see.'

Tibi put the phones on his ears, Sebi turned the knob, and the headphones played... Tibi's face lit up.

'Man, the sound quality is great!' he marveled.

After listening for a few more seconds, he asked:

'Awesome, man! Do you have more?'

'I have the whole album! It's the last one they released.'

[Led Zeppelin's *Wearing and Tearing*](#) blared rhythmically through the headphones. Suddenly, the studio apartment and the Trabant and the quarrels and the road to work and the summer heat and the leaky faucet and the lack of a bed and the mysterious flying dolphin that was neither Albatros nor Mig and the majors and the sergeants and the army and the empty grocery store were all forgotten. Only one thing was not forgotten: flying. Closing his eyes and listening to song after song, Tibi imagined flying close to the ground, following the course of rivers, dipping the plane between high banks, jumping over trees, climbing over hills, descending again into valleys. Throttle wide open! Climbing into the clouds, climbing towards the sun, through a break in the ceiling, a half roll, plane on its back, sun shining in the canopy, half roll, wings level, then dashing over the clouds. The rhythm of the song changed, softening. The landscape also changed. Mountain peaks below, white with snow, long wings, glider, slow flight, wide turns, white mountains, variometer that won't let you descend.

Sebi connected his pair of headphones—the Kashtan had two jacks—and the flight continued in tandem.

Clouds, clouds again, this time like fluffy ivory castles, giant rose-colored towers lit up by the sunset, and airplanes, airplanes slipping through the lacy battlements.

The day slipped away unnoticed. The tapes were listened one by one and the jar of zacusca was emptied spoonful by spoonful.

'Did you finish military school this year? I don't remember seeing you.'

'No, I came from [Timișoara](#). I was assigned to [Giarmata](#) and then transferred here.'

'Well, that's why I don't know you. But I feel like I've seen you somewhere before.'

'Maybe at the Aeroclub. I flew gliders.'

'You too?'

'Me too!'

It was nighttime. Somehow, someone had brought a camp bed with a broken spring. The bedding had been brought from the Trabant, thank you, Mom, for putting it there, and the bed was ready in about three minutes. The tape recorder was strategically placed between the beds, and a pair of headphones connected it to the occupants. The music had tamed them, brought them together.

'Man, I love this,' said Tibi, putting his hand on the headphones in the dark. 'How tired I was of [Angela Similea](#) and folk music.'

'Well, there's nothing else to be found around,' Sebi agreed.

'That's right. Where did you get these tapes?'

Sebi smiled mysteriously in the dark. They had both gone to bed early. It was only when night fell that they realized they had no light bulbs in the apartment.

'I have a source,' he boasted. 'It's a strategic secret, so keep your mouth shut.'

Tibi sighed.

'Oh, what kind of country do we live in,' he complained. 'This is not allowed, that's not allowed, that's not available. Even the Air Force doesn't have light bulbs. Good thing you sorted out the water.'

Sebi had turned off the water completely, from a valve under the sink.

'I don't have any gaskets,' the building's administrator had told him, the same person who had brought the bed, looking at the 22mm wrench. 'Turn it off completely until tomorrow, comrade lieutenant.'

'Yeah,' Sebi muttered. 'What kind of country do we live in...'

He would have said more, but he didn't dare yet. He didn't know Tibi well enough. And he liked aviation too much.

'Do you like the [Jantar](#)?' he asked instead.

'I haven't flown it. I didn't get the chance. I didn't have time. I would have liked to. I did other sports too.'

'What else did you do, kid? Tricycling?'

'No. Mountain climbing.'

'Valleys, torrents, precipices?'

'No. I climbed rocks. Rock walls, to be precise.'

'No way!'

Tibi shrugged under his blanket, not noticing the irony or the challenge.

'So what are you doing in aviation?'

Tibi shrugged again.

'Same thing as you do.'

'At least if we could fly properly. If it's like in school here...'

'We'll see tomorrow. Lights out, because we have to be up at six.'

'What lights do you want me to turn off? We don't have any.'

Sebi turned his face to the wall.

'What's that noise?' asked Tibi.

Something was creaking, bleating, or crackling, with a muffled echo reverberating off the concrete walls.

'I don't know. The iron voice of reinforced concrete! Now let me sleep.'

The fatigue of the day finally overcame them both, and they began to snore as only young people can, despite the austere conditions, the hard beds, and the noises of the concrete apartment building. Outside, stray dogs barked and a night train rattled by. A gust of wind shook the open window, letting in fresh air and mosquitoes, but who had time for them and their annoying buzzing? Who would hear their complaints in the night?

Sebi tossed and turned irritably. There was a mosquito that wouldn't go away, and it seemed to be getting closer, right in his ear, a mosquito that must have been huge, because it buzzed like a doorbell or an alarm clock that he knew he had in his suitcase.

Suddenly, he opened his eyes. The doorbell was real and it wasn't in the suitcase.

'Alarm!' a frightened voice rang out in the hallway.

He could hear doors slamming and voices swearing.

'Alarm! Wake up! Alarm.'

Tibi was already up.

'Do we have to go too?' Sebi asked innocently from his bed. 'We just got here.'

The banging on the door soon made it clear.

'Get up, alarm, everyone to the unit!'

Tibi fumbled for the door handle and poked his head out into the hallway.

'Everyone! To the unit, alarm,' the voice repeated, the echo ricocheting in the stairwell.

'What about us?' Tibi dared to ask.

'I said everyone!' the man yelled, rushing down the stairs.

68th Fighter-Bomber Regiment, the briefing room, in the middle of the night

The room was filled with smoke, despite the windows being fully open. People were smoking heavily and talking in low voices. Everyone was agitated and restless. Although they were used to and trained for alarms, the pilots sensed something unusual in the air. It didn't seem like the typical drill they were trained for. There was tension in the air, something unclear and unknown.

[The alarm cell](#) had long been at its highest level of alertness, and the other aircraft of the regiment were being prepared on the apron. The technicians were in a frenzy. Gas tanks, APAs, trucks pulling trailers, ammunition trucks, [ARO](#) cars, all lost in a human swarm bustling in the light of the headlights and spotlights. And yet no one knew what was happening.

To top it all off, everyone had heard and seen the navigation lights of a helicopter that had landed on the aircraft factory apron on the other side of the runway.

There was a lot of talking out there.

'Is there some kind of drill going on, have you heard anything? They want to test these new planes and their response capacity, I heard.'

'Where did you hear that? Can't you see what a mess it is?'

'Well, even if it's just a test, why did they request live ammunition for all the planes? We don't even know what kind of ammunition.'

'Guys, it's serious, I'm telling you. This time it's serious. They must have dropped an atomic bomb somewhere.'

'Hell no, it would have been on the news.'

'My arse on the news! They only talk about [The Comrade](#) on the news!'

In the briefing room, the same topics were floating around in the smoke.

'Hey, [Mircică](#), have you heard anything? I heard they're sending us somewhere. Deployment.'

'Where are they sending us, to [Ianca](#)?'

'I don't know.'

'And how? Half of the men aren't even qualified for night flights. No, sir, it's just an exercise.'

'I don't know, Mircică. It's never been like this before. Did you see the guys from unit 182? They've been brought up in buses.'

'You got to be kidding me! Did you see them?'

'I'm telling you, man! I saw the buses drive through the gate. And The Cuban saw them too. Tell him, man!!'

'That's right, I saw them too.'

'Then it's serious, man!'

'Who are those two?'

'Which ones?'

'Those lieutenants in the corner.'

'How should I know! They must be new. I haven't seen them before. Look, Titel's here, maybe he knows more. Titel, wait a minute, comrade major! Titel! What do you know? Look at your red eyes! You haven't slept at all, have you?'

Titel shrugged, looking around for a place to sit down.

'They'll tell us what's up soon. Look, Rozeşan is here too.'

The room grew quiet. Lieutenant Colonel Rozeşan, the regiment commander, made his way to the front of the room. He was not alone. He was accompanied by Urechi, the counterintelligence officer.

'Good evening, fellow pilots. Good evening. Are we all here, is anyone missing? Please close the door, I have something important to tell you. Quiet, please!'

Rozeşan was a man of middle age, getting old even. His uniform fit him impeccably, although he too looked as if he had just woken up. He sat down on the corner of a desk and waited for the commotion to die down. The lieutenant colonel was a straightforward man. He didn't like theatrical gestures and preambles. He got straight to the point:

'General mobilization has been decreed in the country, and as of today, zero hour, the SRR Army is on high alert. All operational units have been called to the premises to prepare for battle.'

Whispering and commotion began again in the room, but Rozeşan banged his wedding ring on the desk. Rarely, jerkily, like a metronome.

'This is not a drill!' he said emphatically, almost syllable by syllable. 'We are facing a real situation. Comrade Captain Mirică, from counterintelligence, will brief you on what is happening.'

Urechi took a step forward and cleared his throat. He was still full of his usual bombast, but it was obvious that he was not himself.

'Comrades pilots,' he said in an uncertain voice. 'An order has been received...'

He paused, searching for the right words.

'Our country is threatened by external forces. We have been informed that the imperialist forces of the West are preparing a serious military attack on the socialist countries. Comrades pilots! This is not an exercise but a real situation. Our peace-loving country has a duty to help the international communist society in its fight against [NATO](#) terrorists.'

A restless murmur could be heard in the room. Rozeşan tapped his wedding ring on the desk again.

'We have information that significant armed forces are currently concentrated on the western border of [Yugoslavia](#). Another threat appears to be to the south of this country, coming from Greece. Significant troop movements have also been recorded in [West Germany](#).'

The room stirred again. Surprise, tension, and horror could be read on everyone's faces. Only Titel remained unperturbed.

'General mobilization has been decreed in all socialist countries, as well as in our country. Our armed forces are ready to defend socialism and peace. The threat must be eliminated. Our combat units are ready to sacrifice themselves for the Socialist Republic of Romania and the Romanian people. You, the pilots, have the same role: guard the borders of the homeland.'

Mirică was speaking from memory. He had been instructed to memorize the speech and recite it like a poem.

'Give them the general situation, but don't go into details, Comrade Mirică,' he had been told on the phone. 'The details will be passed to them later. Don't forget that first and foremost we must encourage people, so they don't get scared from the start.'

Urechi himself was scared. His place was quite comfortable there in the unit. He had never imagined that he might ever go to war. What if the Americans came?

'Comrade Commander Rozeşan will now relay the orders he has received.'

Mirică's mouth was dry. His eyes stung from all the smoke. He stepped aside, letting Rozeşan speak. Rozeşan didn't move from his corner of the room. He just clapped his hands, two big, heavy hands, and said:

'Guys, this is serious. We have the following orders: no one leaves the unit without my approval. We will all sleep here, in the dormitories. There will be two alarm cells on duty at all times. All aircraft, except those used for training, will be armed. You will prepare for a possible trip within the country or even abroad. From now on, everything is classified, so you cannot give too many details to those at home.'

The commotion and voices began again.

'Man, this can't be happening,' someone whispered.

'I didn't think...'

'Quiet, please, I didn't finish yet,' Rozešan thundered. 'We have one more task: we will bring all pilots to the same level in as short a time as possible. Therefore, we will conduct as many training flights as we can. To this end, we will cooperate intensively with other aviation units. Now, except for those on alert, you can go and bring the bare necessities here, to the unit. I have already given orders to prepare the dormitories. Squadron commanders, to my office, please. I have important things to tell you.'

There was renewed commotion and agitation, but Rozešan no longer objected. He got up from his corner of the podium and disappeared through the door with determined steps. On the one hand, because he had a lot of work to do, and on the other, to avoid the questions that would inevitably come. With no one left to ask, the pilots also left the room, walking in pairs or threes and talking intensely. Soon, groups of people mingled in the alleys of the unit between buildings, and the grapevine telegraph did its job. Gossips, whispered and more or less censored, found their way from the hearts to the lips.

'What a disaster, sir! That's all we needed now!'

'Not only that we are poor, but now war has started too.'

'God forbid! I hope nothing starts.'

'Come on, guys, give it a rest! Nothing will start. You don't know, you were young then... it was the same in [sixty two](#)!'

'What happened in 1962, sir?'

'Well, it was the same thing, they said war was starting. We got scared for nothing.'

'May the Lord hear you.'

'This too shall pass.'

'I'm scared, man!'

'Come on, what the hell, be a man! You're in the damn army! Your wife might hear you!'

A little further away, on a deserted alley, the same topic was exciting a group of mechanics. The news had spread in the blink of an eye.

'It's true, man, the Americans have invaded Yugoslavia!'

'Well, why haven't they invaded *us*?'

'Shut the fuck up, you're getting us in trouble!'

Frightened heads looked around to see if Urechi was nearby, then the conversation continued in whispers. People laughed, but they laughed out of fear.

Meanwhile, in Rozeșan's office, Titel, Petrică, and Dan Popa, the commander of the 1st Squadron, sat huddled around the small table.

'Guys, I know what a nuisance has befallen us, but there's nothing we can do about it,' said Rozeșan, striking a match and lighting a cigarette. 'An order is an order! I'm just as surprised as you are. No one knew anything until today.'

'As if anyone knows anything in this country,' Titel grumbled.

'Whether they know or not, that's the situation. You know how things work around here.'

Titel lit his cigarette too. Petrișor approached the window, intending to open it, but Rozeșan stopped him.

'The mosquitoes will get in,' he said curtly.

Petrișor sat back down at the table, resigned.

Unperturbed, Rozeșan continued:

'Here's the deal: I've received orders that the entire regiment must be combat-ready and ready to deploy in less than a month. Time is short. We've been approved for an intensive training program for all pilots. We have fuel at our disposal. We also have ammunition. We have the firing range at our disposal. I have informed that there will be exercises with other units as well. We are responsible for bringing everyone up to combat level. Fast. How are we doing?'

He looked from one squadron commander to another.

'Come on, don't be shy. In order of your jersey numbers. You start, Comrade Popa.'

'Comrade Commander, in my squadron, you know how it is: I have two first-class pilots, eight second-class pilots, and one who has not yet made the transition to the IAR. None of the pilots have any real firing experience at the range.'

'Why do you still have the one who hasn't made the transition? [Găină](#) is his name, right?'

'Yes, Comrade Rozeșan, a chicken, eh, sorry, Găină. Well, the situation is that we don't have many two seaters available. There are only two, and they don't fly much. You know how it is: either there are no spare parts, or the ejection seats need to be replaced, or I don't know what maintenance work they have for them in the factory. I haven't had time to get him through.'

'What about you?' asked Rozeșan, looking at the Titel-Petrișor tandem.

'We're in the same boat, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel,' Titel said slowly. 'I have three first-class pilots, and the rest are second-class. And yesterday a lieutenant from Giarmata arrived. He's not qualified on the 93 either. We didn't have time to rotate all the pilots. We have another lieutenant for Petrică. Straight from school. I looked at his file. Few flight hours, he needs to be qualified on the plane, he needs a lot of flights in two seaters too.'

Rozeşan thought for a moment, running his hand through his hair.

'Those unqualified have priority. I want you to get them out as quickly as possible. I'll talk to the chief engineer to give priority to the two seaters. Maybe we'll get another one from somewhere. At least as a backup. That would be one thing. Two: we don't have time to qualify all the pilots for first class, but we absolutely must plan the live firing exercises. They'll be pushing us from above. They'll want to see drills. To see results. You know how it is!'

Titel grumbled. He knew. Titel grumbled every time something didn't suit him. And there was a lot he didn't like. He knew what was expected of them: little time, enormous pressure, many mistakes, and mistakes are how you learn, but in aviation mistakes kill you. In less than a second. He was a chief instructor and combat training instructor, and he was about to have a month of nightmares, in which he had to teach people how not to break their necks in an airplane and how to drop bombs from the same airplane, which was basically still in the prototype stage. There was so much to clarify and improve... all at the same time. And he was the only one in the entire regiment who had been with this plane from the beginning, flying it at the Flight Test Center. The first two seater had crashed. Its tail had flown off at high speed. [Flutter](#). The first single-seater had crashed. The engines had flamed out. There had been something wrong with the fuel system. In both cases the pilots had ejected. Then another single-seater had crashed, killing the pilot, the first human life claimed by the IAR-93 program. Titel sighed, thinking. He had known the pilot well. It was not clear why he had crashed.

And now everything had to be done quickly and with limited resources, in a context where national security was threatened.

'All right, Comrade Commander. We'll do what we can,' Petrişor said quietly, while Titel and Dan Popa remained silent.

'Maybe a miracle will happen,' said Rozeşan thoughtfully.

The four pilots looked at each other with resignation and hope at the same time.

Craiova Aircraft Factory (Plant 444), main assembly hall, the same night

The planes were neatly lined up on either side of the huge hall. It was quiet. A strange quietness, contrasting with the usual industrial hubbub of the night shift. Normally, you would have heard riveting guns, pneumatic tools, voices, echoes, and laughter. Now, the planes, some finished, some not, stood as if under inspection. The inspection team walked slowly through the middle of the hall.

The announced visit, but announced unexpectedly, had made the factory workers wet themselves.

'Someone from the [CC](#) is coming,' said the telephone operator, still holding the receiver in his hand.

'When is he coming?' asked the night shift manager wearily.

'He's coming now,' said the pale telephone operator. 'He's in a helicopter. Comrade Minister Toader is coming from [Bucharest](#).'

The manager rushed out the door in a panic, and the telephone operator was left holding the phone in the air. And now, Comrade Toader and his entourage, as many as could fit in the helicopter, were walking irritably among the planes. The factory director followed him like a lamb. He had arrived at the factory at top speed. So had the chief engineer Zamfir.

'Comrade Minister, you know, we can't build planes if we don't have what we need,' said engineer Zamfir.

'And what do you need?'

'Parts, materials! Look – we don't have special glue and the seals of the hydraulic system are...'

'Oh, come on! You're complaining about gaskets! I want a complete report on all IAR-93 aircraft by tomorrow morning. How many there are, how many are flying, how many are broken, how many are on the assembly line and when they will be ready, understood? I didn't come here from Bucharest in the middle of the night to listen to you complain about gaskets and glue. Take them from Olcit! Where do they get them from? I'll tell them to give you gaskets and whatever else you said!'

The factory manager seemed to be doing a special training in swallowing hard knots. Engineer Zamfir, one of the intellectual fathers of the 93, was very serious and solemn, but inside he was very amused. He didn't like the manager very much. As if to add fuel to the fire, when he reached

a wooden crate containing a metal subassembly, he gestured toward it and told the foreman, who was standing humbly next to the crate, as if hypnotized:

'This part is not airworthy.'

The director paled, his eyes imploring. Comrade Toader stopped, turned on his heel, and stared at him.

'Comrade engineer, that may be so, but we have no other source for it. It's nowhere to be found, you know,' stammered the foreman, as if he were about to faint.

To everyone's amazement, Comrade Toader gallantly announced:

'If it's not airworthy, maybe it's helicopter-worthy!'

Those in the entourage nodded in agreement. Some even applauded the minister's initiative. The director remained perplexed, while engineer Zamfir smiled visibly.

The delegation moved on, passing into another hall.

'What are these?' asked the unexpected guest, pointing to several aggregates covered with tarpaulins.

'These are ejection seats, comrade minister. For airplanes. They are our own production model, but they are not ready yet,' the director explained.

'I thought you were going to build them in Bucharest, not in Craiova.'

'Production will move there at the end of the year, but the project is not fully ready; there are still tests to be done.'

Comrade Toader blushed slightly.

'These should have been installed in the planes already. I was informed that many planes are not flying because they don't have seats. That's why seats must be produced in the country. I understood that production will be assimilated. Are you aware of the current international situation, Comrade Director?'

'I, no, no...' stammered the director.

'That's fine. I'll tell you. It looks like we won't be getting anything from outside anymore, ejection seats included! Nothing, you understand?' Toader was almost shouting now. 'And do you know why? Because the capitalists have decided to declare war on us! Did you know that, comrade director?'

'I don't...'

'Starting tomorrow, install these in the planes. I want as many planes as possible in the air, understood?'

'Understood, Comrade Minister.'

'If I have to come here to personally supervise how things are going, I will, do you hear me?'

'Yes, Comrade Minister,' bleated the submissive director.

'Tomorrow morning, I want a list of all the planes.'

'Yes, Comrade Minister!'

Minister Toader gave a signal and the delegation headed for the exit. As the helicopter took off into the night, the director leaned softly against the concrete fence that bordered the concrete apron where it had landed. Next to him, engineer Zamfir lit a cigarette. This time he was not amused. He knew that if the director had been given a task, he was the one who had to see it through.

The Central Committee of the Communist Party, Bucharest, the same night

At the long table, the commotion had long since ceased. No one was smoking. The Comrade didn't like the smoke, and neither did the [Comrade Doctor Engineer](#), seated to his right. She also couldn't stand cigarettes.

Almost everyone important was there. Only Comrade Toader was missing, having gone to Craiova.

Until recently, they had been discussing the international situation and how the country, and the army in particular, related to that situation. What was to be done? How should people behave? What were their friends in the East saying? The situation was tense. [Comrade Prime Secretary](#) had a very serious expression on his face.

Folders with papers were scattered on the long table—stenograms, reports, orders, leaflets... Among them, steaming cups of coffee. Real coffee. [Nechezol](#) was only for the public shops.

Almost all the politicians had their eyes fixed on the generals and the Minister of Defense and seemed to be waiting for an answer from them. When the silence became so intense that it seemed as if the air had frozen like a transparent resin that had imperceptibly filled the room, someone coughed loudly, clearing his throat, and then spoke:

'Comrade Doctor Engineer wishes to know the situation of military aviation.'

The First Daughter of the Motherland sat proudly in her chair, taking the word herself.

'How are we doing with the new plane, comrades? How many are available? We have been asked to deploy as many as possible to the theater of operations.'

She was not entirely misinformed. Someone had told her beforehand what it was all about. She didn't really understand why it was called a theater, like the [Palace Hall](#), but if that's what they said, that's what she said, even with a certain pride. She had a soft spot for aviation. Not that she was really interested, but one of her boys was. He was even a military pilot.

