

THE FLIGHT DISPATCHER



Catalin Pogaci

Copyright © 2023 Catalin Pogaci All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

This book is dedicated to the flight dispatchers, the house
elves of aviation.

Prologue

The place smelled of pastizzi and had the typical Maltese atmosphere. It wasn't crowded. The time was not right yet. Only a few people occupied the tables scattered around the room. A few more were seated on the stools around the bar. The usual loud rumor generated by the crowd was missing. Only the big plasma TV, which was hung in a corner, was clearly audible. The news was broadcast, but only two people were paying attention to them.

'The mysterious disappearance of the private jet, which was lost without a trace over the Mediterranean, continues to puzzle investigators', the correct voice of the TV was saying.' The aircraft belonged to an influential and controversial business magnate. The investigators did not establish if he was on board the plane during the event. There are only speculations regarding who was traveling inside the jet when it vanished from the radar screens. An official source mentioned that private operators rarely provide passenger lists to authorities; when they do, they are not always accurate. Business people need to have their identity protected for various reasons, the same source specified, and such arrangements are not uncommon. The only person who may know the content of the passenger manifest is the flight dispatcher who released the flight, but he is not to be found.'

One of the men seated on the stools nodded towards the images on TV while playing with the glass in front of him. He looked furtively at the guy beside him but saw only an impenetrable face.

'Authorities speculated the event may be connected to the criminal world, as the involved businessman was known to have ties with corrupt individuals, members of the Mafia, and controversial political figures. Some sources mentioned the event may have been a vendetta act or a settlement of accounts between criminal organizations', continued the presenter.' The general public voiced concerns about how a modern aircraft can vanish without a trace in the 21st century when technology allows tracing even the most miniature objects. The investigators did not comment but mentioned that measures are being implemented to eliminate such events.'

'Maybe they can also explain how the picture of the so-called businessman they posted belongs to a guy who died fifteen years ago,' said the man with the drink, addressing no one in particular.

He felt the eyes of the man occupying the next stool piercing him, but when he looked at him, he reencountered the poker face...

'The police are investigating the car explosion on the streets of Ta' Xbiex, the news continued. 'Apparently,

there was no victim, but investigators suspect criminal organizations are behind the event.'

The two stools next to the bar were empty. The TV was broadcasting the news to nobody.

Chapter I

Kamil pushed the throttle, increasing the speed, while turning around the westernmost extremity of the islands. He glanced out the window, looking for Ta' Gurdan lighthouse, thinking if he could take an aerial picture of it when his radio came alive, announcing an aircraft approaching to land in Luqa. He noticed it was [November¹](#) registered, a [Global 5000²](#), and he wondered who may have owned it. His thoughts flowed freely while his arms and legs were busy controlling the plane through the bumpy air of the afternoon. He knew the business aviation industry well, as he was part of it. He worked for years as a [flight dispatcher³](#), primarily for VIP companies. He asked himself how owning such an aircraft would be and being part of the high life.

Kamil had a modest existence and came from a humble world. His childhood memories from Slovakia were tinted with the vivid green of the fields and the deep, dark emerald of the forests. In contrast, looking under his right wing, he could see only the islands' rocky landscape and the sea's dark blue surrounding them. Small cities were lost in the Gozitan grey. Further east, urban development covered the main Maltese island almost entirely.

The [ATC⁴](#) sent him to orbit away, far from the landing pattern of the approaching Global. While busy

maneuvering, he noticed that he could afford to pay for one or two monthly flight hours in a rented plane. A rented plane, rented apartment, rented life, he bitterly thought. Wings level, 80 knots [IAS⁵](#), nose pointed at the tiny islet of Filfla, hardly visible in the hazy air, then another turn and a new constellation of landmarks parading in front of the propeller.

The Global was finally on the ground, and Kamil asked for landing permission as he was short on money and the flight time he could buy. The rented [Skyhawk⁶](#) carried him back over Valletta in a descent pattern while he focused on his approach. The engine was almost at idle, eighty knots, then seventy, and the long strip of Runway 23 approached the nose of the aircraft. The speed continued to drop while he flared the plane, noticing the ground vehicles waiting to cross the runway. The stall warning sound was heard briefly, and the tires screeched loudly on the rough asphalt surface. Good one, he thought, slowing down without touching the brakes. He had plenty of distance ahead. He taxied to the apron in front of the flight school, and shut down the aircraft.

'There you go, buddy!' He handed over the plane's logbook and the keys after signing off. 'Am I the last client for today?' He asked with a happy grin.