'You know, technically speaking, they are not quite ready,' General Vasile Miluș, the Minister of Defense, ventured.

'What do you mean, Vasiliță, they're not ready?!' she spluttered.

Comrade Prime Secretary fidgeted nervously beside her. He sensed what was coming. He knew that the comrade Doctor - Engineer was quick to anger. He didn't like the situation either, because he knew that his spouse didn't understand many things, but there was nothing he could do about it. He let her speak.

'Certain technical issues need to be resolved.'

'You've been solving technical issues for ten years!' she burst out. You're not capable of building a single airplane!'

'You know,' the man dared to say, 'there aren't really any decent materials for the parts. If we get approval...'

'What else do you need approval for? You've been given everything you asked for! It has to be ready in a month!'

'Okay, Comrade Doctor Engineer! We'll do that,' he replied, knowing that there was no way it could be ready in a year.

'What Comrade Doctor Engineer wants to tell you, Comrade Prime Secretary began, 'is that we must be absolutely ready for deployment, comrades. We have been asked to intervene in Yugoslavia. Politically!', he emphasized, raising his chin toward the ceiling in a gesture that meant the request had come from above him. 'We'll do what we can,' he said more conciliatorily. 'But in a month, a month at most,' he emphasized in a serious voice, 'at least a squadron of fighter planes must be ready for deployment. We have planes for tactical support. Our socialist neighbors don't. We are the only ones. You know, comrades, that thanks to the initiative taken almost twenty years ago, our country is the only one in the region that produces fighter planes and the only one in the region that produces assault planes.'

Comrade Prime Secretary began to get excited and wave his hands.

'They are needed! And if this need causes these planes to fight on foreign soil, they will still fight for socialism.'

He looked everyone in the eye.

'I have agreed on a deployment plan with Comrade General Miluș. It is strictly confidential. If necessary, we will begin the transport of materials at the highest speed. The details have already been established. What we still need to know is the exact availability of the planes. For this, we have sent Comrade Toader to Craiova. He should be back tonight.'

He casts a reproachful glance at General Miluș, as if to say: See, Vasilică, you didn't know about this!

'Then, when the time comes, a secret code will be transmitted to the combat units to begin their movement,' continued Comrade Prime Secretary, still waving his hand, as was his habit. 'But until then, everything must be ready.'

Silence fell again in the room.

'Do you have any questions, comrades?'

The Prime Secretary studied the ministers intently once more.

'What is the code's name?' asked the First Daughter of the People.

Comrade First Secretary was perplexed. He hadn't thought of that. He turned his gaze to General Miluş, as if seeking help.

'What code name should we give the men?' he asked in turn.

'We haven't decided yet, Comrade President,' the general admitted, blushing. 'We haven't found a name for this plan, but we can find one now. As you wish.'

'Well, let's think about it... Operation *Break of Dawn*, let's say.'

The Comrade Doctor-Engineer snorted contemptuously.

'Like daybreak, dear? That's not a name for a plan.'

'Let's think about it some more,' he said conciliatorily, fixing her with his gaze. 'What should we call it?'

'What's that new plane called?' she asked.

'IAL-93.'

'What?'

'IAR-93!' clarified General Miluş.

The Comrade Doctor-Engineer thought for a few moments, then her face lit up.

'I know!' she exclaimed. 'I've got it!'

Everyone was staring at her. The comrade hesitated a little. She didn't let the idea slip out right away. She turned her gaze back to them emphatically, triumphant.

'93 *migratory birds*,' she decreed in an official voice.

Eyes widened and smiles appeared on everyone's lips.

'Excellent, Comrade Doctor Engineer!' Miluş's voice was heard. 'Excellent!'

Come to think of it, thought the general, *it doesn't sound bad at all. It makes sense. A lot of sense.* He set the tone and began to applaud, followed by the others in the blink of an eye.

They all smiled, pleased with themselves.

The briefing room of the 68th Fighter-Bomber Regiment

They were all tired. Their eyes were drooping with sleep. Since six in the morning, they had been staring at their books, taking notes, and staring wide-eyed at the blackboard which was located in front of the room. Three instructors, each with their own specialty, had already passed by that board. Aircraft systems, installations and flight characteristics. The propulsion class was about to start. But they were having a ten minutes break.

Normally, the transition courses lasted about two weeks, but the order was to condense them into a maximum of three days. Rozeşan shrugged helplessly. It wasn't his order.

'We're cramming our asses here! Damn it!' The only other student in the room besides Sebi and Tibi, an IAR-93 aspirant, had expressed himself bluntly in a slightly squeaky voice.

The man had the rank of captain.

'See how you get along with [Forfecare](#),' Titel had told them that morning. 'He's taking the course with you.'

'The second time,' Petrişor laughed mysteriously.

'Who is he?' Tibi dared to ask, surprised that a flight course had to be taken twice.

'Captain Man Dăinea. You'll get to know him.'

Man Dăinea was a man in his thirties, dark-haired, with bushy eyebrows and an attempt at hair on his head that he called a haircut, except that the hair was so sparse that among the few carefully combed strands, his scalp was easily visible. As if on purpose, what he lacked on his head he had in abundance on his body, the man having a chest and arms as hairy as a monkey's. He also had a pair of large black eyes, seemingly too large for his oval face, which made them look like they were pumped up, especially when he became passionate about something and spoke from the heart.

At the beginning of the flight characteristics course, he seemed to have a stroke.

'Fellow pilots, the IAR 93MB. Don't we know it?' the instructor said, dissatisfied, after asking a few general questions, just to see how things were going.

He stared at his students over his glasses, but his gaze was fixed primarily on Dăinea.

Silence and peace. The lieutenants looked at the floor, feeling ashamed that they did not know.

After a long minute, when the instructor considered that the message had been conveyed, he continued:

'If you don't know it, it's okay. We'll go over it again.'

He did it dynamically, with passion. The freshmen's fingers were sore from writing so much. It was clear that the man knew his stuff. And yet, at the end of the class, Man Dăinea, who had taken almost no notes, exclaimed with satisfaction after the man had left and the door had closed:

'Bureaucrat! He could leave us alone!'

He looked at the two lieutenants who were still writing, smiling.

'Comrade Captain,' Sebi raised two fingers, as in school, finishing his writing and addressing Măinea. 'I don't remember where I read it,' he continued. 'Is it true that the 93 can exceed the speed of sound in a dive? I think it was researched by our Yugoslav neighbors.'

Man Dăinea's smile changed from mischievous to confused. He had never heard of it and had never wondered about it.

'I have no idea,' he said, after thinking for a moment. 'The book clearly states that it can't, and what the [VNE](#) is.'

Sebi seemed disappointed with the answer.

'But you can ask Almanac. Maybe he knows more.'

'Who?!'

'Almanac, that blond technician. We call him that because he's like an almanac. He knows everything.'

'Is he illustrated too?' Tibi joked.

'I don't think so. I haven't seen any tattoos on him.'

Dăinea's face was naively innocent.

The engineer who taught the propulsion system found them still laughing. As if on cue, at that very moment, the roar of an airplane taking off could be heard from outside.

Two-seater 601, on the runway at Craiova Airport

'Start, 601 ready for takeoff, cabin prepared, canopy shut, locked and sealed and the flaps extended for takeoff.'

'601, takeoff approved with afterburners.'

Titel and The Cuban were strapped into the ejection seats of 601. The plane was equipped with [afterburners](#), one of the few to receive this gift, and the crew was very excited about the extra power.

The twin tilted forward, expertly held in check by the brakes, while the fuel ignited in the [Laval nozzle](#) of the engines with a bluish flame, whipping the air with a powerful shock wave.

Titel released the brakes lever and 601 galloped like a wild horse, raising its nose and dancing on its tall, solidly built landing gear legs.

On the ground, the 93s had a strange, even comical stance as they sat on their [Messier-Bugatti](#) landing gear. It looked as if the fuselage was resting on something that was not part of the aircraft.

'I'm still thinking about what to compare a 93 to when it lands,' Titel mused at one point, watching one of the planes as it entered the descent slope.

The dilemma was profound and the question perfectly legitimate. He and Petrișor watched as the 93 crossed the threshold of the runway and its wheels kissed the asphalt. The screech of the tires was clearly audible to them, while two wisps of bluish smoke curled around the tips of the wings. A moment later, the red and white [drag chute](#) burst out of the tail of the plane like a clown out of a box.

'With a penguin,' Petrișor spat after a deep moment of thought, still watching the plane.

'Hell no, penguins don't fly.'

'Then with a puffin, there you go!'

'Yes, with that one. That's what it looks like. Well done!'

Both were very proud of their discovery.

The plane lifted smoothly off the ground and a gloved hand touched the lever to retract the landing gear. The puffin legs of the 93 hid in the belly of the plane, the nose gear hid against the wind, pivoting under Titel's seat, and he felt it lock with a dull thud, transmitted like a reverberation of the fuselage.

The engines were within parameters, the hydraulics were green, the flaps followed the same path as the landing gear, changing the profile of the wings as they were supposed to, and the plane sank into the blue sky, climbing toward the white clouds hovering above.

'That's more like it, bro!' said The Cuban from the rear cockpit.

Ever since he had acquired a taste for afterburners, he had turned up his nose at having to fly those lazy [MBs](#), as he put it. But the 601 was different. It climbed much better. It had maneuvering power. You didn't have to keep your eyes glued to the airspeed indicator all the time to make sure you had the right entry speed into a maneuver. Oh, if only the engines had been a little more powerful, just a few hundred [decanewtons](#). What a gem of an airplane it would have been. Or if the airframe had been lighter. Probably just that oversized, tank-like landing gear weighed a ton.

The same tank-like legs saved him and others when he ran off the runway. Twice! The first time, on landing, something had broken in the hydraulics and the parachute alone had been unable to stop the plane. The second time, a tire had burst on takeoff, while he was taking off in formation. Lucky by nature, the Cuban, who was on the right side of the four aircraft formation, had also had the damage on the right, so he hadn't crashed into his teammate. He had made himself small, very small, smaller than Petrișor, in the cockpit, but the plane had come out like a tractor in a field, without anything breaking. When he opened the cockpit and jumped out of the plane, and after the dust had settled, The Cuban was very surprised to find the plane only dirty.

'Like a tank, bro!' had crossed his mind.

The Cuban had had other adventures as well. After all, he wasn't called *The Cuban* for nothing. A few years before being sent to Craiova, he had been part of a top-secret mission in Angola. A delegation of Romanian specialists had been tasked with training Angolan pilots and technicians in record time. Everything strictly necessary for an air base had been transported by sea, from furniture and food to planes, helicopters, and spare parts. The Cuban had worked as a flight instructor, and had arrived in Negage, not far from Luanda, in an [AN-26](#), on top of a pile of uniforms and blankets.

'Man, what a mess it was there! A rich country, and they welcomed us in some shacks. We painted and spruced the place up ourselves, because they couldn't be bothered. We didn't even have electricity! Luckily, we had the technicians with us!'

Before setting foot on African soil, The Cuban had to learn Portuguese, at least for appearances' sake. And as he spoke on the radio, flying near [Buzău](#), the blue-eyed boys, who were scrutinizing everything, even on the radio, heard him. Upon landing, he found out that the flight school in [Boboc](#) had a Cuban spy hiding somewhere. Since then, he has been known as The Cuban.

The Cuban said he was a rich man. The Angolans had paid him handsomely. In US dollars! But, being a patriot, he had *donated* most of his salary to the Romanian state. The state had taken the cream of the crop. He was left with the handle of the cup, but he didn't care. He had seen the ocean, the African savannah, made friends with the Angolans, who were good guys, flew the [823](#)

in two years more than he had flown it in his country in six or seven, and even learned a foreign language. When he returned home, he brought back a pair of teardrop-shaped sunglasses.

'Just like [Gaddafi](#),' he said proudly, after seeing the Libyan leader on the news.

From time to time, he would wear them when flying, even though it was not allowed. Unapproved material.

The 93 flew above the white clouds and Titel put it into a horizontal position, disengaging the afterburners.

'Coverage [five by eight](#) at two thousand meters, [cumulus mediocris](#),' he reported the situation by radio. Their mission was to probe the weather, to scout the sky in the working area.

Following the orders received the night before, the regiment had the mission to get to work as quickly as possible.

It hadn't started well.

The unit's dormitories were terribly crowded, due to a stupid order. It reminded The Cuban of Angola.

'They said everyone sleeps at the unit, everyone sleeps here. No discussion. I don't like it either,' Rozeşan confessed. 'I'll sleep in my office!'

Later, those who lived in the *Aeroporto* neighborhood would be allowed to go home, as they lived practically across the street from the regiment, only a few minutes away. There was no point in crowding the dormitories.

And then that kid showed up, one of the new lieutenants, carrying a tape recorder with him and swearing that it was the most precious thing he had and that he didn't want to leave it in the studio apartment.

The tape recorder was one thing, but the tapes he had brought were fantastic. The Cuban had only managed to listen to a song or two, but he was crazy about them. He had a few tapes himself, brought in secretly from Angol, but he had listened to them so many times that they had worn out and they were pretty much useless.

Much to the Cuban's regret, the order had been revoked, and that kid, Sebi, or Tibi, or whatever his name was, had taken off with the tape recorder to the studio apartment where he had landed. But The Cuban had found out where the kid was staying.

He felt the plane tilting beneath him and the landscape changing before his eyes. Despite the beautiful summer weather, visibility was not great. The air was milky. He couldn't see more than three or four kilometers beyond Titel's helmet-covered head.

'Comrade Major, please give me the controls,' he said to Titel, his palm itching for the stick. 'I want to take a closer look at those clouds over there.'

Under the Cuban's hand, the IAR changed course, the controls in the rear cockpit directing it toward a patch of [stratocumulus](#) clouds that the pilot did not sink into. He just flew over them, pulling a wide furrow, almost splitting them in two, like Moses parting the waters. He made a 180-degree turn to admire his work, but the clouds had already closed back in, like sled tracks in the snow during a blizzard.

'Let's see how it is higher up, then that's it. We're going home,' Titel announced from the front cockpit.

Titel liked flying in tandem with the Angolan veteran. The Cuban had a steady hand, quick reactions, and everyone knew he was lucky. Titel wasn't superstitious, but any man who is emotionally attached to a machine, especially one as capricious and sensitive as fighter aircraft, has certain beliefs and rituals of his own. He felt the pull on the stick and saw the ground disappear beneath the nose of the plane, while the blue of the [attitude indicator](#) covered the entire dial, disrupting the brown-blue balance line between the earth and the sky.

The [altimeter](#)'s needle measured the meters passing vertically, bringing them closer to the sky, the sun, and the [cirrus](#) clouds that threatened to spoil the weather later.

The Cuban was using the afterburner again. The plane climbed much better when it was engaged. It had 'oomph', some said. But it also burned fuel at an alarming rate! The first 93s did not have afterburners. In fact, most of them didn't. The marriage of the [Viper](#) engines with the afterburner system, developed later, had been difficult. The acquisition of the engines and their production license had also been a long story. The Socialist Republic of Romania was part of the [Warsaw Pact](#), so it could not buy any military technology or products that could be used for military purposes from the West. The Viper had been overlooked because of the ridiculous power it developed. The engine was originally designed to power unmanned target aircraft, the kind used by the anti-aircraft artillery in firing ranges for training, but the project proved so versatile that later, the British developed a version for manned aircraft.

The engine was ridiculously simple, reliable, and easy to maintain, but its performance was modest. To increase its power, an afterburner stage was developed, but even so, the plane remained underpowered. The aircraft's performance dropped dramatically above four thousand meters, but that didn't seem to bother the generals. After all, it was an aircraft intended for ground attack, tactical support, and the destruction of tanks and vehicles of all kinds. For this, it flew low, often skimming the ground. What was the need for propulsive power at four thousand meters?

Titel monitored the engine temperatures out of habit, imagining the bluish flame in the nozzle. It gave him power, but Titel also knew that it made the plane vulnerable to [infrared homing missiles](#), such as those carried by MiGs and those the regiment had in its weapons store and which the

alarm cell was usually equipped with. The 93 was not specifically designed for air to air combat, but it could carry those missiles. They had a range of a few kilometers and were good enough to shoot down helicopters or unmanned flying bombs. Other targets were out of reach for the 93. Dedicated supersonic fighter planes were usually beyond its capabilities.

Titel remembered the mission they had and the stupid political situation that could propel him into an equally stupid war, with an aircraft that was not yet ready for combat, an aircraft that could not even be equipped with [flares](#) against the aforementioned missiles, and with a regiment that he had to train in a month, taking some pilots practically from scratch.

Titel was a married man and had two little boys who dreamed of becoming aviators one day. The war that was looming did not bother him too much personally. If he had been single—he would have been happy! Why not? He was a man! He had to fight! But since he had children, he seemed to have softened. Their innocent smiles and voices, their little hands and eyes as clear as the winter sky, made him want to be in a peaceful place, where things were simple, a place populated by sensible people who knew how to think and weigh things up, people who were content with the bare necessities, people who knew how to enjoy life far from the political monster, the monster that fed on human stupidity, which demanded sacrifices for millennia.

But the monster had many tentacles, long, ugly, greasy tentacles creeping everywhere.

Titel sighed involuntarily under his oxygen mask.

'Let's go home,' he told the Cuban over the intercom. 'You've played enough! We have a lot to do today.'

With some regret, The Cuban turned the plane's nose toward Craiova and descended rapidly through the clouds, with the airbrakes out.

Speranței Street, Balta Verde village, in the evening

The house was not large or particularly attractive, but it was very clean. A green [Oltcit](#), covered in summer dust, was parked in the small yard. A few people had gathered in the room where the television set was. They were waiting for the news and the Comrade's special address, which was to include references to the international situation that had been rumored for several days. Rumors and counter-rumors. All Maria Codreanu knew was that her husband, Titel, was with his unit and was not allowed to come home, that there was a special, urgent situation, and that general mobilization had been decreed in the country.

People in Craiova seemed frightened. At the bus station, there was only whispering about misfortunes, and people walked strangely in the streets, like mice caught on the boulevard in broad daylight. Everyone walked quickly, their eyes downcast, without looking left or right. Airplanes roared day and night at the airport, and she knew that her Titel was in one of them.

'Don't worry, girl, this too will pass, stay calm!' Tanța, who knew everything, had told her. 'We've been through so much... Earthquakes, floods, and...'

Not knowing what other calamity to mention, she contented herself with waving her hand wearily.

'As long as we're healthy everything is fine! How are the little ones?'

'Fine,' Maria replied softly.

'What grade are they in?' Tanța, who was indifferent to politics, persisted.

'The older one is in second grade and the younger one is in kindergarten,' Maria explained.

'Well, you see? May they live long!'

But Maria couldn't come to terms with Tanța's simplistic ideas. May they live long, may they live long, but with what, if a war came and Titel didn't come home one day. What would she do then? It was hard enough knowing he was in the army, knowing he could be killed, knowing the phone could ring, or that his colleagues would knock on the door and very humbly tell her that, tell her that...

Maria stifled her tears at the thought of the phone or his colleagues...

A few years earlier, Titel had come home one day sullen and gloomy, as she had never seen him before. He hadn't said anything all day, hadn't eaten, hadn't drunk. There was a movie on [Channel 1](#) that evening, but Titel had gone to bed, his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

Maria had also gone to bed, next to him, and only then had he glanced briefly at her and said simply, curtly, without intonation:

'Stan died.'

Then he turned away without saying another word. Titel cried that night, but he didn't want his wife to see him. Later, Maria found out that a plane had crashed.

And then again, years later, Maria didn't remember the exact date, but more recently, they already had children, Titel had come home again, he had been sullen and grumpy again, he hadn't said a word, and then, after the children had gone to bed and she had gone to bed too, Titel had confessed in the same robotic tone:

'Marin died!'

He had never said how his colleagues had died, and Maria had never asked.

She was a small, delicate, dark-haired, warm woman. From a distance, she looked like a child. When she brought the children home from school and kindergarten, one on each hand, she looked like their older sister.

The old [Diamant](#) TV set started to stammer and stutter. Madame Babencu, the old woman next door with whom they left the children when there was no one else to look after them, began to grumble, but Maria was already on her feet, shaking the device.

'Move the antenna, dear,' the old woman advised, while Maria shook the wooden box of the device and slapped it with her palm.

She tried the channel buttons, ready to grab them if any flew off, because as soon as you pressed another channel, the button that was already pressed would suddenly return to normal and fly across the room like a projectile or a champagne cork. Maria managed to make the TV work just when a clock counting seconds briefly showed up on the screen, then disappeared. In its place appeared the words [Telejurnal](#) in large letters. Like hypnotized, Maria remained in front of the screen, oblivious to Madame Babencu's efforts, who was turning her head like an owl, trying to find an angle to see the TV herself.

'Good evening,' said the announcer's correct and severe voice. 'We present the news. We will begin with the exceptional speech of the First Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, who is addressing the people this evening with a message of major importance.'

There was a short pause, followed by static, buzzing, and murmurs, among which a vague *Oh! This Titel! He'll never fix this TV* could be heard. The Comrade appeared. He was dressed as usual, in a suit, and was holding a piece of paper from which he was reading.

'Dear comrades and friends,' came the hoarse, smoker's voice. The broadcast was lost for a second, then resumed with static. 'I must inform you that our peace-loving country, the Socialist

Republic of Romania, is subject to external capitalist pressures. The decadent West is massing massive military forces at the borders of the Warsaw Pact countries. This revolting and unacceptable situation is a threat to the peace, prosperity, and tranquility of the citizens of the Socialist Republic of Romania, as well as...' the comrade glanced at the paper he was holding in his hand, 'of all the citizens, the workers, the proletariat of the socialist countries.'

'Move aside a little, dear, so I can see what The Comrade is saying,' begged Mrs. Babencu, tired of peering, trying to see past Maria.

Obediently, Maria moved aside, ready to intervene if the television set did anything funny.

'The massing of these troops,' said the beloved son of the people, 'compels us, the people of labor and peace, to take the most drastic measures to defend our beloved homeland. In this regard, general mobilization has been declared, with the Romanian army ready to repel any attack from the capitalist powers. We urge the population not to panic and to listen to the advice of the authorities. '

'Oh dear Lord!' Mrs. Babencu crossed herself reverently.

Maria stared at the television as if hypnotized, almost without blinking, but the broadcast was interrupted. Just as the woman was about to resume her role as a boxer-electrician, the image changed and, in place of The Comrade, documentary-like images appeared, while a serious voice announced:

'We remind our viewers of the consequences of the fascist-capitalist military actions of the past.'

As the voice continued, images from World War II played on the screen: villages in flames, columns of tanks on the roads, explosions, cannons firing. Then came footage from the [Vietnam War](#), American helicopters strafing villages with machine guns, soldiers crossing swamps with their weapons raised above their heads, more tanks, more helicopters, and finally, the newsreel ended with a line of small children, with slanted eyes, almost naked, dirty, wounded, jumping and crying bitterly in the middle of an asphalt road, while their village burned with living flames in the background. The voice mentioned something about Yugoslavia and the capitalist troops it had at the border.

'Oh my God,' Mrs. Babencu crossed herself reverently again. 'But they're killing innocent people! Children! Look! But why do the Yugoslavs look like Chinese people, dear?'

Maria couldn't answer her. A soft child's voice took her by surprise and Maria turned her eyes from the television to the doorway.

'Mommy! When is Daddy coming home?'

There was a little boy there. Disheveled and sleepy. He was wearing a pair of pajamas bought some time ago from [Materna](#). They were a little too small for him now, and it occurred to Maria

that she should keep an eye on the store, to find out when they would be restocking. If she didn't have time, maybe she could send Mrs. Babencu to stand in line.

'When they will allow him to come back! Come on now, back to bed, sugar. It's okay!' she said, seeing that the little boy had started glancing at the TV.

'Mommy, when will they show cartoons on TV?'

'I don't know, my sweetheart, maybe tomorrow.'

'Come with me, sweetie, let Grandma put you to bed. Come on, little one!'

Groaning and moaning, Mrs. Babencu struggled to get up from the armchair and took the little boy in her arms.

'Wow, you've gotten so heavy, may Grandma eat you up. Come to bed with Grandma, she repeated,' disappearing through the door and leaving Maria alone with the television.

'Our country's army,' continued the serious voice from beyond the screen, 'is prepared to deal with any situation.

Maria caught a flash on the TV, another one, a metal bird, an airplane, a warplane, with roundels on the wings. Maria was familiar with the insignia of the Romanian military aviation.

'Together with the military aviation, our ground forces are constantly watching over the country's borders, while the aviators guard the blue sky. At the urging of the Comrade Secretary General, Romanian military pilots are working hard to continuously raise their professional level and defend the country's borders.'

Maria's thoughts turned to Titel, then to her children, then her eyes returned to the news on television and the images being broadcast. Worry returned to her heart and her eyes filled with tears.

The studio apartment at number 9, in the evening

But while Maria was worrying, while Madam Babencu was fighting the TV, after putting the children back to bed, while the fate of the world was once again being decided on a paper map, while politics was doing the devil's work, while dubious and malicious old men were arguing in pride, plotting the death of the young, Titel, the one Maria couldn't stop thinking about, what was he doing?

Well, he had the headphones on, the volume turned up to the max, and tapped his hand on the table to the beat of the music.

It had been a tiring day for everyone, but full of accomplishments. It had been a long time since they had flown as much as they had that day. The directives from above said loud and clear that they had to train. That they had to bring all the pilots to the same level; that they had to prepare for a deployment to the theater of operations; that they had to get the planes ready; that and that and that...

So they flew. They flew so much they couldn't believe it. Every pilot, except for the two newcomers and Man Dăinea, had flown several sorties, either in pairs or solo. The flight instructors of the regiment had worked the hardest. But the weather was on their side, it had been sunny and beautiful, the IARs had flown like never before, and to top it all off, at the end of the day they had been allowed to go home, but only those who lived in the Airport neighborhood, as they lived three minutes away from their unit.

'Come with me and you won't regret it,' muttered The Cuban, taking Titel by the elbow, seeing that he was about to enter the crowded dormitory of the unit.

The Cuban lived in a studio apartment in the aforementioned neighborhood. Astonished, Titel followed him like a lamb.

'Where are you going?' Rozeșan asked them.

'You know, Comrade Colonel,' said the Cuban apologetically, 'Titel can sleep at my place. It's easier that way. We'll free up beds for those staying in the regiment's dormitories...'

Rozeșan signed Titel's exit pass without commenting.

'Damn profiteers,' Petrișor muttered, carrying his blanket from the storeroom.

He also lived far, on the other side of Craiova, in Podari.

'There's no room for me in your studio apartment!'

The Cuban pretended not to hear. Titel shrugged.

'Maybe tomorrow...'

But The Cuban didn't take Titel to his home, but to number 9.

'What are we doing here?'

'You'll see.'

'Man, I'm exhausted, I really want to sleep...'

While he was still protesting, he was pushed through the door and found himself face to face with the two lieutenants who had just arrived at the unit.

'Hello, Comrade Major!' They stared at him in surprise, their eyes wide.

They were waiting only for The Cuban, who insisted to visit them, until Sebi gave in.

'Cheers!' stammered Titel, still not knowing what he was doing in the two men's studio apartment.

'Look who I brought!' boasted the Cuban, almost singing.

A little later, Captain Horia showed up. Horia was one of the youngest pilots in the 68th Regiment, a little more experienced than the two lieutenants. He was a confident guy, talented at flying and a bit too cocky.

'We have to keep an eye on this one,' Petrișor whispered to Titel after giving Horia his final check ride one year earlier. 'If we let him out of our hands, he'll get too full of himself.'

Horia had done it anyway. After all, they couldn't really find him any flaws when it came to flying. The man worked hard, but he had that annoying superior attitude, as if he was telling everyone, *Look, I know what I'm doing! I'm the best pilot around here, no matter what you say.*

Horia had settled in at number 9 with a bottle of something to liven up the atmosphere, even though it had been made very clear that no one was allowed to drink during the alarm. He could handle someone like The Cuban, but Titel's appearance had thrown a spanner in the works. Titel was very strict about drinking.

Not long before, Tibi had just collapsed exhausted onto his bed when Sebi announced that they had visitors.

'It's just that major they call The Cuban. He'll only stay for ten minutes, don't worry, he just wants to listen to a tape or two.'

Well, it wasn't just The Cuban. It's pretty clear that when one bloke announced his visit, there will always be more, especially in a fighter planes unit. Horia and Titel showed up, and finally Forfecare, aka Man Dăinea, also with a signed pass.

'I knew you were staying here. I thought I'd stay too, so I wouldn't have to sleep in the unit like the sardines.'

'Then sleep here like a sardine!' Titel had snapped.

With nothing else to do, Tibi accepted his fate. Luckily, no one paid much attention to him, and everyone was focused on the damn tape recorder.

Horia and Man Dăinea listened ecstatically and commented on each song as it played. Horia, in particular, had been hard to convince to take off the headphones. He sat there mesmerized, eyes closed, transported, listening to Iron Maiden's [Aces High](#).

'Let me play you something you're going to like, comrade captain,' Sebi had said.

'Come on, forget about comrade captain, we're at home here. Call me Horia, okay?'

'Okay, Comrade Horia,' Sebi had grinned. 'This song is about the [Battle of Britain](#). If you understand English, the lyrics of the song are about air battles.'

Horia didn't necessarily need to know English, because he didn't, but the rhythm of the song spoke for itself. He could see himself flying, shooting, maneuvering, diving, climbing, one plane caught in his gunsight, then another, evasive maneuvers, a burst of machinegun fire, evasive maneuvers... oh! Where have those days gone... Now you press a button, a guided missile takes off, boom, job done!

'One more time, Sebi, one more time,' he begged at the end of the song.

Sebi obliged and rewound the tape. Three times more!

Titel had been standing there pensively the whole time, smoking, leaning against the window, absent, listless, tired, cursing the Cuban, after all, what business did he have with these kids? He just wanted to flop down on the bed, just like one of the two kids, Tibi, who also looked very tired...

Then Sebi approached him too, pulling him out of his world.

'Comrade Major, aren't you having any?'

He held out the headphones suggestively, smiling innocently.

'Take them and listen, that's why I brought you here,' The Cuban had growled. 'Then we'll go to sleep. You'll sleep better.'

And Titel took the headphones, put them on, Sebi turned on the tape recorder, and Titel's fatigue melted away. To hell with sleep! Now that you've gotten yourself dirty with one song, you can't refuse the second, just like a glass of wine. Then the third, then the fourth. As you drink, you'd drink more, as you listen, you'd listen more, because the path from stimulus to reward is the same in the corners of the brain, and the music is pretty much the same as the wine.

Titel hadn't listened to any song twice, as Horia or Man Dăinea had done, he had savored them one by one, tapping the rhythm on the table, gently, delicately. He had seen the others talking, conversing, but he couldn't hear their words because he had the headphones on. Headphones for listening, embedded into the flight helmet - [Zsh-3](#), oxygen mask, gloves on his hands, [G-suit](#), and Titel found himself flying in his imagination.

He was thinking about the beauty of flight, the sky, the clouds, the rhythm of life lived in the air.

'And that's how it turned out!' Titel heard Man Dăinea explaining something while gesturing with his hands at the same time.

The tape must have ended, because Titel was back on the ground, hearing the conversations of the others. He remembered that he was a squadron commander, that it was his duty to take care of those young, impulsive men, to temper them, to teach them not to break their necks with their fast, camouflage painted flying machines, and to fight in them. To fight for real.

He slowly put the headphones aside. And he remembered something else. Something more serious, something unrelated to flying, but which could burn them, truly burn them, because they did not live in a free country, even though freedom was talked about every day.

'You've got some good pieces here, Sebi,' Titel said during a pause in the other's conversation. 'Really good ones, but be careful to who you play them to. Very careful.'

Seeing the question in their eyes, he explained, even though he knew they knew and were just pretending not to.

'This is forbidden material. We don't care, but Mirică might have his eye on you.'

'Who?'

'Ears! The C I guy, that son of a bi...' Man Dăinea tried to express himself very liberally, but seeing Titel's face, he refrained.

'Careful here. Someone may hear you too! They heard you saying things before. That's why you're grounded.'

Man Dăinea beat a retreat and said nothing more.

There was silence. And the spell of the room was broken.

An austere office, with a metal cabinet and a desk with two chairs, that same night

By pure coincidence, Mirică was working too at that hour of the night. But it wasn't because he wanted to. He had been summoned. He still regretted leaving the bottle of cognac at home in plain sight. He hoped his wife wouldn't find it.

'Yes, Comrade Major. I know this report doesn't say much, but I don't have anything better about this case. It's hard to prove anything, but I'll stay alert.'

'Your reports are generally rubbish, not just this one! Kindergarten gossip! Why should I care that Man Dăinea didn't learn his lesson at aerodynamics and has a calendar picturing bare-breasted women! Every tractor driver has one! Every truck driver!'

'I wrote that he sells calendars, not that...'

'Shut up!' yelled the major. 'I'm the one talking here!'

'Yes, Comrade Major,' Mirică swallowed hard.

'We have to catch a saboteur! Worse! A possible deserter. One who has been planning for years to escape in a fighter plane, to deliver it to the capitalists, so they can see how it's built and learn our secrets, you understand? Especially now, when war is looming. They have to find out. Now it is the best time. Now he's going to act. Now he must be caught. And it can only be one of the pilots, one who can fly the plane, to deliver it as a gift to the enemy.'

The major had cooled down a little after all that shouting. He lit a Carpați cigarette, blowing the smoke toward the ceiling.

'What about those two who just arrived?'

'They're not flying yet, Comrade Major.'

'But they'll learn, won't they?' the major yelled again.

Mirică made himself small.

'I want you to keep an eye on them. Young people are the most dangerous. Rebels!' said the major with disgust. 'A bunch of spoiled brats easily lured by capitalist debauchery. They would sell their own mammas for a few dollars!'

'Yes, comrade major. I'll look into it. I'll keep an eye on them,' said Mirică submissively and zealously.

'If you see or hear anything suspicious, let me know immediately. Maybe you can search their rooms, see what they have in their luggage. I heard they came in their own cars. What kid has his own car these days, huh?'

The major took another thoughtful drag on his cigarette.

'I want you to check their cars too. Discreetly. Don't draw attention to yourself.'

'Yes, Comrade Major.'

'If necessary, take two or three guys with you, the ones who know what they're doing.'

'Yes, Comrade Major.'

'And one more thing...'

Mirică waited silently while the major finished his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray like a disgusting worm.

'If they seem really suspicious, maybe you can get them kicked out of the flight program, like you did with Dăinea. You'll find reasons, invent something, just like you did for him. It's too risky to let them around the planes. Better to keep them on the ground innocent than to let them cross the border unproven.'

'Yes, Comrade Major.'

'You can leave now!'

'Yes, Comrade Major.'

Mirică got up, scraping his chair across the cement floor, making an unpleasant screechy noise, and the major grimaced, irritated.

'Come on, man, what the hell! he said, pointing to the floor.

'Please, excuse me, Comrade Major.'

The C I guy of the 68th Regiment closed the door behind him, leaving the major alone.

'Fucking stupid asshole,' the major muttered to himself in the empty room. 'How can I work with people like him...!'

Craiova Airfield, the flight briefing room, in the morning

'Today we have to execute exercise number thirty-two – very low-altitude flight to practice the low-low-low and high-low-high attack profile. We will fly in pairs. We have already decided who will pair with whom. You already the route on the map. Jot the waypoints down on your kneepads and set your watches.'

A line drawn on the huge map behind Lieutenant Colonel Rozeşan marked the route.

'The weather is on our side today, no problem, the weather probe hasn't signaled anything important, nor has the meteorologist. Do not deviate from the route. Do not descend below one hundred meters. Pay close attention to high-voltage cables and other obstacles. Speed along the route - eight hundred kilometers per hour.

The pilots wrote nervously in their personal notebooks.

'If you encounter any special flight situations, go higher immediately. I am referring in particular to collisions with birds. It's full of crows now, in summer. And storks.'

'And turtles', Horia muttered very quietly.

'What did you say?'

Rozeşan had very sensitive hearing.

'I said watch out for houses, Comrade Colonel.'

'Houses don't grow a hundred meters high, Comrade Captain.'

The pilots laughed in unison, but their voices betrayed their nervousness.

'Good! Any questions?'

Of course they had. But there were answers too. In aviation, every question must have an answer. Speculation doesn't work. In aviation, either you know or you don't. Merely believing doesn't work. Believing is reserved for going to church.

'All clear now? Good, on your marks, get set, go! Man Dăinea in the tower, as flight coordinator. The rest, to your planes!'

The hustle and bustle of a flight day.

Men in the corridors, men in the locker rooms, G-suits, the clatter of aviation boots with their oil and kerosene-resistant soles...

Men huddled together, wearing white helmets on their arms...

Cars, trucks, fuel tanks, vans, the line of planes on the concrete apron, ladders leaning against the cockpits, pilots and aircraft technicians on the ladders, other pilots in the cabins...

Canopies that close and lock, plugs that connect, heads with white helmets and gloved hands signaling one thing or another...

'Start, I am a number, large, white, written on the front fuselage, approve start up and takeoff.'

Start, Man Dăinea, upset that he's not flying, but positive:

'Approved.'

Ground power plugs inserted and removed, the whine of the turbines, apathetic and prolonged, then the whistling of the jet engines at idle...

Wheel chocks away, brakes released, technicians standing at the wing tips, waving goodbye.

Planes entering the runway, lining up, and then:

Continuous thunder, roaring like breaking waves;

And eating up the asphalt, puffins rising in pairs.

Rozeşan looked over the shoulder from the rear cabin of the twin seater 601, watching the planes lined up on the ramp. He caught a glimpse of the factory buildings and the Flight Test Center on the other side of the airfield. He wondered for the umpteenth time why everything had to be so exposed, totally unprotected, especially now, when there were rumors of war. The airbase looked so vulnerable! No hardened hangars, no shelters, the planes parked outside in the summer heat, under the open sky. A single bomb would have destroyed them all.

He wondered why the Russians did everything this way and why the same architecture had to be imitated in Romania.

It had been a long time ago, in the [USSR](#), in [Krasnodar](#), during training. Then in [Astrakhan](#), during live firing practice. And it was the same there. Everything was in disarray. The runways lined with planes refueling, the fuel tanks exposed to the sun, the ammunition depots above the ground, planes literally piled on top of each other...

Does it matter? he thought. *If they drop the big bomb, you can hide in a snake hole, it'll still be hell. The whole planet will be a smoldering hole or a phosphorescent desert anyway. What difference would it make to have reinforced hangars? Maybe they didn't want to spend money on all those buildings if it wasn't necessary.*

Rozeşan was a man close to retirement, with gray hair, always cut short, like most military men. He was an old-school pilot because he had been trained in the old school days. He was among the first to fly military jet planes in Romania and among the first to become instructors on such

planes. He wasn't the type of commander to be harsh, but he didn't forgive when there was nothing to forgive. Behind his back, people called him *The Boss*, although he himself did not feel like a boss at all. He felt more like a lightning rod for the unit, because almost landed on his shoulders. He was not surprised that with so much administrative and office work, he barely had time to fly.

He didn't like the 93 that much, because he was a realistic man. That is, he liked it, but he liked more what he would have wanted the plane to be, not what it was. Rozeşan knew the austere conditions under which the project had been carried out and knew that it was a plane that had been made on the fly. But it was a plane that flew. An airplane that had turned out worse than intended but better than expected. Glancing fleetingly into the cockpit, at the amalgam of instruments and switches, some Russian, some Romanian, a jumble of equipment, marked sometimes with Latin letters, sometimes with Cyrillic, Rozeşan compared it for the umpteenth time to an older, much older project, a propeller plane that was no longer talked about and that the rookies in military schools didn't even know about—the [IAR 80](#). An aircraft that had seen action in the war and on which he, as a recent graduate, had trained in the early 1950s. He remembered the cockpit of the 80 and its amalgam of Romanian, Polish, and German instruments and switches. Some planes had English gunsights. Others had German ones. A few 80s, converted into rude twin seaters at Pipera, had an unusual configuration, with the instructor sitting *in front* of the student in an open cockpit, the seat being located in place of a fuel tank.

But he liked the plane. It had something special.

He liked many planes, but his favorite remained the Mig-17, a fast, light, highly maneuverable plane, equipped with a powerful automatic cannon that could destroy anything.

Rozeşan's thoughts changed direction when a plane, a single seater 93, appeared in his field of vision. A wrinkle appeared between his eyebrows. He knew who was in that single-seater. He knew, and he didn't like it very much, which is why, when he paired the pilots, he had taken Horia as his wingman. To keep an eye on him.

This kid is going to do me one day, Rozeşan thought. He's so full of himself that if he doesn't break his neck, I'll break his legs one day. If his father weren't who he is, I'd have transferred him long ago, to get rid of a worry and retire without any headaches. Titel should have disciplined him better. Look at him, he's gone crazy again. Why the hell can't he fly by the rules like everyone else?

'Two zero two, come up higher.'

'Two zero two, roger,' Horia's submissive voice could be heard.

The two planes, a twin seater and a single seater, were flying low, at a hundred meters above the ground, but the single seater had the tendency to fly even lower.

Rozeşan knew why, he knew that the temptation was great, the intoxication was great. He had been young too, he had been through it too, but he also knew that the ground was hard, and he

also knew that at that speed the brain worked in slow motion and that even if an obstacle was seen, it was always seen too late and the hands would not have had time to do anything, even if the brain commanded them to do it. The doctor called the phenomenon *dead physiological time*.

The planes entered a narrow valley, changing formation, and the single seater plane fell behind because it could no longer fly side by side with the twin. Rozeşan lost sight of it. He looked over his shoulder as far as he could, but he couldn't see it anymore, and he knew that Horia also knew that he was no longer visible, which was precisely why Rozeşan was trying to see him.

Full of adrenaline, Horia was singing in his cockpit - *na-na-na-na-na, biufo is tulei... what was that singer saying, man? Flai tu liv, liv tu flai*. He knew that *flai* meant to fly, but he had no idea about the rest of the lyrics he had heard the night before.

The thrill of speed, flying at fifty meters above the ground. Not one hundred, as ordered, but fifty! He could do it. Rozeşan had no way of seeing him. *This Rozeşan, with his parables from his father's days, himself an old man. He should have retired long ago, along with his Mig 15s, why do they still keep those in service...*

Horia hated old planes.

Flai tu liv, liv tu flai...

He wanted to go even lower, now that no one could see him, and he did. Why not?

The thrill of speed, flying at twenty meters above the ground.

He didn't dare glance at the instrument panel to see how low he was, being content with the sensation of speed. Maybe a little lower?

The thrill of speed, flying at...

His brain developed a gigantic, skeletal pillar perched on the slope of the valley, which rushed past his right wing. In the next second, things happened fast.

The plane pitched up violently, uncontrollably. Under the enormous positive G, Horia almost blacked out. When his vision returned somewhat, he had the distinct sensation that the plane was flying tail first, like a car in reverse, while he clearly saw the vertical tail, yes, the vertical tail, gliding past the cockpit. He saw it for just a fraction of a second.

Then he had the sensation of falling into a void and a golden field rushed upward into the windscreen of the plane.

His hands went between his legs on their own, grabbing the ejection handle. He didn't know how, he wasn't thinking about it. He pulled. There was an explosion, a shock stronger than when he had the accident with his father's Dacia, then he didn't know anything for a second or an eternity.

He hung under the open parachute for another second and landed like a sack, with a gasp he hadn't meant to let out, but his lungs had deflated from the shock, forcing air through his vocal cords.

'What the hell happened?' he moaned dazedly.

The inquiry commission asked him the same thing a few hours later at the hospital, when he was sitting strapped to a straight board placed on the bed. They were all there. Rozeşan, General Rusifescu, the division commander, the C I guy, other generals from Bucharest, even General Dragone, the commander of the military aviation, in person.