'You're not, *ta*! There are others in the evening! It is too early now! Too bumpy!'

'That's the fun of it!'

Kamil undressed his yellow high-viz vest and walked out the gate, saluting the soldiers on guard and heading towards the crippled parking lot behind the industrial area. He remembered his car was broken again and was in a service shop. He changed direction toward the bus stop, hating it. The traffic was horrible, and the buses ran randomly despite the carefully published schedule glued to the plexiglass shed of the stations. He stepped off in Gzira, walking the busy boulevard that stretched close to the sea. He stopped with his hands in his pockets to look over the bridge leading to Manuel Island. A small, beaten sailboat was there, moored to one of the jetties between numerous others. He glanced at her, hands still deep in his pockets. One day, *Simplicitus*, he thought, then turned around and continued his walk. He navigated the twisted, narrow streets and entered a small pub with a discreet inscription above the door - *Sandros*'.

'How are you, bro? All OK? I haven't seen you in ages,' remarked a whisky voice behind a pile of cables and loudspeakers.

'Oh! Hi Ben! Had no clue I was going to find you here!'

'I'm gonna sing here, bro, in the evening! I have a gig! Will you come?'

Kamil thought for a second, hands still in his pockets.

'Dunno, Ben! I don't think so! I have an early start tomorrow, and I wouldn't mind some sleep!'

'You don't have to stay long, bro! Just a bit! Or are you still upset with me?'

'No!' Kamil said bluntly. 'I'm not! But you still owe me!'

'I'll pay you, bro! Don't worry!'

'In the afterlife,' said a cheerful voice behind the bar while an ice-cold Heineken popped up on the counter. 'As usual,' mentioned the bartender, gesturing towards the bottle.

'The right stuff,' smiled Kamil.

He slowly sipped from the bottle, enjoying the coldness of the drink.

'How is it, bro? Do you still live in Gzira?' Ben continued from behind his cables. 'You're close to the sea in here!'

'I'm not,' promptly came the answer. 'I live higher on the street.'

'Are you still looking for a flat mate? I heard that Russian guy left!'

'Found someone, don't worry about it! He's gonna move in tomorrow evening.'

'Who is he? Do you know him?'

Kamil shrugged, eyeing the beer bottle in the light like a connoisseur.

'Never met him! I heard he's a pilot.'

'Like you, bro!'

'Not really! A real one. A pro.'

'Good for you, bro! Hope he's not an ass!' Ben said, tuning his guitar.

Kamil drained the beer, putting the bottle back on the counter.

'Me too.'

The following day, in the early morning, Kamil observed the enormous screen above the operations room in Skyparks. The office building, made of glass and steel, was situated near the airport, and the sound of airplane engines could be faintly heard inside. The ringing of phones and the voices of people answering them added to the background noise. Although Kamil had spent most of his life living or working near an airport, he would still pause to listen every time a plane took off.

He made himself comfortable at his desk, logged into the company's informational system, and glanced at the three displays before him. He needed to watch the restricted space around the conflict raging in Africa. He checked the schedule allocated to him by the Operations

Manager and scoffed. Shit, as usual! He had a few flights around Europe to take care of and another to Moskow to prepare for the next day. The flights were simple, but Kamil knew who the clients were, and they were always unpredictable. They changed details at the last moment and always complained if they didn't fly on time. Then, the pressure built up on a hierarchic scale, as everybody, starting with the personal assistants of the customers and ending with the shift managers, put pressure on him to make things happen faster. At least he didn't have to work from home, as sometimes happened. The company always blamed the lack of personnel, especially experienced people. Still, Kamil knew that for the money they paid and the stress people were subjected to, the chances were slim that employees stayed for long. Looking for new jobs was the company's distinct culture, and Kamil was no exemption from it.

He logged into his flight planning software and rechecked the flight times. He noticed that whoever worked before him did a lousy job and planned a flight outside the maximum duty time of the crew. He called the customer's representative, informing him that either they'll have to expedite on the ground or they'll have to use three crew members in the cockpit, and that will be more costly. The representative complained about being told so late about it, but Kamil shrugged and replied he wasn't the one who planned it that way.

He plotted the route to Russia for the next day. He noticed it was crossing a restricted area that was supposed to get activated at midnight. He tried to make his planning software go around it, but it nonchalantly refused. Kamil plotted the route by hand, eyes glued on the airways map, waypoint by waypoint, which took him half an hour. During that time, the phone rang a few times. A pilot complained about his accommodation or, more precisely, the lack of it. Another one said he missed his positioning flight and needed another ticket, ideally during the same day, as he didn't want to arrive late at night and not sleep. After all, pilots need to rest, and night commuting wasn't compatible with it.