He told them what he remembered, then they explained it to him.

'You hit a high-voltage cable, you idiot,' Dragone thundered. 'It severed the tailfin! You left the whole of Piteşti without power. Luckily, people are used to it! But those at the Dacia car plant did not appreciate the favor.'

The doctors explained it to him too. Something about a cracked letter, a vertebra, and a broken leg from the parachute landing. Grounded. Probably forever. A long recovery. The C I guy was going on about sabotage...

'Man, he was lucky,' he heard Rozeşan say as he was leaving the hospital room. 'When did he have time to eject? I only saw the explosion...'

68th Fighter-Bomber Regiment, Craiova, commander's office

'Comrade commander, I have ordered a temporary halt to flights,' Rozeşan justified himself.

Sitting in his chair at the desk was General Dragone, commander of the military aviation. Technically speaking, he also commanded the civil aviation, given that all civil pilots were trained in military school.

Dragone smoked dreamily. It was as if he hadn't even heard Rozeşan.

He was a well-built man who wore thin-rimmed glasses. The glasses gave him the appearance of a stern teacher. Dragone also had a deep, resonant voice that frightened younger pilots who did not know him. He was neither good nor bad. He just followed orders and the rules. Rozeşan had known him for a long, long time and was still afraid of him. No, he wasn't afraid, he respected him.

'The question is, what do we do now? Do we stop flying until the investigation is complete, as the procedure says? Or...'

The question hung in the air like a hawk circling high in the sky, searching for a mouse in the field.

'Stop, my ass. We're moving forward. We don't have time for procedures now. The situation is clear! We don't even need an investigation. But the question is different. Now, I'm asking you, because you were there. How was it?'

Rozeşan sighed wearily.

'Comrade...'

'Leave this,' Dragone interrupted him very gently. 'We've known each other since the dawn of time. Did you really order him to fly lower, as he said? You can't hear anything on the tape. All you can hear is that you ordered him to fly higher. '

'That's right. I called him higher. He's a restless child and I know that...'

'You know very well whose child he is!'

'I know. That's why I couldn't really do anything about it.'

'Yeah,' Dragone said thoughtfully. 'We can't get involved in politics... It's clear to me. Now, I hope his father doesn't foul you, because I can't really do anything to save you. Who the hell asked you to fly in formation with that guy?'

'I thought I'd keep an eye on him,' said Rozeşan resignedly.

He had dark circles under his eyes.

'And you did!' concluded Dragone. 'Anyway, I'll try to speak for you if his father makes a fuss. Maybe he didn't hear properly, maybe there's nothing on the tape, maybe he hit his head... One thing is certain.'

Dragone's voice boomed in the room:

'The flights won't be suspended! Not at this moment. With or without you, this regiment must be ready for battle and deployment in a month at most. You know the order. You can't stop now with a fucking investigation where the causes are already clear. At least for us! Tomorrow, you shall resume normal flight operations, understood? And be extra careful! No more incidents! We don't need any more trouble. Especially you.'

'Yes, Comrade Commander,' Rozeşan sighed.

'Then,' Dragone continued a little more quietly, so that only they could hear, 'you know how to find me. You have my direct phone number if you need anything. Between you and me, all this crap seems like a storm in a teacup, but we'll see. *If The Comrade decrees 93 migratory birds*, we have to be prepared.'

Rozeşan's face brightened a little.

'So it's true that all this crap is only a...'

Dragone raised a finger, signaling him to be quiet.

'It's just my theory.'

He got up to leave, and Rozeşan automatically did the same.

'Come on! Get going!' Dragone said to him. 'With this whole situation, at least you guys can fly.'

Twin-seater 601, the front cockpit

Sebi was already strapped in the front cabin. He looked like a child who had just received a new toy. The technician, standing on the ladder, an older technician with white hair, almost a grandfather, whom you would be surprised to see in a combat regiment, was rocking him:

'Be careful with the ejection seat, comrade lieutenant. Make sure the safety pins are in their place when on the ground. A kid like you ejected from the ground by accident a while ago. He caught the ejection handle with his foot when he wanted to get out of the plane. He was smashed to bits! Never forget to put the safety pins on before unfastening your straps.'

Titel muttered something in the rear cabin, but no one understood what. Maybe he agreed with what the technician had said, maybe he didn't want to remember...

Sebi checked the cabin once more to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. With his eyes closed, he recited the pre-takeoff checklist in his mind and ran his gloved fingers over the switches and levers. He made sure that all the equipment was correctly calibrated, the altimeter set to the airfield altitude, and that he was properly strapped in.

Titel hummed absentmindedly and out of tune into the intercom:

'Aviation gives you the thrill, and makes your hair turn grey...'

The technician closed and locked the canopies.

A few minutes later, the plane lined up on the runway.

'We'll both work, okay?' said Titel from the back seat. 'I'll tell you when and how much to pull.'

'Roger!' Sebi replied automatically.

His left hand was wrapped around the throttle levers, his right hand on the control stick, and his feet were firmly planted on the rudder pedals. In his headphones he heard Man Dăinea's voice giving him clearance for takeoff. He wondered again what Dăinea's complete story was, why he wasn't allowed to fly, why he had to do the transition to flying the IAR-93 aircraft once again, and why, even after passing the theoretical flight exam, he was still a flight coordinator, never showing up on the flight roster.

Titel interrupted his thoughts.

'Come on, gently push the throttle levers all the way in, but don't engage the burners!'

Sebi obeyed and 601 took off, like a runner taking the start. Slowly at first, timidly, then faster and faster, more virtuosic, more rhythmic.

'Not now, don't pull yet, we don't have enough speed,' came from the rear cabin. 'This isn't a Mig-15!'

The plane took off, and Sebi eagerly sought the flight sensations.

The 93 felt somewhat livelier than the L-39. Parameters, parameters, pay attention to the parameters. Sebi scanned the cockpit and the instruments. He was not yet fully accustomed to their layout, even though he had spent a lot of time in cockpit training. But it was never enough time when everyone was rushing to go to war.

He retracted the landing gear and pulled the plane into a normal climb.

'Good, sir,' came from the back seat. 'Keep it like this, it's fine so far.'

The plane wasn't climbing very well. At least not as Sebi had expected. *The modest thrust-to-weight ratio*, he whispered somewhere in the back of his mind. He knew that a Mig-15 didn't climb much worse and that a Mig-17 with afterburners would have overtaken him. But what was the IAR like when using the burners? Pity that during his first flight in the machine he wasn't allowed to use them.

'Let's go to the maneuvering area, Sebi, let's play a little, so you can see how the plane handles.'

Sebi was expecting this and was eager to try it.

Left turns, right turns, at various altitudes and speeds. Titel demonstrated certain maneuvers while commenting on them.

'Deploy the airbrake, see how it feels.'

Sebi pressed the button, feeling the speed drop and the plane become heavy and unresponsive.

'It feels like you're running with your pants down, does it?' asked Titel from the rear seat. 'You know, that's what it looks like from the outside,' Titel laughed.

Sebi pressed the button again, pulling up his pants and buttoning them, and the plane picked up speed again.

'Well, how is it?' Titel asked. 'Do you like it so far?'

'I like it,' came the reply from the front cabin.

They heard the second twin flying somewhere else, and Sebi recognized Tibi's voice on the radio.

'Hey, a plane has crashed!' Tibi had told him less than two days earlier.

Sebi was busy writing in his notebook, his flight proficiency exam. Tibi had finished and was listening to the radio traffic when all hell broke loose. Sebi hadn't believed him, but when he looked up from his notebook, he saw the commotion at the airfield.

The regiment didn't have any helicopters, not even for search and rescue. In fact, it didn't even have an ambulance, a decent ambulance. But he had seen people running. He had seen their faces.

Then Rozeșan had landed alone and told them he had seen the explosion.

Sebi knew the feeling, that feeling of shock. The lump in his throat.

Years earlier, at the airfield, a Zlin had crashed at the flying club. And he, was also writing in his logbook when he heard the voices, 'Guys, they crashed, they crashed!' He hadn't seen how. But he had seen the smoke, just as Rozeșan had seen the explosion. He had learned, he knew the feeling from then on.

And yet, days, weeks later, he hadn't given up. He knew what might await him, but he hadn't given up. He had climbed into a Zlin, flown, and landed safely. He hadn't forgotten, he knew, but he flew.

Then, again, Horia fell, I saw the explosion. Then the news, he ejected, he's in a wheat field, he can't move, they sent the ambulance.

Horia had ejected, but so low that his parachute had only been open for a second and no one had seen it. Later they found out he was alive.

With the Zlin, it had been the opposite. He thought the crew had survived, but later found out that they hadn't.

And yet here he was flying again, in another plane, more powerful, faster, more complex. How did that saying go? What doesn't kill you makes you stronger? Where had he heard that?

Tibi and their twin seater were echeloned for landing. Who is Tibi flying with? He tried to remember. Ah! With that small major, Petrișor.

'Comrade student,' he heard Titel's resonant but phlegmatic voice. 'Are we going to the airfield too? Come on, you have other exercises to do today. Let's see how you do with the landing. How much fuel do we have left?'

There was enough.

Sebi reached the airfield, guided by Man Dăinea, while Titel helped him with visual cues. He recited the [base leg poem](#) and made sure that everything in the cockpit matched the verses.

'Come on, ease off the brakes a little, but don't slow down too much! I remind you once again that this isn't a Mig-15!'

Indeed, the 93 had a higher approach speed. Everything was happening at high speed.

'The drag chute! The parachute, Sebi!'

The Mig-15 didn't have a parachute. Now it was coming after them, colorful, blooming, slowing the plane down noticeably.

They stopped at the fuel pits and Sebi cut the off the engines. With great care, before unbuckling, he set the ejection seat and canopy release safety pins. He took off his oxygen mask, breathing in the fresh air greedily. The technician put the ladder in place and opened the cabin. Titel jumped out of the plane first. Sebi climbed down carefully, like a cat stepping into a puddle, glancing sideways at the ejection handles.

'Not bad, eh!' Titel patted him on the shoulder.

He didn't say anything else. Titel wasn't in the habit of rushing into things. At least not before he figured out who he was dealing with and what kind of pilot the man really was. One flight wasn't enough to determine that.

Sebi watched him walk away among the fuel tankers parked on the grass, where the MiG-15s were refueled. He shrugged his shoulders, somewhat puzzled, because he had expected more criticism, then slowly walked toward the line of planes on the apron.

'How was it? What do you think?'

Another hand on his shoulder. This time the pace matched his, but Sebi didn't bother to turn his head, just smiled. It was Tibi.

'Not bad. It's okay. I liked it. You?'

'Me too. I'm sorry we didn't fly for longer. But the day isn't over yet.'

An insistent whirring of engines starting up could be heard from the apron, and the two stepped further away onto the grass.

'I think it's the guys with the combat drill,' said Tibi.

'What drill?'

'Don't you know? They say four planes are leaving for a drill to Giarmata.'

Sebi's eyes widened.

'No, I didn't know.'

'Man Dăinea told me. They say they want to do some comparisons and performance tests.'

They had reached the big apron, walking on the grass, coming from the fueling stations. They didn't notice the shadow that was following them, keeping its distance. On the apron, there was

a bustle like in [Nicolaescu's](#) films. If Sebi or Tibi had been in Craiova longer, they would have known that the airfield in general and the regiment in particular had never seen such busy days.

The four planes destined for the exercise taxied past them one after the other, leaving behind the smell of burnt kerosene. The young men's nostrils quivered.

'The smell of aviation!' exclaimed Tibi, delighted.

Despite the oxygen masks covering their faces, they both recognized the Cuban's cheerful face in one of the cockpits and waved to him. The Cuban raised his gloved hand in return, greeting them with two fingers.

They continued their leisurely stroll among the planes, watching the four of them line up at the runway's threshold.

'I wonder how many have been manufactured so far,' Sebi asked dreamily, without asking anyone in particular and without expecting an answer.

'How many what? 93s?'

'93s, what else...'

'How should I know? Do you think I'm a spy? Nine-three, here you go!'

'93 of 93s?'

'So you can be satisfied!'

Sebi laughed, wondering which was the 93rd 93 and which was the first, then remembered that the prototype had crashed.

'Look!' said Tibi, surprised.

Among the planes, there was a group of people standing apart. One of them was Rozeşan. The rest were civilians. Rozeşan behaved very officially and courteously toward them, especially toward an older, rotund gentleman dressed in a dark suit that made him look like a penguin.

'Well, how are you, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel?' they heard the civilian ask when they reached them.

'Very good.'

'How are we with the locally produced ejection seats?' Rozeşan asked in turn.

'There's still work to be done,' replied the civilian, in a somewhat disappointed tone.

The two saluted according to regulations and continued on their way, but later Sebi asked quietly:

'Who are those people?'

'From [CÎZ](#) or [ICA](#), I don't know,' Tibi explained bluntly, turning his head toward them.

Luckily for them, Almanac happened to cross their path at that moment. They had met him before. Almanac was a blond man, but blond like an egg yolk, so much so that you would wonder if he was Romanian and not German or some other Nordic people. For reasons known only to himself, he had liked the two lieutenants since he first met them. Perhaps because they had come to him with questions, which meant that his merits as an unofficial encyclopedia were recognized not only by Man Dăinea but also by the other two people. Almanac liked to show off his knowledge. He didn't miss the opportunity this time either.

He nodded toward the group led by Rozeșan among the planes:

'Do you know who he is?'

He was referring specifically to the civilian who looked like a penguin.

'How am I supposed to know everything?' Tibi lamented.

'He's that professor, the father of the 93, Zamfir, the one who also flew in it,' Almanah replied mysteriously.

'And what's so special about that?' asked Sebi innocently, thinking of [Radu Manicatide](#) and [Iosif Silimon](#). To him, it seemed natural for a designer to fly the plane he had designed. But Sebi didn't know the ways of the socialist military aviation.

'Don't you know?' Almanac continued, in a tone as if it were a mortal sin not to know. Well, there were times when the 93s were dropping like flies,' he explained, changing his tone again, as if to say, *lucky for you, I'll fill you in*. 'This professor did what he did, he made them good again, and then, to prove it, he flew himself, well, in a twin seater, with a 93, just to show that it was a good plane that could be trusted.'

'Ahaaaa!' said Sebi, nodding, but thinking – *why didn't he make them good from the start, so they wouldn't crash in the first place?*

Innocent child! What did he know... He was just happy to be flying.

'Hey, what are you guys doing here?' Petrișor and Titel have been looking for you for half an hour.

Man Dăinea, who had appeared out of nowhere at the line of planes.

'Oh dear! And where are they?'

'Where else, in the briefing room!'

They hurried to the room, still unaware of the shadow that had been following them and, in the last part, had been listening to them with ears as long as the wings of an [AN-2](#).

Quarter past nine and quarter past two (Nine-three and two-three)

'Damn it, where did he go again? 025, do you see the target?'

'Negative.'

The [23](#) was an extraordinarily powerful aircraft. Three planes in one, as the pilots liked to joke. Just like the [Nescafe](#), for those who still remembered it, or for those who still knew where to find it.

It was damn complicated to fly, and only the best got to pilot it. The variable-geometry wing generated many restrictions, as each position brought different flight characteristics to the aircraft.

The aircraft's flight manual was practically loaded with operating restrictions and emergencies. Almost every paragraph of the emergencies chapter ended with - *eject*.

Somehow, the army's cinematography center had either imported or created [a documentary film](#) with the possible special flight cases of the aircraft and their solutions. Major Baros knew them all. But that wasn't his problem. The aircraft was flying perfectly on that particular day.

The exercise consisted of detecting and intercepting a ground attack aircraft, the IAR 93, against the ground. Small and low as it was, and nimble compared to the Mig, it was a find it if you can challenge.

Major Baros cleared the area again, making a wide turn to return to the attack. The onboard radar could theoretically detect targets against the ground, but it was not an easy task. Baros looked at the gunsight's reflective glass in front of his eyes, a privileged glass, because the onboard radar symbols were also projected there. The major focused on his task. Among the green numbers and symbols scrolling across the glass, the pilot made out the faint signal of the target. The line marking it flashed intermittently, a sign that the radar was losing it from time to time. He pressed the transmit button:

'025, I have the target again. I'm going in to attack.'

'Roger 025,' muttered the navigator in the flight control center.

Major Baros tried to lock onto the target again with the radar, but the damn thing wouldn't switch to tracking mode. The target was too low, too close to the ground, and changed direction too often. Another problem was that it was also slow. The Mig's engine could accelerate the major to

supersonic speed in just a few seconds. The plane could practically accelerate faster than any other NATO aircraft. It would be a piece of cake to catch a 93. If he could find it!

The plan had been hastily drawn up during a meeting—there were many meetings in those days. The IARs were to destroy a ground target, while the MiG-23s were to defend it.

The meeting had been extensive, as they had even discussed the *93 migratory birds* plan. Generals upon generals, each with an idea, brass upon brass, shiny enough to dazzle your eyes, and ideas upon ideas. At the head of the table sat the First Secretary of the party himself, who could not miss such an event.

'Comrades, but why send the 93s, these planes that I see are not ready? Why not the MIGs?'

He was referring to the idea of sending the 93s to the possible theater of operations.

'Comrade Secretary, allow me to explain. The IAR 93 is an aircraft specifically designed for tactical support. You know how it is. You know the requirements for such missions—to fly fast, low, in the midst of ground combat, to support our tanks or destroy those of the enemy. It is designed for that. It is designed for subsonic flight. You cannot find a target on the ground and bomb it while flying supersonically. It can be equipped with bombs and unguided missiles, it has auto-cannons, it is suitable for the mission. MiGs are interceptor aircraft, designed to fly supersonically, high up, to catch bombers and their escort, to launch their missiles and shoot down the targets.'

'Well, but they can also carry bombs, comrade!'

'They can, but that's not their role. That's a secondary role, not a primary one. They can bomb if necessary. Even the USSR developed special aircraft for tactical support, because MiGs didn't perform very well in ground attacks. Besides, comrades, they want to deploy these planes in the theater. We rely on them to stop the enemy's advance. MiGs will defend the country's airspace, industry, facilities, and military bases. They don't need to drop bombs, except when there is no other option.'

'And who will take care of these ground support aircraft in the air?'

'Are you referring to escort missions? Of course, we can deploy a regiment of MiGs for such missions. Besides, the countries on the margins of the Treaty also have MIGs, and we will cooperate with each other. What they lack are ground attack aircraft, such as the 93.'

The room had fallen silent.

'And how do we know how they'll manage in the face of enemy interceptors?' a voice asked.

'We don't know that, but we can find out.'

'How?'

'We will prepare an exercise, comrades. An exercise in our country. We will conduct tests and see the results. We will set up a target to be destroyed on the ground and put the MiGs to guard it. We will see if the IARs get through.'

The generals murmured enthusiastically.

'Comrades, I am ready to deploy or prepare the Borcea Regiment for this exercise,' said Dragone.

'Comrade General, allow me,' Rusifescu dared to say.

'Yes, you have the word.'

'The Borcea Regiment is equipped with MIG-21s. They are not very modern aircraft. Even in the USSR, they are used in secondary roles. If we want to add realism to this exercise, considering that the capitalist forces have much more modern aircraft, I would suggest using MIG-23s. They have a targeting radar that can detect targets flying against the ground, they have modern missiles, what more could you want, comrades, it is the most advanced interceptor available under the Treaty. The capitalists will not come with old junk if this war starts. We have to simulate this exercise with aircraft that are up to the task, and the only ones we have are the MiG-23s.'

There was a commotion again, but looking into Dragone's eyes, Rusifescu knew that his idea had already been accepted. The First Secretary also nodded his head in approval.

So, Major Baros struggled to catch the damn locust, which was difficult to track with the radar. But the major had also a plan.

He made another breakaway from the target and a new attack, but this time, instead of coming with his wings swept at a 45-degree angle, he deployed the aerodynamic brakes, which opened like four tulip petals around the jet engine nozzle, and when the speed dropped enough, he turned the wing to 16 degrees, opening it like a glider's wing. In this configuration, the MiG was much more responsive at low speeds, such as those at which the target was flying. But it was also more difficult to maneuver.

And yet, the major's plan paid off.

A greenish speck, from which wings and tail fins soon grew, appeared in the center of the windshield, in the center of the [head up display](#), exactly where the major wanted it. It was too close to use his medium-range missiles, the ones guided by radar. With a quick gesture, he turned the selector switch on the weapons panel, arming the infrared homing missiles. The missiles weren't real. They were training missiles—a missile body, without an engine or explosives, but with a guidance head, a devilish mechanism composed of glass, mirrors, gyroscopes, and lead sulfide. These mechanisms worked together to find and lock onto the infrared radiation emitted by the Viper engines of the 93. Soon, very soon, in the blink of an eye, the signal captured by the mirrors, and gyroscopes was transformed into an electrical impulse, which was interpreted by an analog computer on board the aircraft, calculated, and retransformed into another impulse, this time auditory, broadcast to the pilot's headset.

Beeeeeeep! Long, continuous, fascinating. A clear sign that the missile had locked its target. A clear sign that death, simulated as it was, was just waiting.

All Major Baros had to do was press the trigger button on top of the aircraft's control stick. Another impulse would be generated, transmitted to the missile's locking mechanisms, and its engine would be started. With a burst of fire and smoke, the missile would fly toward its target like a meteor, leaving a thick trail of white, chemical smoke behind it, the target hit, and the major happy. That is, if the missile had been real. Since it wasn't, the major had to settle for a simulated, mathematical victory, but that was good enough, because he hadn't become a Mig-23 pilot for nothing!

The whole process had been so intense that it had captured Baros' full attention.

But wait! What's this?

A 93 appeared out of nowhere and came up alongside his left wing. It was like flying a parade formation. In the cockpit, a pilot with strange, non-regulation sunglasses, unimaginably large and beautiful. He waved his hand as if firing a gun, then fatally ran his palm across his throat. *You're dead, sucker. Simulated dead.*

Mircea, one of the IAR pilots, had flown the MiG-21 at one point in his career, just like the Cuban. He had participated in enough exercises, but he had been more of a target, that is, the one who lets himself be tracked, locked, and simulated to be hit by the interceptor. Just like now.

Mircea was generally a docile target. He didn't want to give the interceptors any trouble. Even so, his changes of direction and flying close to the ground had given Major Baros enough trouble.

The Cuban, on the other hand, had been more of an interceptor. On top of that, he had the temperament he had—he didn't want to lose. So, during the exercise, he had made a sneaky turn, while Mircea had continued to fly relatively straight, tempting the interceptor.

The Cuban couldn't see much behind him. The cockpit blocked his view, but he knew the MiG was somewhere there. He also knew that the MiG's cockpit didn't offer much visibility to the rear either. Easy to surprise.

He finished the turn, accelerated, and... was rewarded with the MiG-23 right in front of his eyes, its wing open like a glider's.

I'll take a picture of it with my [gun camera](#), what the hell, he thought. As it flew, with its wing at 16 degrees, it was a piece of cake to catch up with it.

Major Baros swallowed hard, cursed, then burst out laughing. *Damn you and your IARs!*

After analyzing the flight with his superiors, he concluded:

'Comrade Colonel, we can't really stay behind them. And it's hard to see them from above.'

Then, after a pause, smiling:

'And they can bite if they want to.'

Again, an austere office with a metal cabinet and a desk with two chairs

'Comrade Major. They're asking questions, you know. And they're not technical, professional questions. I heard them asking how many planes had been manufactured.'

'Did you search their cars?'

Mirică turned bright red. He swallowed hard, then said with difficulty.

'I didn't search them, Comrade Major. Only the apartment. And I found...'

The major seemed to be gathering his anger. He was a solid man, short in stature, with a very short haircut, like a convict, to hide his receding hairline. He had a thick neck, which spilled over the blackened collar of his simple nylon shirt, and small, piercing blue eyes. He could be violent or gentle, depending on the situation, but the gentleness in his words was more like the nectar on carnivorous plants, or the honey in the Wolf's voice in his dialogue with Little Red Riding Hood.

Mirică closed his eyes, waiting for the explosion, cursing his luck.

To his surprise, the major spoke sweetly, honeyed, dangerous. Mirică would have preferred to hear him yelling.

'And what did we talk about, son? Didn't we talk about you searching their cars?'

'We did,' said Mirică submissively.

He knew it wasn't good to contradict the major. He knew it was better to make him believe that he, Mirică, was an idiot who couldn't be trusted with complex tasks, like in the army, where the dumbest soldier works the least. Or the soldier who pretends to be dumb. After all, he was starting to get a little fed up.

Informers, eavesdropping at doors, secretly following people, listening at the hospital beds of pilots who had ejected. Look, for example, at that Horia guy!

'Are you okay, dear? Mom brought you strawberry jam, just the way you like it.'

'Okay, Mom, thank you, leave it there, on the table.'

'And did they tell you what they're going to do with you?'

'Well, what can they do?'

'Will they let you fly again?'

'How can I fly, can't you see what state I'm in?'

'Come on, dear, an office job is fine. Look at Dad, right?'

His mother was overjoyed that he was going to be given an office job somewhere in the army. She was beaming. At least her son wouldn't be crashing in a plane anymore.

Mirică had suspected Horia all along. He had everything he needed to be a deserter. He had relatives in the party, he had a father high up in the army, he had this and he had that... *I had a lead*, Mirică thought. *It's a good thing they expelled him for real, not like Dăinea. Dăinea had nothing to do with politics, he was just a womanizer, like many others. What did it matter if he stole a little here and there? Didn't everyone do the same to get by...* Mirică had long since noticed that those with many connections at the top, no matter how poor they were as military pilots, were given jobs at [TAROM](#). Some had gone far. Why hadn't they given *him* a job at TAROM, so he could see the world, and spoil his wife with western products? Those TAROM guys were loaded. They were even selling stuff on the side! What deals he could have made at TAROM... Instead, he had to rot in Craiova, eavesdropping on what some kid who had just arrived in his Trabant was saying and what music he was listening to. Mirică had plugged in the Kashtan, had put on one of the tapes, and had ran his hands through his hair, sweating. But what did it matter? Didn't everyone do the same? He would have liked to record the tapes and then sell them in Craiova, with the help of his network of bootleggers. He could have made a lot of money. He had even thought about *confiscating* a tape or two...

But Mirică was afraid of the major. He was an evil man, truly evil, one of those who like to do harm, to see people suffer. He was evil and cunning, very cunning. Mirică believed that some had deserted the army or left the country just to escape the major and nothing else. He picked on people like that, for no reason!

And Mirică remembered how, a few years earlier, a *Securitatea* general had deserted, one named Cepeta. No one talked about it, but Mirică had found out. Until then, things had been going as usual, but then the major had arrived, and with him, it was no longer possible to joke around. He suspected everyone and everything. And Mirică was his direct subordinate.

The major looked at him with his small, cold, blue, devilish eyes.

'What are we going to do, son? Do we not follow orders anymore?' he said in the same suave voice.

Mirică swallowed hard again.

'God forbid,' he mumbled, barely audibly.

The major looked him in the eye, leaning over the table, his gaze fixed, as if to hypnotize him.

'Then, please,' he whispered with the same tenderness, only the whisper sounded like the hiss of a poisonous snake. 'I don't want to hear about such deviations anymore.'

'I understand,' stammered Mirică, unable to take his eyes off the major.

'Dismissed!'

Mirică stood up, saluting. He had been dismissed so firmly that he forgot to tell the major what he had found in the studio apartment.

Day, night, intensive

'Tibi, did you get your hands on the tapes?'

'No.'

'Then why are they in such a mess?'

'How should I know?'

Tibi was sprawled out on his camp bed, even though it wasn't completely dark outside yet. It had been a tiring day, like all the others lately. Theory, flight, flight, theory, theory, flight, from five in the morning until seven in the evening. He was exhausted, worn out, like a man who had come from the fields, not from aviation. He didn't care much about Sebi's tapes at that hour. However, to do him a favor and get a little revenge, he said:

'Maybe your friends. The ones who come here and never leave.'

Tibi liked peace and quiet, and since the tape recorder arrived, there had been anything but peace and quiet in the studio apartment.

'My friends don't have a key to this place!' Sebi burst out angrily, but his concern was evident in his voice.

'Then I don't know. I certainly didn't!' Tibi declared fatidically.

'Then I'm screwed!' Sebi declared just as fatally.

A thought crossed his mind, that maybe he had moved them and didn't remember, maybe they had been in Tibi's way and he had moved them without thinking... But someone had listened to them, because the tapes weren't rewound the way he had left them.

'To hell with the tapes,' he said. 'Tomorrow I have to practice [stalls](#) and special flight situations.'

'With Major Codreanu? With Titel?' Tibi snapped out of his apathy, stepping back into the realm of aviation.

'Yes, with him,' confirmed Sebi, wondering whether to reread the notes he had taken in his notebook about the exercise he had to perform the next day.

'I thought these exercises were reserved only for The Cuban,' said Tibi innocently. Did he return from that drill?'

'Yes, he's back,' Sebi replied. 'You were in the briefing room today when they landed. You should have seen your Cuban when he got off the plane...'

'What do you mean?' Tibi said, looking at him curiously.

'He looked like [Elvis Presley](#).'

Tibi looked at him with even more curiosity in his eyes, and Sebi told him the story.

The Cuban had landed, taxied to the fueling pits, the 93 had braked, leaning forward and swaying on its legs, and The Cuban had gotten out of the plane like a cabaret actor. With those huge sunglasses on his nose, walking like a cowboy, looking at the horizon and having the wind in his hair. He raised two fingers up, forming the letter V - victory! Word had spread that *he had caught* a Mig-23 with his gun camera.

Tibi burst with pride.

'You see?! The man's big. I told you!'

'Eh, it's not like Titel isn't. Or Petrișor! They're all good.'

Tibi muttered something, dissatisfied that his hero was not being glorified. And he imagined the Cuban sitting at a table in a bar, like in an old American movie he had seen as a child, with those glasses on his nose, drinking whiskey and gesturing with his hands, phlegmatically, as he recounted his exploits. Nah, that Titel guy had no style, sir. He had no style at all.

As if to confirm his thoughts, a few kilometers away, on a street corner in the village of Balta Verde, Titel was walking slowly toward his home. A cheap plastic bag hung from his arm, contrasting with his aviation uniform, which seemed to call for a diplomatic briefcase or a more respectable leather bag. The uniform was ruffled because he hadn't had time to wash and iron it. Or rather, he hadn't had anyone to do it, because he had been on the road the whole time. He had barely been given one night off to go home.

'Comrade Commander!' he begged Rozeșan. 'I haven't been home in ages. If we are to deploy soon and maybe never come back, I'd like to see my family.'

'So?! Do you think I did?'

'Well, no one is stopping you, and anyway, it's just one night. I'll be back first thing tomorrow morning. I have work to do.'

Rozeșan had been weighing up alternatives in his mind for a while.

'Okay,' he concluded slowly. 'Make sure your phone at home is working. Turn the ringer up to full volume.'

'Understood, sir!'

'If the alarm goes off, come back by car!'

'Yes, sir.'

Titel prayed that the battery was still good. He rarely used his car.

Although he was about to see his family, Titel was grumpy and in a bad mood. He didn't really know why. To make matters worse, when he turned the corner, he saw the woman whose mouth he feared most: Tanța. Before he could make the slightest evasive maneuver, Tanța saw him.

'Look who's here!' she said, delighted. 'What do you have there? What are you bringing us?'

Before Titel could make a move, Tanța's inquisitive nose was already in the bag. She sniffed deeply, her eyes wide as saucers, which made her look like an actress from a black-and-white silent movie, with those big eyes, caked with too much mascara, then she asked briefly, as if giving an order:

'Where did you get these sausages? They're the good kind.'

'From Reta, from the butchery at the [Coop](#),' Titel replied submissively.

'From here in the village?' Tanța exclaimed, very surprised.

'Well, where else?' Titel shrugged.

'Do they have any more? I didn't know they brought meat over there.'

Her tone suggested that if she didn't know, no one else should know either. Those sausages shouldn't even exist. But the temptation was too great.

'Is it still open?'

'I don't know... they were getting ready to close when I was there.'

He was talking to the wind. Tanța was already on her way to the Cooperative.

Titel wondered if the sausages in question were in the store just because they were there or because Reta had kept them specifically for the pilots, especially for him. He hadn't paid more than he should have, and Reta hadn't asked for any other favors, but Titel could imagine that one day he would hear her mischievous voice:

'Comrade pilot! I have a favor to ask. Come on, I served you when you needed it!'

And Reta wasn't a bad catch. She wasn't Maria's equal, but she wasn't bad either.

Titel looked in his bag again, disappointed that he was coming home with so little. He had also stopped by [Gostat](#) to look for some apples, but it was closed. He should have also made a trip to the gas station to make sure his Olcit had enough gas, but he knew he didn't have time that day.

He opened the door with his key and entered the house.

Just right. There was a speech by The Comrade on TV. Mrs. Babencu was, as always, on duty as supervisor-repairman. Maria sat on a stool with Răducu on her lap, while Horațiu sat enthroned like a pasha in the big armchair covered with black upholstery with red oriental motifs.

'The Comrade First Secretary of State,' said the correct voice of the television, 'urges the people to increased vigilance.' The TV continued to say something about possible spies coming from the sky, and how to identify such a spy.

Titel remained there, on the threshold, ignored for a while, then Răducu turned his eyes toward him and exclaimed in the sweetest voice that could delight Titel's ears:

'Daddy!'

The eyes of those in the room turned to Titel, one by one.

'Titel!'

'Dad!'

'Look who's here!'

'Dad's here!'

'Mom, Daddy's here!'

The little ones swarmed around him, while he stood there stiff and dumb, not knowing what to say, but happy to be home and to find his house unchanged, just as he remembered it.

Maria took the bag from his hands, bustling around the house and humming:

'Look! Dad brought you sausages. I'll put them in the fridge, because they won't eat them now. Tomorrow morning, at tea.'

Mrs. Babencu watched the bag longingly, while Titel nodded toward the television, grumbling:

'Yeah, look at The Comrade. Showing off as usual. Talking big. What a barroom hero he is!'

'Who needs such heroes?' Maria's muffled voice could be heard from the kitchen.

It wasn't hard to find room for the sausages in the refrigerator, which didn't have much in it. But next to it, in a place of honor, a massive freezer, larger than life, was filled with almost everything a family could store in a year, from vegetables to pork and bread. You never knew what might disappear from the market. And the freezer was frozen enough to survive even a two days long power outage.

'Yeah, nobody knows the real heroes,' Titel grumbled sourly, but quietly, though not quietly enough for Mrs. Babencu not to hear him.

'Somebody does! Death knows them, son!'

Titel gave her a surprised look. He hadn't expected such philosophical statements from her.

'Aunt Babencu, if you please, I'm tired of listening to him. Turn it off. We haven't heard anything else for many years.'

'That's right, dear. We used to watch [The Saint](#) and [Dallas](#) ages ago. But maybe they'll show something new about this war that may start.'

'Like hell they will. I'll tell you later about the war.'

'Oh no! Are the Russians coming, dear? They came before and it was terrible!'

She knew.

But Titel paid no attention to the question. He left her alone with her worries and focused on the children.

'Whoops! Come to Daddy!'

Răducu was already on his knees.

'Tell Dad what's going on at home. What did you guys do today?'

Horațiu also came quickly, trying to make room on his father's knees.

'Today we went to school and the teacher made us hide under the desks because the Americans are coming, but the teacher said she wants them to come too and that we shouldn't be afraid.'

'Did the teacher say that?' Titel wondered, surprised.

'That's what she said,' Horațiu rushed to reply. 'And Mom said not to tell anyone, only to you.'

'Well, what about Mrs. Babencu?' Titel asked, raising his eyebrows.

The boy fell silent, confused.

'Come on, Mrs. Babencu has been waiting for them since 1947,' Maria replied merrily from the kitchen. 'Would you like some tea? That's all I have.'

'Make some tea,' Titel agreed meekly. 'And what else did the teacher say?'

'Nothing,' said Horațiu.

'And Mom came to the garden and I gave her a flower that I picked myself,' the little one boasted.

'You did that? Well done!'

'Yes, yes, I brought it home and put it there.'

Quick as a mouse, Răducu stood up, took his father by the hand, and led him to the kitchen. In a place of honor, on the windowsill, in a small yogurt jar, sat a bright yellow dandelion.

'Look!'

Titel took him in his arms and kissed him on the cheeks.

'Well done! See what boys we have?' he asked his wife.

But she didn't answer, and when Titel looked more closely, he saw that she was crying quietly, next to the kettle on the stove, her face hidden in her hands.

Titel took her in his arms, and she made herself small at his chest, very small, and he held her tight, very tight. The little one didn't understand.

'Daddy, is Mommy crying?'

'Horatiu! Come on! Come with Grandma. Come on, let Daddy talk to Mommy too, they haven't seen each other in a long time,' stepped in Madam Babencu.

That night, Titel talked with Maria for about two hours. They were both lying in bed, discussing the difficulties of life, the hardships, what would be, what would not be, and Maria's fears. Titel understood very well what she wanted, what she feared, but he refused to admit that anything could ever happen to him.

'Nonsense,' he would say quickly and change the subject.

And yet... something could happen. He thought about the children, the older one, the younger one, Maria, he thought about those who were no longer into this world to enjoy their Marias and their children.

'Oh no,' Maria said, suddenly remembering something.

'What happened?' Titel's eyes widened in the dark.

'Horatiu broke something at school and the teacher said she would lower his behavior grade.'

'Is it the new, young one? The one with the Americans?'

'Yes, that one.'

'It's nothing. A pack of good coffee and it'll be sorted,' said Titel conciliatorily.

'Can you get some?'

'I'll try.'

Words, words in the night, said between two spouses who tell each other their sorrows.

Titel embraced his wife, lovingly running his strong hands over her bare thighs, climbing onto her hips, caressing her, cupping her breasts, desiring her, wanting to hear her cries, to feel the heat of her wild breath.

But then, Răducu came tiptoeing, climbed into their bed, and nestled at Titel's chest.

Not a chance! Răducu was sleeping with his head resting on him, snoring peacefully. Horațiu loved sleeping in his own bed, but Răducu hadn't left them yet. He was too young.

Titel sighed, cooling off, panting, thinking about how hard it was when you had children. The only ones who didn't have any were the Cuban and Man Dăinea. It was obvious—they were the biggest womanizers. With every soirée, with every ball, they brought in a new girl with them. One Christmas, long ago, Dăinea had come with a companion who had driven everyone crazy—even Rozeșan, who had stared at her all evening, like an owl, craning his neck into incredible positions.

Titel fell asleep with his hands crossed under his head, like a man deep in thought, thinking that it would have been much better if there had been peace, that it would have been much better if he didn't have to deal with so many fools, comrades, comrades up, comrades down, that it would have been much better if things had been simple, as at the creation of the world, and that it would have been much better if he had known from the outset what was to come. He fell asleep without knowing that his thoughts intersected with those of Sebi, who was in exactly the same position, in bed, with his hands crossed under his head, thinking about what would have been if, and who the hell had moved the tape recorder and the tapes, and for what purpose.

Their thoughts intersected and their fates were linked.

Early in the morning, at first light, at the bus stop in front of the gate of the regiment, Man Dăinea, who a few minutes earlier had argued with the soldier on guard at the gate, was just rubbing his eyes, eyes that had grown quite long, like a snail's, long enough to reach inside a square, plastic bag brought by a dark skinned man. Well, he wasn't really dark skinned, he was more like brown skinned, brownish enough to arouse the sentry's suspicions.

'What are you doing here, you rascal?'

'I'm *uhwhaiting* for *mhishter* offiser.'

'My ass, you're waiting for. Move along! Move along, you hear?'

'*Bhut* what *dhid hi* do?'

'You're not allowed here. Scram! Get lost!'

Whether he wanted to or not, the dark skinned man crossed the street to the other bus station.

'Hope I won't catch your ass around here again!' the soldier at the gate threatened.

But then Man Dăinea had appeared.

'What are you looking at, man...' he threw at the guard.

'Comrade Captain, it's not allowed...'

'Mind your own business. I'm only going there. I'm only crossing the street.'

The man crossed boldly, stopping next to the dark skinned man, talking to him, both looking at something brought in the mysterious bag.

'Good stuff,' concluded Măinea with satisfaction.

Adesgo calendars, basically advertisement for women's stockings – beautiful, attractive legs! Man Dăinea was satisfied, but also a little disappointed. Lingerie calendars, and especially the ones without lingerie, sold better.

'So, how much do you want?'

'*Seven*-five, boss.'

'Per piece? Are you crazy?'

'Come on, boss, you will *resell* them quickly. *He*everyone here has money.'

'No way, man, I sell to soldiers, not officers. Where do you think soldiers get their money from?'

'They do boss, they *collects* money from each other. What, haven't I been in the army? You don't know how much I rubbed it in there, and I didn't even have a *calendar*.'

What can you do! He asked for seven-five, you give him seven-five, because later he'll ask for a hundred, and in the end it wasn't even that expensive. If five soldiers got together, Dăinea could sell the calendars for a hundred or even more.

The deal was done quickly. The square bag changed owners, while the first bus from Craiova, an old bus, stopped at the station, behind them. When the bus started again and Man Dăinea turned to face the road, he saw Titel.

'How is business?' Titel asked

It seemed more like an observation than a reproach.

Man Dăinea blushed, then with a proud gesture revealed his secret. To his surprise, Titel showed no desire to look in the bag.

'Listen! he asked instead. 'Where can I get some coffee? Do you know anyone at TAROM?' he asked as they crossed the street toward the gate.

'Coffee?' Dăinea asked, surprised and somewhat disgusted.

'Some good stuff.'

'I have no way of getting coffee. Only Mirică. I don't think he'll help me. But maybe he'll help you...'

He lengthened the last syllable meaningfully, smiling. Titel smiled back, thinking that a strong coffee wouldn't have hurt him either that morning. Since he didn't have any, he lit one of his ever-present cigarettes instead and headed for the briefing room.

'A lot of work today?' asked Măinea, not liking to walk alongside someone without making conversation.

'Quite a lot. I have to practice stalls with the new kid, Sebi. You know everyone is clamoring for us to let them go solo.'

'And? Is he good at it?'

'How could someone who just got here be good at it!' Titel snapped at him.

He was suddenly irritated. Or rather, he was calm one moment and irritated the next, without any reason. It was as if he had suddenly lost his balance and didn't understand why. *Maybe I have too much on my mind*, he thought, trying to calm down. After all, Măinea was a big, innocent kid, unfairly grounded. He had no reason to be upset on him.

'I know, I know,' said Măinea, without noticing Titel's tone. 'Too much is expected of us. Until yesterday, we got nothing when we asked for something, and now everyone wants us to perform miracles. I understand you, Comrade Major. It's as if those kids run on batteries! You stick one in their ass and that's it, they become experts.'

Suddenly, Titel calmed down. He smiled again. Man Dăinea wasn't a bad guy at all.

But Titel's smile disappeared when, later, in the briefing room, he saw the plane he had been assigned to.

'What's with this one? Why 602?' he asked Petrișor, who was already dressed up for flight.

'Because 601's ejection seats have expired,' Petrișor told him, smiling.

'Again?'

'Again. And because, as the directive from above says,' Petrișor's tone imitated the correct, right-angled voice of a party activist or news announcer, 'and as the directive from above says,' he repeated, 'we must carry out the program day and night – intensively. So, Comrade Major, we have no time for breaks and unfounded claims. We fly with what we are given, because the planes are the property of the people, and we, the beneficiaries, have no right to complain. At the urging of the party's general secretary, we are obliged to raise our professional level to the highest heights. Therefore, Comrade Major,' this time the tone was that of a priest singing in church during Easter, 'be blessed with 602, for we all pray for your professional well-being and enlightenment.'

Petrișor's parody cheered him up somewhat, but Titel wondered if it would be better to postpone the mission or request another plane. He had a reason. In fact, several.

Not all of the IARs were manufactured according to the same standards. In theory, they should have been, but in practice there were differences. For example, the pre-production models flew better than the production ones. They were more responsive in the air. Of course, there were some manufacturing tolerances, but it seemed that the factory had abused them, unable to produce two perfectly identical planes.

The one he was going to fly that day, 602, was well known for a strange and abnormal lateral instability.

Titel flew IARs on the edge of their performance envelope before. He was an instructor, after all! He had also flown 602. Since then, he had noticed that the plane was not quite normal. But if he had an order, he had to be happy to comply. What else could he do? The bugs had to be ironed out as quickly as possible, the regiment had to be prepared for deployment, fully staffed and, possibly, ready to become war heroes.

'Write me down how you put the aircraft in and out of a stall. From A to Z, the best you know,' he told Sebi, who was sitting quietly in one of the benches.

Obediently, Sebi took out his notebook and started writing. He wrote a short introduction, then wrote down, one by one, the necessary maneuvers, and when he was done, he handed Titel the notebook. It was a simple math notebook. Pilots draw a lot, and math notebooks are the best for their notes.

'Yeah,' Titel grumbled. 'It's fine. And if it doesn't work to get it out, or you enter a [spin](#), what do you do?' he asked like a teacher testing his student with a new problem on the blackboard after finding that he had learned the lesson well.

'If nothing works till down to two thousand meters, we eject,' Sebi replied precisely.

'Yeah. You should know that the 93 stalls like any plane, but it's hard to put it into a spin. In fact, no one has ever intentionally put it into a spin. Not even the test pilots. The spin chapter in the flight manual is in fact copied after a Mig-15 one, just so have something written there, but no one knows how this plane behaves in a spin. That's why it's forbidden to intentionally do any.'

Sebi nodded in agreement. For him, it was just a mission to be accomplished. He didn't intend to test the aircraft's capabilities himself. He had barely learned to fly it. Normally, during peace time, the country did not train fighter pilots directly out of lieutenants who had graduated from school. It was a long and winding road to becoming a fighter pilot, but the current situation was exceptional. And Sebi wasn't afraid to admit that he was somewhat scared. He was afraid of his first solo flight with the IAR precisely because he didn't feel ready. Everything was too rushed. It was all too hurried!

He had spoken to Tibi the night before. Tibi had more experience, having come from Giarmata. He had more flying hours. He had even flown more in the Aeroclub.

'Take it easy,' he had advised him. 'First, practice in your mind what to do, so that nothing takes you by surprise. If you're surprised, your brain goes haywire, you can't think straight. Even if you keep your cool, you waste time thinking about what to do. When *you know* what to do and you've made a decision, you're halfway into solving any problem in flight.'

Sebi had dreamed all night about stalling the God damn plane.

'In the saddle, Gents. Let's go.'

Sebi strapped himself to the plane, checked the equipment, the safety pins of the canopy and seat, and declared himself satisfied. In the rear cockpit, Titel was no longer singing, as he usually did.

The flight coordinator allocated them Work Area number 2, somewhere towards the mountains, and Sebi was happy to be flying further away from the airfield, changing the familiar view. The work areas were marked zones on the map where they could practice various missions. Some were naturally delimited by rivers and mountain ranges, others were drawn around a village, lake, forest, or some other landform, something that could be clearly seen from above.

Sebi recognized on the radio the voice of the ever-present Man Dăinea, the flight coordinator of the day.

Other pilots also requested to start up their engines, creating the characteristic radio atmosphere of a combat base in full flight activity. Sebi liked that atmosphere.

He pressed the [PTT](#) button, requesting to start the engines. He signaled to the technicians that they could begin. The ground power was already connected, the turbines whirled sharply, one by one, as the fuel injected into the combustion chambers ignited, being transformed into decanewtons of thrust.

He saw the ground power truck detach and move to another plane.

602 was one of the planes equipped with afterburners, something Sebi had never flown before. He was curious to see the difference. The Cuban, Tibi's friend, was crazy about planes with afterburners.

'We'll take-off with [PC](#), so you can see what it's like,' came from the rear cabin, to his great satisfaction.

Titel was trying to kill two birds with one stone.

'ITake-off with PC, approved' Man Dăinea gave them the go-ahead.

How well the planets aligned that day!

The acceleration wasn't much more than he was used to. He had expected more, but anyway, it was much better than if he hadn't had PC. The plane took off smoothly and Sebi pulled the stick to give it a normal climb angle.

'You can pull more when you have the burners engaged,' he heard from the back seat. 'Go ahead.'

Sebi increased the angle of climb.

'That's enough, it's not a rocket,' came the voice from the back seat.

They headed for Area 2, climbing, leaving the airfield behind. It was an incredibly clear day, as if it weren't even summer. There was no sign of the hazy, visibility-impaired atmosphere of an August day. The Parâng ridge was clearly visible, as if it were just a stone's throw away. As they climbed, the atmosphere seemed to clear even more, and soon Sebi could swear he could see hundreds of kilometers away, as if he were in a satellite orbiting abnormally low.

'Climb to four thousand meters, OK?'

The voice from the second cockpit.

'Roger.'

Sebi craned his neck to see outside better, to identify geographical landmarks, delighted by the visibility.

'What a great view, comrade major,' he couldn't help saying.

Titel was also surprised, pleasantly surprised. *That's right, keep flying*, he thought.

'Make a 360-degree turn,' he said. 'We'll see the country better.'

Sebi complied, and the IAR moved its nose from the dark green of the forests to the checkered green, speckled with gold, of the fields, the undefined brown of the cities, and then returned to the green of the forests and the gray of the Parâng mountains.

'Do another one, slower, let's see if we'll see the sea.'

Nope. They couldn't.

'Maybe if we go higher,' Titel grumbled. 'But let's get to work, otherwise we'll be here until Tuesday. First I'll show you how it's done, then you do it, okay?'

'Roger,' said Sebi obediently, tightening his harness.

'Let me show you a trick first—we'll descend a hundred meters so we have some space to climb back at idle power, and we'll start the exercise at exactly four thousand meters, okay? Go ahead, take it to three thousand nine hundred. Engines at idle. What's the idle value?'

Sebi thought for just a second.

'Sixty percent of the max [RPM](#).'

'Very good,' Titel approved.

The plane nosedived gently as the engines were reduced to the appropriate idle value.

'That's it, good job, now the nose slightly above the horizon.'

The IAR began to climb again, but without the help of the engines, it quickly lost speed. That was the purpose of the exercise. Airplanes cannot fly without speed. The movement of the wings through the air generates lift, the lift that carries them above the clouds. Every plane has a minimum speed below which the wings become dead metal, and flying becomes anything but flying. In general, a well-behaved plane will nose dive, no matter how much you pull back on the stick, and it will fall from the sky until it gains enough speed to fly again. A more unruly one, requiring a steadier hand and cat-like reflexes, may enter a spin. This means that one wing loses speed before the other, and the plane nosedives but also spirals towards the ground at the same time. Depending on the aircraft and its flight characteristics, the spin can be spectacularly chaotic, meaning that no one understands what the plane does, not even the test pilots, or very benign, meaning that you just need to release the controls and the aircraft will recover on its own.

The IAR-93 was a spin-resistant aircraft. The parasol wing, i.e., the wing located above the fuselage, gave it stability, refusing to spin like a dead leaf falling from a tree. The downside of this type of wing, demonstrated in practice with another aircraft, an Anglo-French one, was that once it entered a spin, with difficulty, but once there, it was very difficult, if not impossible, to get out of it. The same stability that worked against the spin caused the aircraft to remain stable in that condition once it entered it.

602 climbed a few hundred meters more than the agreed four thousand out of inertia, then Titel took firm control and waited for the air flow over the wing to become turbulent.

'Can you feel it doing it?' he asked over the intercom.

As slipstream detached from the wings like a veil sliding off a piano, the plane began to shake as if it was shivering. The shaking wasn't a bad thing. It was telling the pilot that something wasn't right and that he should increase the airspeed. But Titel not only that he didn't increase it he also pulled back on the stick, raising the nose of the plane even more. His goal was not to prevent but to enter a stall.

When the airspeed reached two hundred and ninety kilometers per hour, the nose of the plane dropped uncommanded, as it was supposed to, but 602 did something else too—it went into a spin.

Surprised, Titel immediately gave commands to pull out. Stick in the middle, foot on the rudder opposite of the rotation. Stick in the middle and rudder opposite to the direction of rotation. Stick in the middle and rudder...

Aha! The plane stopped spinning for a second that lasted an eternity, then started spinning in the other direction.

Titel started over. Stick in the middle and rudder opposite the rotation.

The plane stopped again, only to *jump* back to the opposite side. It made a few turns to the left, stopped, then a few turns to the right, and stopped again... The vibration in the cockpit was incredible. Titel could hardly read the flight instruments.

'Fuck this damn plane,' the man groaned, struggling with the controls.

He pushed the stick harder to make sure he wasn't pulling it by mistake, and the plane ended up even more spectacularly—spinning on its back. Titel pulled back on the stick and the plane calmly resumed its normal spin.

'Hey, are you doing something there?' Titel yelled, firmly convinced that Sebi was also trying to pull out, countering his maneuvers.

There was no answer. It was as if the front cockpit was empty.

'Leave the controls to me, man. Leave it to me!'

Titel was gasping for air under the oxygen mask. He felt like he was losing the fight with the duralumin. The plane just wouldn't come out! He wondered if it made sense to lower the flaps or the landing gear, but none of those maneuvers were in the book, and Titel was stupidly afraid to try. What if it didn't work and if he crashed the investigators held him responsible?

'Did you lower the landing gear?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Well, you see, that's why it didn't come out!'

A staff officer who knew everything.

'Where does it say in the book that you should lower the landing gear in a spin?'

Or another version:

'Kid, your father died because he lowered the landing gear in a spin. Well, didn't he know you don't lower the gear in a spin? He destroyed the plane, the people's property. Now who's going to pay it? You?'

Titel's thoughts turned with difficulty to his family, amid the turbulence. His hands and feet automatically repeated the maneuvers to end the spin, but the plane stubbornly remained dead metal.

'Leave it to me, man!' he groaned once more into his mask.

The unnatural proximity of the ground made him look at the altimeter. Two thousand meters.

'We're ejecting, man, get ready.'

Again, no response.

'Hey, can you hear me?'

Maybe the kid had passed out, or the intercom was broken and he couldn't hear.

For his sake, he tried to get the plane out of the spin. Once, twice, three more times. Nothing. The plane was locked in its crazy rotation.

'Hey, we're ejecting, you hear? We're ejecting! She's not coming out!'

Silence and tremors.

The altimeter passed a thousand meters. Only a thousand lines separated life from death. The countdown continued, rapidly.

'Let it go, can't you hear me?! Eject, man!'

Sebi was as unresponsive as the plane.

'Man, what a bitch!'

Man, what's wrong with this kid! Then the word stirred memories, two other kids, smaller, weaker, and a small, brunette woman holding their hands, some kids eagerly waiting for their father, but their father, their father...

For Titel, the image of the children and Maria was more than he could stand. He reached between his legs, grabbed the ejection handle, and disappeared in a thunderclap and a cloud of smoke that flooded the front cockpit for a second.

Strange thing, the aerodynamics!

The two thousand kilograms of force generated by the rocket engine of the ejection seat that propelled Titel with an acceleration of fourteen G did not only push the seat out of the plane. Like any universal physical reaction, the rocket's propulsive force pushed not only the seat, but also the plane. Negligible, admittedly, but essential. The seat went up, while the plane was pushed down. This impulse, combined with the fact that Titel and the seat were no longer there, lightening the plane by more than 200 kilograms, shifted the aircraft's center of gravity and, paradoxically, by changing the balance of forces, put the plane out of the spin.

When the smoke cleared in the front cockpit, still occupied by a dazed Sebi, the altimeter needle was just signaling that there were five hundred meters left to the ground.

The shock of the seat launching and the bang had another, secondary but positive effect: they woke Sebi up.

Amazed, he noticed that the vibrations had stopped and that the piece of duralumin to which he was strapped to was flying again, and could be called an airplane again.

The human brain is also a strange thing.

Sebi slowly contemplated the situation he found himself in. Apart from a hellish noise coming from the rear cabin, he noticed that the control stick was firm, the plane was responding to commands, the speed was increasing, and the engines were still idling. In a stupid way, his mind intoned three verses by [Bolintineanu](#):

...You must die for others!

And your grave forever,

Will be crowned with flowers.

As if he had all the time in the world, he avoided the grave and chose an early resurrection.

Slowly, so as not to disturb the newly restored balance of forces, Sebi pulled the stick. He did it like a ghost, as if he wasn't the one pulling it. Surprisingly, the plane came out of its dive less than fifty meters above the ground. Sebi pushed the throttles and the plane responded to the instinctive maneuver, climbing. The nose rose above the horizon and the piece of pot metal was once again transformed into something dedicated to flying, a beautiful but merciless phenomenon, a phenomenon that had completely ceased over the last four thousand meters of vertical fall.

Another meeting, 68th Fighter-Bomber Regiment, commander's office

'Where is Major Codreanu? Where did he eject? Why didn't you report anything on the radio?'

'Did you see his parachute open?'

'What do you mean you went into a spin? And why didn't *you* eject?'

'This is sabotage, comrades. What do you mean...'

'Comrade Captain, hold your tongue for a moment, let him speak!'

'Come on, speak up, man! Let him calm down a bit. Have a cigarette! Someone bring him a glass of water. And open that window, sir. Let some air in!'

'Tell us, kid, how was it!'

Sebi was lost, sitting on a chair only with his body. His spirit was still spinning in the air with the plane, chaotically. He couldn't believe he was still alive, that he had been the protagonist of that event, that he had been the one who had come alone with the plane to the airfield. He didn't even know how he had done it. He vaguely remembered that somehow he had figured out where he was and where the airfield was, He entered the landing pattern unannounced, and landed without further events. He taxied the plane to the apron the best he could, stopped in the middle of it, under the stunned gaze of the technicians, turned off the engines, opened the cockpit and, to his amazement, although he had a vague idea that this was what he was going to see, he found the rear cockpit empty. It was curious and funny at the same time. A twin seater airplane with only one seat!

They put the ladder in place, he climbed out of the plane with wobbly legs, seen astonished faces, people who had begun to gather around like at a show, then they had simply picked him up, shouting at the top of their lungs, demanding explanations he was unable to give them, and carried him to the commander's office.

He felt as if he had floated there.

Sebi made an effort of will and memory, trying to remember, trying to stop the chaos in his head, and the earth spinning towards him.

'We were in Area 2,' he mumbled with difficulty, 'above a forest.'

'Bring me a map!'

'So, and? Go on!'

'And we got into a spin.'

'Okay, guys, quiet, let him talk! Go on, boy!'

'And then, I don't really know. I'm very tired now. I heard a bang and the plane came out of the spin. I took the controls and brought it home.'

Sebi swallowed hard.

'Here, have some water!'

'And then I landed.'

'Is that all? Do you know that Titel ejected?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know where?'

'I don't know. There was a forest.'

Petrișor looked at the map. Area 2 was full of forests.

'Comrade Commander! Should we send two planes on a search mission? Maybe they'll spot something on the ground?'

'No one is going anywhere! All flights are grounded!'

'So what do we do?'

The question floated through the room like a plastic bag caught in a warm summer whirlwind, a super adiabatic thermal trigger above the overheated concrete.

'I called a helicopter from Alexeni...' said Rozeșan softly. 'It will search the area.'

'Maybe we should also notify the police stations in the surrounding villages. Maybe they can organize a search too,' suggested Petrișor.

Of all of them, he was the most agitated. After all, Titel was his best friend.

'Okay, take care of it!' Rozeșan agreed absently.

'Comrade commander!' Mirică's voice, a voice he didn't want to hear. 'This could be a clear case of...'

'The commission will clarify that when it arrives, understood? You don't decide, and we don't speculate! Where do you see a case of sabotage here? Get out!'

Mirică made himself small, without saying another word. At that moment, the phone rang.

'Yes! Do you have any news? I see. Okay. Keep me informed!'

Rozeşan felt the eyes of those in the room fixed on him.

'The helicopter has taken off,' he announced in an absent tone.

The truth was that his current state was not much different from Sebi's. *We got away from one mess and we've entered into a new one!*

He remembered very well the conversation he had had with Dragone. That's all he needed right now! But first and foremost, he thought about Titel's fate. *Did he get away safely? Did his parachute open? Did he land safely?*

He jumped as if he had touched a high-voltage cable when he heard the hoarse crackling of the phone again.

'Yes! I'm listening! Yes, send him over, he's here in my office!'

Man Dăinea had told him that the doctor from CîZ had arrived and wanted to know if he was needed. Of course he was needed! This kid, Sebi, looked like he was in another world. Give him a damn sedative, something. And honestly, I think I need one too!

'The doctor,' he told to those in the room.

'Listen, you surely don't remember which forest? Do you remember which village you could see?' he asked Sebi this time.

Sebi couldn't remember, he didn't know, he was still dazed.

They took him to the infirmary like a knickknack, while the rest remained to worry, watching the phone. But the phone remained silent. One hour, two, three. Evening came without any news. The helicopter had landed long ago, without discovering anything.

Then the night came, still without news.

The morning came, and still no news.

Rozeşan finished his twentieth cup of black, bitter coffee, rubbing his temples wearily. Petrişor, who hadn't slept at all, was dozing in a chair, his head on the desk. Sebi was fast asleep in the infirmary, still under the effect of the sedative. Then the phone rang.

'Yes,' Rozeşan answered wearily.

'Hello,' said the voice on the other end of the line.

He didn't recognize the voice. But he didn't bother to ask who it was.

'I am Colonel Gabriel, from the Securitate,' the voice continued. 'We have one of your guys here in Bucharest—Major Codreanu.'

Rozeşan's eyes widened.

'I would just like a verbal confirmation from you that he parachuted yesterday. He was found in a forest.'

'Yes, it's him,' stammered Rozeşan, stunned.

'All right, Comrade Colonel,' the voice continued. 'We'll send him to you in one of our cars. Sorry for the confusion and madness. I hope you understand. These are the times we live in!'

'But what happened?' asked Rozeşan.

'Nothing. He'll tell you.'

The line was dead.

'He's alive, man! He's coming from Bucharest,' said Rozeşan hoarsely, looking at Petrişor, who had suddenly raised his head from the desk, like a dog that hears food falling from the table onto the floor.

The news spread through the unit faster than the [Radio Yerevan](#) jokes.

Later, that same morning, in the same office, but with more people present, including the military accident investigation commission from Bucharest

'So you were eager to fly solo, sir!' Titel said to Sebi.

Titel smoked cigarette after cigarette, you'd wonder where he got so many. He looked tired, but the doctors at the Central Military Hospital in Bucharest had said he was in great shape, despite the ejection.

'The X-ray shows that you haven't suffered a vertebral compression. Of course, you're still a little shaken, which is normal, but we'll give you a painkiller and you'll be back on your feet by tomorrow.'

Titel hadn't quite been *back on his feet* early morning, but after everything that had happened, he wanted nothing more than to go back to his unit and then home. He pretended that everything was fine, just to see the doctor sign the discharge form. The *Securitatea* had sent the car, as promised, and Titel was back at the regiment in three hours.

'Are you going to drive me, or should I get in the cab and drive myself?' he asked nervously the driver of the truck parked on the side of a forest road, while the man stared at him in fear.

First, he had been hanging in the tree where he had parachuted down. He had rolled from branch to branch until the parachute got tangled in a sturdier one. He remained there, one meter above the ground, hanging like a puppet.

The ejection seat had worked flawlessly.

So he climbed down from the tree as best he could and made his way through the forest until he reached the high embankment of the forest road, which he climbed, panting. Miracle! A few meters away, the truck in question was parked. A strong smell of salami betrayed the driver's location.

Titel was too shocked to consider how he looked, and the driver, caught with the salami, was too surprised to control his fear.

'Comrade...'

'Colonel...'

'Colonel,' the truck driver had said during the subsequent interrogation. 'When the comrade...'

'Major!'

'...when the comrade major came out of the forest, he was, how can I put it, he was like a...'

'Come on, man, don't be shy like a girl. Viorel, come here and hear what this guy is saying!' said the *Securitatea* colonel amusedly, calling his colleague.

'He was like one of those aliens,' added the driver.

'Do you know what aliens look like?' asked the colonel with a smile.

'Well, like this...'

'What are they like, man?'

'I don't know,' the driver admitted defeat.

'Come on, tell me more!'

'And when he came out of the forest like that, I thought he was one of those spies, a paratrooper.'

'Well, from an alien to a paratrooper...'

'You know, I saw on the news that we should be vigilant, that spies are coming from the sky.'

'Right! I understand. Go on!'

'And he, the comrade spy...'

'Major...'

'...major, said to give him the truck so he could go to the police...'

'I said *he* should take me,' Titel corrected tiredly, 'but *he* refused.'

'No, no...' stammered the man, 'I was afraid, comrade. I was afraid! Well, if someone like him comes out of the woods, dressed in those overalls and that helmet, and he has those hoses and that thing...'

The Securitate officers were already laughing hysterically. Not so much at what the man was saying, but especially at the way he was saying it. Major Codreanu sat nervously and smoked.

'... I was really scared. And then the comrade said he would go alone, with the truck.'

'And you took him.'

'I took him, because he had already climbed the ladder to the cabin!'

'And you took him to the village policeman!'

'Yes.'

'Listen, but did it ever occur to you why a parachute spy would want to go to the police station by himself?'

The driver didn't answer.

'I'll tell you why,' continued the colonel.

This time he wasn't laughing.

'Because you were the first to run in and tell them that you, the great hero, had caught a spy in the forest. And the guys at the station, even more stupid than you, believed you.'

The driver sweated silently.

'Fuck your mother in the ass so I can fuck you too!' the colonel suddenly exploded. 'You sent me on a wild goose chase, and this man spent a day and a night on the road. You and that stupid policeman! You said you caught a parachutist in the forest, how he complained that he had fallen from a plane, but no one had heard of a plane crashing, how your policeman called around the villages and no one knew of a crashed plane, and then he called us. And by the time the folks in Craiova reported that they'd had an incident, the man was already in Bucharest. Good thing we sorted it out in time,' he said quietly to himself. *And good thing that since he came, we sent him to the hospital.*

That's how Titel spent a day and a night, unable to make a phone call. If he had been alone on the plane, he might have found the adventure amusing. But he was convinced he had killed Sebi.

He felt like shit. He felt like he had abandoned this kid, along with the plane, he who was responsible for his fate in the air. For a whole night, he didn't know what had happened. He hadn't seen the explosion, he hadn't seen the smoke, but it was as if you could see something from the parachute, when everything is a yellow-green whirl and then the trees rush up, grabbing you by the legs...

He had arrived in style that morning. A black Dacia car had brought him. To his surprise, he found Rozeșan's office full. It wasn't just his acquaintances, there were others too. There was General Rusifescu and General Dragone, who had arrived in Craiova quickly, a few aides and, of course, Urechi. Mirică had come accompanied by one of his superiors, a major with short hair and steely eyes.

Then, to his great relief, Sebi was brought in. They had recounted the story about three times, each from their own point of view. Detail by detail. It's incredible how many questions an aviation incident can raise!

Titel's earlier question lightened the mood in the office. It even brought smiles.

'Quite so!' burst out Rozeșan, whose nerves were about to give way. 'What are we going to do with you now? [Roll you in thorns?](#)'

Sebi was red as a beet. Although he had slept a little, he still hadn't fully recovered.

'Leave him alone, he did well,' said Dragone conciliatorily. 'You don't often hear of students landing a plane on their own after the instructor ejected.'

It was Titel's turn to blush.

'Okay,' Dragone concluded. 'Is there anything else to add here? I heard that the seat was also recovered from the forest. And the parachute.'

The room was silent.

'Good. Then we're done with you. You are free to go for now.'

The silence persisted. Then Titel's resonant voice:

'I'd like to go home if possible. I'd like to see my family.'

'Yeah, you may,' Dragone concluded. 'And you, little one, go to the infirmary, have the nurse check you out again, and then go to sleep, to recover. You're grounded from flying until we're done here anyway. And you!' he glanced at Titel.

'Understood, sir!'

They both stood up, saluted, and walked out slowly.

Dragone sighed deeply, watching the door close. Rozeşan held his head in his hands.

'Do you have anything else up your sleeve?' Dragone asked phlegmatically. 'Come on, let's at least discuss it, since I'm here. Power lines cut off, instructors ejecting mid-flight, what's next? At least you shot down a Mig-23 with the gun camera! Bravo!'

Rozeşan looked him in the eye and was about to say something, but the short-haired major from the *Securitate* interrupted him.

'I have something to add...'

Both looked at him as if they were seeing him for the first time, or as if they were surprised he was still there. Next to him, Captain Mirică looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else but in the room with them.

'Please, Comrade Major.'

Dragone made a broad gesture with his hand, inviting him to speak.

'Weren't we a little hasty in letting them go so quickly?'

'What do you mean?' Dragone asked, surprised.

He wasn't the only one. Rozeşan, who was convinced that he was the subject of the discussion, which was why the major had remained in the office, raised an eyebrow. *What does he want now? I thought he wanted me.*

'I would have waited a little longer, asked them a few more questions, Comrade General,' said the major sharply.

'Ask me!' Dragone replied candidly.

He didn't like something about the major's attitude. And that wasn't all. Although he had only seen him a few times before, during other investigations, Dragone didn't like the major as a person. He didn't know why. Maybe because there was something malicious in his eyes, a furtive gaze with which he studied everyone.

The major shifted in his chair. He wasn't used to someone else using the same tone he usually used when he wanted to intimidate people—candid, cunning, full of venom.

'I think this was an attempt at sabotage,' he blurted out, adopting a serious tone.

The generals and Colonel Rozeșan didn't say a word, as if inviting him to continue.

'I believe this incident was deliberate. We have serious reasons to believe...' here he turned his gaze to Mirică, who was looking at the floor, 'we have serious reasons to believe that this ejection was so that the student could get rid of the instructor behind him, in order to be alone with the plane.'

The generals' eyes widened. Dragone puffed up like a toad, his face reddening. Rusifescu and Rozeșan looked at each other in bewilderment.

'Once this was accomplished, he planned to defect to the enemy, along with the plane. For reasons still unknown, he returned to base. We still don't know why.'

Silence. Deep silence. Then the silence was broken and Dragone burst into laughter that shook the walls. And he laughed and laughed until he infected the other aviators and the whole room laughed at the major's ineptitude, openly, with him there, a deep release, from the bottom of their souls, a release they hadn't had in years, and their laughter seemed to clearly express their opinion of the web of stupid locks that held them captive in a dungeon without walls, but with walls built from *I know and I will tell*. So they laughed openly, because their boss was laughing without fear.

'You mean, you think that kid who *saved* a plane,' Dragone said between bursts of laughter, emphasizing the word *saved*, 'you think he ejected his instructor to flee to the enemy?'

Dragone's words, although he was still laughing, were spoken in a tone as if he were saying, *man, you're stupid! I've lived to hear that too!*

The major looked at him pointedly, maliciously.

'Comrade Major,' Dragone continued, not caring about the major's gaze, 'maybe you're good at your job, I'm not saying you're not, but when it comes to aviation, you still have a lot to learn. Let me explain!'

Now Dragone's tone was like that of a grandpa ironically lecturing his grandson.

'First of all, there was no way that child could eject Major Codreanu. In the front cabin, where he was sitting, there was no ejection handle for the rear seat, nor was it possible to move from one cabin to the other. Secondly, even if he could have, the plane's range and the fuel it had left would have not allowed him to reach the enemy. In the best-case scenario, he would have ended up in Bulgaria. What a desertion!'

'I understand your concerns,' Dragone continued, 'but consult with the experts first, and then come with accusations.'

This time he was no longer candid or grandfatherly, but sharp as a razor.

'Do you have any other accusations or questions? We have other things to discuss.'

Dragone had the attitude with which he dismissed his subordinates. The tone on which he asked sounded like, *get out of my sight!*

The major understood. He stood up slowly, disgusted.

'No. I have no more questions,' he said quietly, but just as sharply, like a threat, as if he were saying, *You're also on my list now.*

He glanced at Mirică, who understood and stood up in turn, and both left the room. He walked heavily and decisively down the short corridor, while Mirică ran after him, two steps behind, as if he were his Japanese wife.

I'll get you one day, the major continued to think. And if I don't, it doesn't matter anyway. I know what I know! I heard it higher up, at the party's headquarters. They'll send you all to hell to die like heroes. That heroic plan, the 93 geese, or whatever, will be put in practice. I hope none of you will come back! And if you will, I'll be here, waiting.

The major smiled maliciously, took one last look at the corridor and slammed the door behind him, stepping out into the morning sun.

93 migratory birds

The IARs took off one after another, like an orderly flock of dirty swans flapping on the water until they managed to rise heavily into the air, then flying more elegantly, faster, gracefully, settling into their places in formation, according to millennia-old canons. They disappeared one after another over the horizon, without showing off at the aerodrome's vertical, without honorary salutes, without saying goodbye. They were heading towards a goal, perhaps their only goal, the purpose for what they had been built, for which thousands of hours of work, thought, torment, and joy had been spent—dead metal, painstakingly extracted from the ground, as it had been for thousands of years, and turned into weapons - spears, swords, armor and helmets, rifles and pistols, tanks and planes.

Airplane after airplane took off toward destiny, toward fate, or toward dead glory. Who could know? There were many, but not all of them. A few defective ones were left behind, like sick birds, on the apron of Craiova. One of them was 602.

And the grounded pilots watched them too.

Grounded. That was the order. Only the two of them.

The *93 migratory birds* plan was set in motion. But only as a test. The regiment was moving on. But only to Giarmata. The Comrade had decided so. The major had been right. But he didn't know the whole story.

'Comrades,' the Prime Secretary had said. 'I have a new proposal!'

'Ehem,' comrade Doctor-Engineer had cleared her throat.

'We have a proposal,' comrade Prime had corrected himself.

The generals listened.

'I'd like to test the *93 migratory birds* plan. Make sure everything falls in place. But don't tell anyone!'

The generals were all ears.

'The same as we tested the planes against the MIGs, we should test also the *93 migratory birds* plan in its entirety. We shall send the planes, probe if they are prepared for deployment, test the way the regiment prepared itself during this month. We'll launch the plan, but send them only to Giarmata. Nobody should know about this. Let them believe they go to war. We'll see how people react and how prepared they are.'

The generals looked at each other. Dragone sighed. A long, painful sigh. Then he nodded his head. He was equally curious.

The migratory birds were flying away, and the grounded pilots watched them.

Their friends were going. They were flying. Petrișor, Cubanezul, Dan Popa, Rozeșan, Mircea, even Man Dăinea was flying in a twin seater. Everyone except them.

They sat next to each other, shoulder to shoulder, Titel and Sebi, watching the planes fly away.

One day before, a gigantic trucks column had departed the base already, carrying technicians, spare parts, weapons, and every living soul that wasn't connected to flying.

The base remained empty.

Looking at them, Titel wondered when they had found the time to build so many examples of this aircraft, born of necessity, enthusiasm, conflicts, and restrictions, an aircraft he loved and hated at the same time, just as he loved and hated the people who made it, who flew it, and who made it fly. All of them. Every single one of them gone with destiny.

He remembered how, more than ten years before, he had seen the first IAR. It was a prototype, as if it had just come out of the box, carefully painted in shiny colors, like a freshly unpacked toy. Titel had looked at it long and carefully, even though he wasn't allowed to. Military secret. The plane had nothing in common with either the Migs or the Ls. He had been fascinated by its robust silhouette, supported by its oversized landing gear. He had been fascinated by the double, fine air intakes and the front windshield made up of three panels that gave the plane a questioning look.

He had approached it and stroked the Pitot tube, which cut through the air like a knife in the nose of the plane.

'Comrade Captain!' He was a captain at the time. 'You're not allowed here.'

He wasn't, but two years later he was flying that plane.

At first, he didn't like it. His initial opinion melted away when he discovered the cockpit layout, which seemed to be made of different pieces, causing headaches during night flights and in bad weather. Over time, he got used to it. Now he seemed proud to fly such an airplane, an airplane built by a simple nation, oppressed most of the time, which throughout history had known nothing but to take care of its own needs. He was proud, even though he knew it was not the best plane, not by a long shot. But it was his, theirs, they had made it and they could be proud of that, because few on earth, especially small nations, could boast of making planes.

He wanted to kiss the engineers, the teachers, the students, the workers, everyone who had lent a hand, everyone who had helped with raw materials or other work that produced other products, which were used in other products that ultimately became an airplane. He wanted to tell them all, 'Hey, guys, I know you struggled! But look what came out of it!'

And yet, somewhere deep in his soul, a small light like a flickering candle kept asking why all this work, why all this torment, why this flying machine, a sword in the sky, aluminum and steel, gunpowder and speed...

The migratory birds were leaving, and those who could not fly, those who were not allowed to fly, watched them, as people had watched them for thousands of years, when autumn came, with their heads tilted back, their gaze fixed on the sky.

They were leaving for their fate, but not all of them. A few were left on the apron, defective, with expired subassemblies, including his twin seater, which had only one seat, the front one.

Somewhere higher, in a place where people's fates were decided, the fact had not gone unnoticed.

'I thought I said ALL of them!' the Comrade Doctor Engineer protested when the major gave her the news. 'How can we fool the Americans if we don't send all the planes to intimidate them?'

'Leave it, dear,' began the Comrade Prime Secretary, conciliatory and fully satisfied with how things were going.

'What should I leave, can't you see they're not listening? Where have we ended up?'

'Comrade Doctor Engineer, please leave it to me,' Comrade Toader intervened softly but firmly, having made it his personal goal to get all the planes airborne. 'Comrade Prime Secretary, you can have complete confidence. I will personally take care of this matter. I am going to see them now, at the factory.'

And so it came to pass that, while Titel and Sebi looked up at the sky, on the other side of the airfield, engineer Zamfir, wandered aimlessly around the factory yard, thinking about what would happen now that the entire regiment had left. But he knew how things stood and how things were done. Even the children in Craiova knew. But what could he do? He accepted his fate with almost resignation, even relief, relief that the waiting was over and the tension of the last month could dissipate in the smoke of the war that he thought was beginning.

And as he was walking towards the factory's apron, he ran into the factory's general manager. The man was pale as a ghost, unlike anything he had ever seen before, and engineer Zamfir was frightened, fearing for the director's health.

'What happened, Comrade Director? Are you feeling well?'

And because the man did not answer, Zamfir panicked. Against his will, his thoughts took a different direction in his mind, giving rise to the question that had been on everyone's lips with fear and hope for almost fifty years.

'Are the Americans coming?' he asked, barely breathing, whispering, almost secretly, fear and delight flooding his soul in equal measure.

'Worse!' stammered the lost director.

'The Russians?' whispered Zamfir in horror.

'No. Comrade Toader!' replied the unfortunate man with a groan.

The helicopter, which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, was just landing on the C.Î.Z. apron.

'Hey, director, you're making fun of me, aren't you?' were the first words they heard, despite the noise of the turbines dying down in a whimpering decrescendo.

Comrade Toader was extremely irritated. He slipped under the still-spinning blades and stood in front of the director with his hands on his hips, like a melon seller at the market.

'No, no, comrade...'

'What's this all about? I thought we had an agreement.'

Comrade Toader pointed toward the few planes left behind, standing guiltily on the regiment's apron in the distance, small as insects.

'Why aren't all the planes being flown?'

Then, after a pause in which he gathered his nerves and venom:

'YOU ARE SABOTAGING our defense efforts!'

The sentence was uttered like a verdict handed down by a ruthless judge.

The pale-faced director turned ghostly white. He saw Comrade Toader's lips moving in slow motion, the image became black and white, like in a silent film with [Chaplin](#), and instead of hearing the words, as was natural, the director seemed to read them written in white on a black background, with curly letters, just like in silent films or on a funeral banner. His own funeral.

Take him! was written on the cinema screen.

As if by magic, a wicked individual appeared, the villain from the movies, with short hair, evil blue eyes, dressed in a cheap nylon suit, with an evil but delighted smile, who took him by the arm. He had a strong grip, like a vice.

'Where should I take him?' the director heard faintly, as the hydraulic pressure in his legs took a dangerous plunge to the minimum.

'Lock him in his office. I'll deal with him later,' comrade Toader said with satisfaction, turning to Zamfir, who had caught the director's pallor. 'And you'—he paused, as if wondering what to do with the engineer—'you come with me!'

And again they walked around the large assembly hall, and again Comrade Toader shouted. But the fear had passed. What else could happen besides being *taken away* when he was already taken away, they were *all* already taken away, because they were all guilty of something in that country and they had all been taken away for fifty years already.

Comrade Toader knew the way this time, or so he thought. So he stood right in front of the ejection seats which were unpaired with any aircraft, because that's how he imagined things, that's why the planes didn't fly.

'You've had two ejections in two weeks!' he said in a sharp voice, as if Zamfir were responsible for the ejections and the regiment's misadventures.

Well, that's why they need those chairs, dear, her words echoed in Toader's ears. Make sure, Tudorică, that they put them on the planes, because that's why they're complaining at the unit that they don't have planes, she had told him before getting into the helicopter.

'Why are these still here? The army complains that it doesn't have any ejection seats, and I see that the factory is full. Why are you keeping them here?'

The tone of an inquisitor hunting witches.

'You know, we told you before, comrade, the tests aren't finished yet,' Zamfir dared to say. 'These are our seats, built here, unapproved, our own production.'

'So, let's do a test, man, right now,' Toader shouted, as if he was tired of being the one to come up with ideas, the one to get the factory out of the shit, because no one had thought to do a damn test with those chairs to see if they worked.

'What do you mean, now?' asked Zamfir, changing color for the umpteenth time.

'Are you deaf? Now! Let me see such a test!'

'Where? Here with at us?' Zamfir continued, dumbfounded.

'Where else?' Toader shouted. 'At my house? Don't you have here an airplane factory and an airport?'

Comrade Toader was haggling like he was at the market, but there was no point in saying anything to him. Who could? With great difficulty, engineer Zamfir managed to appease him, convincing him that such a test could not be organized in the blink of an eye and that it would take time to prepare everything necessary, because the factory did not have a test bench.

With great difficulty, Comrade Toader agreed to postpone the test by one day, just one day, until everything was ready. He walked away satisfied and proud going to the offices to deal with the director too, because he had already taken care of production, despite the one-day delay.

So the men set to work in fear.

Under Zamfir's supervision, they first broke down a concrete fence facing the fields. They needed space. Then they put together a kind of grandstand, built from welded profiles, where the minister and the person supervising the test would sit. Cables were brought in, a control panel was cobbled together, and they even found a camera to capture the historical moment.

Zamfir knew that this could not be a real, engineering test, after which data would be collected. What they were doing was basically an improvised, worthless demonstration, just for Minister Toader, to shut him up. That the seats would be installed on planes without being properly tested was no longer his concern. He had done what he could.

They worked hard all day, then at night, under the light of spotlights brought in from the assembly hall. When morning came, the paint was still wet on the steel pipes of the grandstand, and the people, including engineer Zamfir, were exhausted. The latter did not have time to check all the details of the improvised installation. He just walked around the perimeter, hoping that if something was wrong, it would catch his eye. He looked at the connecting cables, at the special crane that had to install one of the ejection seats, at the seat itself, then looked again at the control panel, at the power generator, the scaffolding of the grandstand, making sure that at least the pipes were well welded, so that the minister wouldn't fall with it, he looked at the hole in the concrete fence that was supposed to provide access... access for a... they were supposed to bring it through there... Zamfir almost fainted.

The plane! The fuselage! Where the hell was it?

He realized that the essential thing was missing. They had worked so frantically and with such verve that only then did he realize that there was no plane or fuselage in which to install the seat and test it.

Zamfir quickly scanned the factory hall and the apron in his mind. He had nothing, absolutely nothing, in which to install the damn seat. There were three single seaters under repair, but they all had seats installed. He had a few fuselages in production, but they were too incomplete to install a seat in them. He had... But wait! He remembered. Salvation! On the regiment's apron there was a twin seater that didn't have the rear seat, the plane Codreanu had ejected from. Quick, to the phone. Maybe there was still time. If the minister was lenient, he could wait until later to install that new seat in the rear cabin.

In the office of the regiment's officer on duty, Mirică sat with his legs crossed, leaning back in his chair with his feet on the desk. He was enjoying a Kent cigarette, smuggled into the unit by one of his many dealers with whom he was in contact. He had no reason to worry. The regiment had been deployed, and there was almost no one left in the unit, not even the storekeepers, who had left with the regiment. He had a special mission—to discreetly guard those who had been grounded from flying, to make sure they didn't do anything stupid. Mirică was fine with that. Far from the theater of operations, i.e., from danger, he didn't have to run around who knows where, and the mission was easy because the grounded pilots didn't give him any trouble. They were there, in the unit, smoking, talking, not even getting close to the line of planes, which was empty

anyway. It was true that the regiment had only been deployed as far as Giarmata, partly as a test to see how they would fare, and partly as a deterrent against the treacherous enemy forces. Even Mirică didn't know what would happen next. And just then the phone rang.

'We need the twin seater parked on your apron for a trial in front of Comrade Minister Toader,' said the voice.

'Well, who approves this? And who will bring it to you?'

'The minister approves!' the voice boomed. 'What do you mean, who will bring it? The pilots, the technicians!'

'But there's no one here,' Mirică apologized. 'They've all left. There are only the guard soldiers.'

'That's not possible, sir! Don't you understand that we need that plane, otherwise it will be a disaster? It will be bad for everyone.'

The message slowly sank into Mirică's brain. Disaster, bad for everyone, Minister Toader... Suddenly he jumped up chair and all, realizing the danger and finding the saving idea.

'It's done," he stammered into the phone. 'It's done immediately. We'll bring it now.'

The next second he was already running through the buildings of the unit, opening doors, poking his head into rooms, shouting at the top of his lungs.

He found them behind the duty officer's office, in the shadows, that is, where he had left from and where he had not looked.

'We need the twin seater at CÎZ,' he said breathlessly. 'Someone has to take her there immediately. Right now, this very moment.'

Titel and Sebi looked at him as if he were crazy.

'Well, who's going to take it? There's no one else here.'

'What are you?' he shouted, forgetting that he was addressing a major and forgetting the rules of common sense. The danger hanging over them was too great to take anything else into account.

'But we're grounded,' Sebi intervened innocently, not knowing what to think.

Mirică seemed to swell up, his face reddening, then the panic that had gripped him erupted in the form of anger, just like in a small, frightened dog that barks out of fear:

'FROM FLYING, man, FROM FLYING, what don't you understand! You're not allowed to FLY! What, you can't take a plane and bring it there, to CÎZ? You're not flying in it! You're driving that damn plane. It's like a damn car!'

Amazed by Mirică's attitude, but instinctively sensing the danger, because otherwise he wouldn't have made such a fuss, Titel said calmly, conciliatorily:

'All right, sir! We'll take your plane wherever you want, if we can get it started. It would be better if they sent a tractor with a trailer to pull it, but if that's what you want, I'll taxi it there.'

A few minutes later, Titel opened the cockpit, helped by Sebi and Mirică. He installed the access ladder, which was stored under the plane, climbed into the front cabin, connected the battery, checked the voltage, hoping it wasn't dead and that he wouldn't have to connect the plane to a ground source to start the engines—it would have been difficult for him to find and drive one of the generator trucks. That would have been the last straw! To his great delight, the battery was charged. All he had to do was set the switches to the correct positions and start the engines. The Lucas starter-generators needed about half a minute to start each Viper.

As he was about to settle into his seat, he felt a movement in the rear cabin. He turned his head and saw Mirică huddled there, even though he had no seat to sit on. What had gone through his mind: what if the major decided to defect to the enemy? With him back there, it would be more difficult. Mirică had no idea what he would do in such an eventuality, but he felt better sitting back there.

'You, over there!' he yelled at Sebi. 'Bring a car to take the major back!'

'Where am I going to get a car from?!'

'Come with whatever you want, just go!'

'Can I bring my car? I don't have another one!'

'Go!'

Titel, in the front cockpit, was already starting the engines, whose crescendoing whine was beginning to fill the air.

'What about the sentry at the gate?' insisted the stubborn child.

'Tell them I sent you! What are you waiting for? Go!'

And so, in the late morning, a 93 twin seater slowly crossed the apron, then the runway, with one man in the front cabin and one in the rear cabin, sitting there without a seat or a canopy, like a farmer traveling in a farm trailer in the fields, the whistling of the jet engines mingling with the rhythmic farting of a Trabant following the plane at a respectful distance.

Once they arrived at the CÎZ apron, what did Titel see?

A small army of people, workers and engineers, swarmed fearfully around a hole in the concrete fence. Some had brought a ladder, others signaled him to cut the engines, others helped him and Mirică out of the plane, and then they all pushed the twin, whose engines were still spinning from inertia, through the hole in the fence.

'What the hell is going on here?' Titel asked curiously.

No one had time to answer him.

Beyond the fence, in the field where they were pushing the plane, there was a shack that resembled a kind of grandstand, from which a web of cables and wires emerged.

'Take this Trabant away, why is it here?'

'Wait a minute!' Mirică thundered. 'Don't leave without me! I'll be there soon!' he shouted, pushing his way through the crowd, seeing that Sebi was about to turn the car around and Titel was ready to get in.

Mirică moved away among the people, as if he were looking for someone. Behind him, having nothing else to do, Titel also slipped away. Curious by nature, he wanted to find out, or at least watch what was happening. He took a few steps, passing through the hole in the fence, and moved aside so as not to get in anyone's way. Next to the grandstand, there was a kind of desk, where he recognized engineer Zamfir, who was feverishly working with a tangle of cables and wires that led further into the field, where they were installing the twin. A special crane for changing ejection seats was already in position, and it suddenly dawned on Titel: *These people are crazy! They want to test ejection seats now? It's very likely that the war has started and you're testing seats?*

Titel knew that since the beginning of the 93 program, they had been working intensively to assimilate various aircraft installations and components. The seats were imported from Great Britain. *Why not manufacture them in Romania?* he had wondered. Now his diligence had paid off! He crossed his arms over his chest, staring in amazement at how, as if by magic, the indigenous ejection seat was being installed in the back of the twin seater at fantastic speed.

If they worked this fast at the regiment, I don't think we'd ever have planes pulled out of service due to a lack of seats, Titel continued to think. *I think even race car mechanics don't move that fast. What did they eat? And what suddenly made them so industrious, that the whole factory is buzzing around that seat?*

He found out a few minutes later.

A character he had never seen before descended with great pomp through the same hole in the fence. People humbly made way for him, guiding him to the improvised podium, where the character settled. *Who the hell is this guy?* Titel wondered, watching him.

Meanwhile, next to the plane, the engineers seemed to be fainting, especially Zamfir, who was shuttling between the mysterious console and the aircraft. Finally, after more procrastination and intense fussing around the plane, everything seemed to be ready.

Cautious and recently traumatized, but still haunted by the terrible accident in which one of his colleagues had lost his life, accidentally ejecting from the ground, Titel took a step back, closer to the concrete fence, thinking that if necessary he could take shelter behind the cement blocks. He knew what an ejection seat was capable of. He knew it was basically a rocket projectile, more

complex, but still a rocket projectile. He was really surprised that the test was organized in such crazy conditions, with the grandstand ridiculously close to the plane and crowds of people scattered everywhere.

These people are clearly insane, Titel said to himself once again, taking a decisive step back and taking cover behind the wall.

Completely oblivious to the dangers, Mirică was carefully monitoring the control panel.

'It's not working!' he heard Zamfir whisper to someone. 'This converter is broken! We can't do anything like this. We need something with direct current. A car battery!'

'Come on, comrade, let's get started, the minister is waiting!' he heard someone else urging Zamfir.

'Can't you hear that it's not working?! We need a battery!' the engineer whispered.

It took a while, but Mirică finally got it. He took a step forward and opened his mouth:

'There's a Trabant here,' he dared to say, happily. 'Let's quickly get the battery.'

'Where is it?' Zamfir asked feverishly.

'Around the corner, on the concrete platform. I brought it here!' Mirică boasted.

'Very good, very good.' Zamfir replied. 'Let's hurry over there. We also need cables. Bring two cables!' he said to his colleagues, who already had a roll of cables in their hands.

They found the car empty. Sebi had also sneaked away somewhere to watch what was happening. Luckily for them, he had left the keys in the ignition.

The engineers quickly attached the cable clamps to the battery terminals and unrolled the reels behind them.

'No! This isn't right. The car has to be running, otherwise the battery will die,' Zamfir grumbled, turning the key.

The Trabant started on the first try.

'You, sir!' he pointed to Mirică. 'Please be so kind as to keep your foot on the accelerator. Keep the car revving. About halfway, no more. Just enough to keep the battery charged.'

Obediently, Mirică got behind the wheel, accelerating the car as instructed. Zamfir immediately disappeared, leaving him alone.

Beyond the fence, Minister Toader began to show signs of impatience. He was late because of a phone call he had received from above, an important call that had kept him longer than he should have wanted.

'Is everything ready?' he asked in a superior tone, as if he did not expect anything to be unprepared, given that he had given his instructions the night before.

He hadn't noticed the commotion behind the platform and how, unnoticed, two cables had been running from under the hood of the Trabant to the control panel.

Zamfir was already back there, next to the panel, as if he had teleported his body.

'We're ready!' he stammered, trembling, hoping with all his heart that everything would turn out well.

'Go ahead, sir, what are you waiting for!'

The engineer swallowed hard and turned a few switches on his console.

In the Trabant, Mirică suddenly remembered the major and that he had a mission related to the car he was in. The opportunity was ripe. He looked left, he looked right—no one! He let go of the accelerator, got out, and opened the trunk to take a look. His luck and misfortune!

Beyond the fence, Zamfir pressed the launch button.

The Trabant couldn't provide the necessary voltage if the engine wasn't revving. Therefore, the ignition diode activated only one rocket engine, and even that one was on the verge of failure. The launch sequence was incomplete, the propulsive force needed to eject the seat was greatly diminished, and instead of being launched vertically like a cannonball toward the moon, the chair took off like a limp pancake from a frying pan, rolling along. It flew over the heads of the crowd in the stands and landed with a thud on the hood of the Trabant—150 kilograms of seat landing at speed on the fiberglass it was made of! The little car flattened like a pancake.

Mirică was extremely lucky not to be in the driver's seat. He only managed to say *Haoleo* before falling like a child on his ass, staring dumbfounded at the pile of metal and fiberglass on top of which the smoking seat sat enthroned.

The experiment seemed to have been carried out by children playing with carbide and tin cans.

'Whose car is this?' Minister Toader asked sympathetically.

He hadn't even blinked. In fact, he hadn't understood much. Only that the experiment hadn't gone according to plan and that he had been in some danger when he felt the air current stirred up by the chair spinning above his head.

Absent-minded, or perhaps in a state of delayed shock, he climbed down from the stands the same way he had climbed up, passed through the gap in the fence behind him without saying a word to anyone, and came face to face with the wrecked Trabant.

Then, feeling somewhat guilty:

'Give this man a brand new Olcit!'

Then, wisely, like a grandfather gently scolding his grandson, still without addressing anyone.

'Well, comrade, right here in Craiova with the Trabant?'

Comrade Toader finally realized what was about to happen and only now began to tremble. People had begun to gather around him, he could hear the murmur of the crowd as if in a dream, he could see people looking dazedly at the crushed car as if through a fog, he saw in slow motion someone helping Mirică to his feet. Engineer Zamfir, pale as a ghost, was next to him explaining something about the special rules for testing and the risks associated with improvisation and how they would investigate what had gone wrong and how to correct it, but Comrade Toader waved his hand wearily and, with a trembling voice fueled by the fear that had just overcome him, said faintly, weakly, and slowly, without thinking and without realizing that in the silence that had fallen, his whisper was like thunder:

'Now, whether you get them right or not, it doesn't matter. It's the same damn thing. You were lucky. We were all lucky.'

Seeing the curious looks around him, he blurted out.

'Before I came here, I got a call from... I got a call! It's been canceled!'

'What exactly?' Zamfir dared to ask.

'It's been canceled! The mission! The planes are coming back! We don't need seats now.'

'Comrade Minister, is it, is it, is it... is it true?'

Realizing he had said too much, the minister turned his back without answering. Too late! In ten minutes, the news spread like wildfire throughout the factory. And the next day, the migratory birds returned from Giarmata. They all returned. They returned intact. They returned with spring and brought hope, even though it was hot and midsummer.

Epilogue at number 9

Two weeks later, the world was still boiling. But the boiling was no longer fueled by a burning fire. It was that subsiding bubbling, like when you take the pot off the stove but it takes time for the boiling to settle, to calm down, to reach the end of its transformation. In all this boiling and disintegration, there were some vegetables that sought to take advantage of the fact that it was still hot, as if to benefit only themselves of the heat of the fire. Ha! As if they weren't all in the same pot! As if the pot had exploded, it wouldn't have scattered its entire contents throughout the kitchen, but only certain elements of the recipe! The vegetables that thought they were privileged would have escaped the catastrophe, living happily ever after! But, alas! What an illusion! How could the carrots and potatoes have known that if the pot had given way under pressure, not a single vegetable would have remained intact? How could the hand that had made the fire too hot have known that the story would have backfired on it, leaving nothing good to eat?

Ignorance is just as great, even when it is small, that is, the kind of ignorance that honors ordinary, unremarkable creatures, those who go to work every day and on vacation every year, without pretentious aspirations and without thinking about tomorrow. In fact, without thinking! And the same ignorance is just as great when it comes to those chosen beings, more or less democratically, but chosen as leaders, without really being needed, because the world follows other rules and not political ones, no matter how important they may seem and no matter how much importance the chosen ones give them and themselves.

But since the pot had escaped intact this time, a whole cohort of comrades had paraded through the electromagnetic waves of radio and television, each praising and boasting, each declaring victories or victory, without even a war being fought, and without any of them really knowing what that means, and without any of them realizing that any war, even a won one, is in fact a loss, a loss for humanity, and that any war, won or not, is only a temporary solution until the next one. Eternity has other mysteries, mysteries rooted in wisdom, but wisdom is a path that the comrades have generally never trodden.

But let's leave philosophy aside. Let's settle in at number 9, where, after all, somehow, through methods that are difficult to define, a black-and-white television had appeared, the kind that has to be slapped responsibly every five minutes to convince it to work, and whose antenna must be moved like a radar in full swing in order to see something without flecks on the screen. The comrades mentioned earlier had just appeared on the screen of that television, recalling how certain decisive actions had intimidated *the enemy*, making it clear that a socialist, peace-loving country is not to be trifled with and that such a country is always ready to defend itself and, in

particular, its own freedom. Faced with such a show of force, *the enemy* had no choice but to retreat with its tail between its legs, because, decidedly, its petty plans would have had no chance in the face of such determination.

'Following the decisive actions taken by the armies of the Warsaw Pact, a treaty in which our country, the Socialist Republic of Romania, occupies a place of honor, the capitalist forces withdrew from the borders, intimidated and convinced that the hard-won socialism and freedom would be defended to the last man. Our Beloved Leader, a brilliant military strategist and great lover of peace,' said the correct voice of the TV, continuing to praise the beloved son for about five minutes straight, until a hard Pittiș brutally interrupted:

'Come on, turn it off, I'm sick of it! That's all we've been hearing for years!'

Helpful hands fiddled with the volume knob and the voice from the wooden box disappeared as if by magic, which is basically what it was.

They were all there. Titel, Petrișor, Man Dăinea, The Cuban, Sebi, and Tibi. Only the high-ranking officers were missing. But there no ranks at number 9. They had been left outside. There were only people there.

There was also a bottle of something. It doesn't matter what it was, but it was strong. Man Dăinea had procured it. He had brought it. As if it were something special and the people in the county didn't manufacture the liquor on an almost industrial scale! But lately, especially in the regiment, there had been a severe prohibition. The bottle had its role. It loosened tongues and revealed the truth at the same time. No wonder the discussion in the studio apartment, as lively as it was, had a very liberal tone. No wonder the talk, fueled by the bottle, was hard to understand, but for a trained ear, the truth was there.

'Yeah, we know! Those capitalist killing innocent people! We've heard it all before!' said someone, without being impressed by the TV.

'Well, technically speaking we do the same! What do you think we do here? Seed daisies? Didn't you join the army to kill people?'

Titel's voice. After all, the air force, jet-powered as it was, was part of an army.

'We're defending our homeland, comrade,' said Petrișor, slurring the words and taking another sip from the bottle.

'Defending our country, my ass! came the reply. The way things have gone so far, I'm surprised we all made it back in one piece, and that in peacetime! We're lucky there was no war!'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, do you think those Americans didn't already know what we were planning, or how stupid we are? Do you think they can't see us from their satellites? Hey, [Gion](#), take a look at those

Romanians. One of them shaved a high voltage pole, another ejected the instructor, they were close to killing a minister... Nothing to worry about them! They'll do the job for us! We don't have to move a muscle!'

'Cool down! How do you know that Gion of yours and his people are smarter than us? Do you think they make no mistakes? Do you think they don't have their own problems?'

'They may have problems, but not like us, the Oltenians,' The Cuban interjected.

His tone sounded as if he was proud. Titel wondered if he was proud because nobody had trouble like the Oltenians, making them unique. He knew that The Cuban was a true Oltenian, being born in Craiova. He had always been proud of his ancestry. However, to Titel, it still sounded like The Cuban was proud for being stupid.

Being stupid? Titel found himself asking in his mind. *Maybe a romantic fool, but stupid, definitely not! Most pilots are like him. Even I. Would have I been happy if a war started? Happy for the war? No! Excited? Yes! Excited for the action, like any other fighter pilot! That's the purpose of my life! This is why I chose to fly fast jets, instead of being on top of a mountain, meditating. But is this the way? Is this the only way to prove that you're a man? Do you really have to prove that you're a man? There are other ways,* he concluded, thinking about his family. *Build a house, grow a family, provide them the day to day bread, teach them well, teach them to love peace, teach them that all of us are the same, and that only the words make the difference, words that don't matter.*

'What do you say, young gents?' he asked, looking at Sebi and Tibi. On the one hand he wanted to get rid of the thoughts that were tormenting him and pass the ball of conversation to others, on the other he wanted to know the opinion of younger men, to know how the new generations think, if there is hope out there.

'What do you think about everything that happened? And was about to happen. What would you prefer? War or peace?'

After a while, as to underline that the expected answer was not a simple yes or no one, Sebi replied softly.

'What do we think?' he said, looking questioningly at Tibi. 'That as pilots we train for war, that's the fun of it, that's why we joined the army, but that'd be better to be peace. Better to have peace and not strife. I think most people want to have peace, because ordinary people like us don't go to war with a light heart, but they go because the weapon of the rich against the poor is the poor.'

Silence fell in the room. Even Petrișor remained with the glass in the air.

'What do you mean?' asked Titel, taken by surprise by the complexity and heaviness of the answer.

'I mean that those who fight a war, fight it as a result of years of being kept in darkness, as a result of illiteracy, as a result of a lack of education that leads to a lack of critical thinking and prevents

them from seeing the shortcomings and the greed of those who lead them, as a result of all kinds of shortages that urge them to accept the bones and crumbs thrown at them. On the other hand, those at the top, when they get where they are, the first thing they learn from their mentors, whoever they may be, is that: here, you will learn to lie convincingly, so convincingly that you will first convince yourselves how to sell your mothers and fathers, how to manipulate your friends, how to snitch on those who dare to be different, and how to give yourselves the importance that you do not deserve, but that ordinary people will grant you out of fear, or because they've been taught this way. But first you must know that here, at the top, we only accept lepers, lazybones, that is, those who are too lazy to do honest work, and those who were born to sell themselves directly to the devil, without middlemen.'

'Close the damn window before someone hears you!' sighed Titel, caught completely off guard.

'You're great, sir!' squealed Dăinea excitedly, but cautiously closing the window.

'And this whole thing,' continued Sebi unperturbed, 'leads to social and economic inequality, creating a competition that often manifests itself violently. It creates a contest for resources, for who has and controls more. A competition clearly reflected even in our daily lives. We quarrel or fight for a piece of cornmeal. Hold on,' he said, raising his hand, seeing that Titel was ready to contradict him. 'Don't rush. I have more to say,' he said quickly, so as not to give him time to interrupt. 'This cornmeal has many aspects. It doesn't necessarily have to as you know it—yellow. We each fight for what we need, depending on the situation. Some, yes, indeed, fight over the real cornmeal because they have nothing to eat. But others fight a better job, a more beautiful woman, a nicer colored car, a flock of sheep, oxen, well, you get the idea, everything that can ultimately give them a comfortable and carefree life. Even those who are in politics. That's why quarrels begin. Because man lives in the present. He can't think beyond that. No one thinks that they might die tomorrow, or even today, and that they can't take their cornmeal with them to the other world. Everyone wants to live today! And so, for millennia and centuries, we have been competing for cornmeal. With nature, with other people, more gently or more violently. We make and break friendships, alliances, enmities, mistresses, wives, children... all for cornmeal! Cornmeal that generates peace of mind. But, teach them all to believe in friendship, in cooperation, in the belief that we are all the same and that we can find support in each other no matter where in the world we were born. Give them all the cornmeal, because there's plenty around, and the Earth can make enough of it for everybody. Teach them the value of peace from an early age, and in a few generations there will be no damn wars on this planet!'

There was deep silence in the room. A silence that persisted, like after a stage play, when the curtain is lowered and the public remains stunned by the superlative performance of the actors.

And then Petrișor slowly raised his glass, setting an example. The Cuban raised his, and all in the room followed, raising their glasses, into a toast.

'To peace!' he said.

'To peace!' the others joined him.

And it was peace.

But deep in their hearts, they all knew that it would be only for a while.

Instead of a happy ending

Two years later, during winter, Romania and the world was walking a different path. The Cold War was over, but from then onwards, for Romania it was not an easy path.

Like it happened before to its predecessor, the IAR 80, another program that disappeared at a crossroads, the 93 was scrapped, also at a crossroads.

The aircraft flew for the last time in 1998. It's role was over. Whether this withdrawal was premature or not is a subject that is still debated today, with many considering it a crime to scrap an aircraft that still had potential.

Whether it was good or not is a subjective and irrelevant opinion. What matters is that it proved it can be done.

Glossary of terms and other explanations

Titel – it is pronounced Teetel, or Tea – Tel

Petrișor – it is pronounced Petreeshor and it is a Romanian diminutive for the name Petre

pickles jar – non-official nick name for the [Alouette III](#) helicopter

Uncle Nicu's helicopter – reference to the [Aerospatiale Dauphin](#) a type of helicopter that was used intensely as a presidential helicopter in Romania. Uncle Nicu (read Nikoo) is a reference to the then communist president of Romania, [Nicolae Ceausescu](#). Among the people he had many nicknames, one of them being uncle Nicu

Urechi – Romanian language – it translates as 'Ears' – a reference to the character's job

blue-eyed enthusiasts – reference to the intelligence officers belonging to the oppressive state apparatus – '[Securitatea](#)'

C.I guy – abbreviation for Counter Intelligence

Ideal – Romanian vacuum cleaner that looked like a cylinder with a hose coming out of it

The Comrade – reference to the then president of the SRR, the supreme comrade of the country. Sometimes, he was popularly referred to only as The Comrade

Mircică – is a diminutive for Mircea, a Romanian name and a secondary character that the reader will meet again in the book

Găină – in Romanian language it literally means 'hen'

Comrade Doctor Engineer – the then president's wife, basically the First Lady of the SRR. During the days she had many academic titles, even if in reality, the legend says, she was almost illiterate. On the streets and in the media, she was mostly known as Comrade Doctor – Engineer, due to her many titles. She had an active political life, and at anecdotal level, it's been said she influenced the presidential decisions significantly

Comrade Prime Secretary – in communist Romania, many in the communist party had a heap of titles and illicit qualifications. The president of the SRR also occupies the function of Prime Secretary of the Communist Party, hence he was often addressed as such

Forfecare – windsheer in the Romanian language

MBs – the non-afterburning variant of the IAR-93. Most of the aircraft were built as MBs

Diamant – Diamond in the Romanian language was a popular TV set, manufactured in Romania during the communist era. Despite its popularity, like many other products of the era, it wasn't very reliable

Teledin – the official news bulletin

Materna – a chain of shops during the communist days, addressing maternal and children's needs

the base leg poem – radio conversation where the pilot tells the flight coordinator, point by point, the pre-landing checklist

Coop – Cooperativa – the typical communist village general store

Gostat – abbreviation from Gospodăria Statului, the state owned green groceries chain of stores

Roll you in thorns – rolling a pilot in thorny bushes is an old aviation tradition in Romania. It is done at the first solo flight. A pilot's colleagues prepare a heap of thorny branches and bushes and wait for his return from the first solo flight. The unfortunate fellow is then extracted from the cockpit, rolled in thorns and sprinkled with water or champagne. It is said that this will keep him safe for the future flights

Gion – it is the Romanian pronunciation and phonetic spelling of John

For more information about the IAR 93, and accurate historical facts visit:

<https://iar93.ro/>

Unfortunately the website is written in Romanian only, but Google Translate does a pretty accurate job nowadays.

If you liked this book, I have a humble request. Please give it a star rating in the reviews. Not for me. I like it anyway. I already know it's a beautiful story, because I made it up! For the others! People don't read if they see that a book is not "verified." It would be a shame for it to be lost in obscurity. Thank you!