When he solved it all, the phone rang again, and somebody from sales cheerfully announced they just got a flight to Asia for the next day. Kamil swallowed his cussing and told the guy that for nothing in the world, he would be able to obtain the needed overflight and landing permits in the next twenty-four hours.

'But we have to try it,' the salesman said. 'We must prove to the client that we work hard to fulfill his needs! Giddy up! Chopp, chopp! Just get on with it, please!'

'I'm doing it, but expect that nothing will happen until tomorrow. It is already 4pm in Singapore, and their CAA will soon close. Not an easy destination.'

'Let's not be pessimistic,' the voice replied.

Kamil started to work on the flight, sending emails, when he realized essential details were missing. He called the salespeople back, and they promised he'd have them in a jiffy. And since he was on the phone with them, did he know how many fuel stops were needed with a [Citation](#)⁷ from the Maldives to London?

He released his flights for the day, sending the flight documents to handlers to be printed or uploading them directly on the airplanes' [EFBs](#)⁸. He had to deal with several [AOCs](#)⁹ simultaneously, each with regulations and peculiarities. Still, Kamil knew all of them by heart and rarely had to check the books. After finishing, the phone started to ring again, but he dismissed it and went to the kitchen to fetch a coffee. He needed a break.

The coffee machine hummed while filling the mug under its nozzle, but Kamil ignored it. An aircraft engine was winding up on the runway, and he tried to determine if it was a [P&W](#)¹⁰ or a [Snecma](#)¹¹, listening to the buzz of the compressor blades. Just as he was about to draw a conclusion, his colleague Zsiga entered the room, aiming towards the coffee maker like everybody else.

'I need some fuel,' he explained, putting Kamil's mug aside and filling up his.' Such a busy day today! Haven't slept much either!'

'Night shift?' Kamil inquired while sipping the hot brew.

'Yeah! They should hire more people! Leaping from the day shift to the night shift is very tiring. You sleep, but you don't, and when you're finally off, you spend the whole day sleeping or trying to!'

Kamil nodded in response, approving. He liked Zsiga.

'I hoped you would say Paceville instead of a night shift.'

'Paceville?' Zsiga shot back with his baritone voice. 'Do I have time and money to go to Paceville?'

'Why not?!' Kamil pressed him, grinning on the inside. 'A couple of drinks with a nice girl, some romance in bed, that's a fundamental night shift.'

Zsiga grabbed his coffee and looked at him.

'I'm married, you bastard!'

'But you're not dead!' Kamil innocently replied.

'You twisted fuck!'

Zsiga chuckled and exited the room.

Kamil fetched his mug and returned to the office, craving a good friend and a good laugh. He tried to remember when it had been the last time he had a genuine laugh from the depth of his being, but he couldn't recall it. 'What a pity,' he thought. 'Corporations drain all our energy...'.

Back in the Ops Room, his inbox was already full. There were also alert messages blinking on the monitors, and he focused on them first. A flight plan was suspended by [Eurocontrol](#)¹². Kamil called the jet's pilot and learned he was still waiting for the passengers. Could Kamil delay the flight plan for thirty more minutes? With a few mouse clicks, it was done.

The second alert was trickier but less urgent. He was looking into it when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

'Are you dealing with the Singapore flight?'

He looked up and looked into the narrow blue eyes of the Sales Manager. Kamil didn't like him, as he had an annoying way of pushing things, bugging everybody. Some Ops guys complained that he didn't allow them to work, as he was always behind them, demanding the impossible.

'Yeah! I'm the one,' he told him, slowly taking another sip of coffee. He liked to boil him and watch him melt. At least that he could do.

'How are we standing?' The salesman continued, undisturbed. 'How does that permit look like?'

'Same, same!' Kamil played his game.' Nothing will likely happen today! I already applied for everything, but these things take time!

'We have to obtain everything today,' started the salesman.' This is a significant client. If we lose him, we'll lose a lot of money, not to mention his trust. Keep pushing, please! I want everything done by tonight!'

Kamil cursed inside his mind, not giving a fuck about the client. He couldn't care less if Jesus himself was supposed to be on that flight. Still, he was amused to see the man's turmoil.

'I'll do my best,' he replied.' Moving mountains is somebody else's expertise.'

He received a cold glance from the narrow blue eyes but didn't care. He returned to work, sorting things out, prioritizing, and spending time on the phone. His coffee mug stayed on the desk, half empty, the coffee getting cold.

It was still there, on the desk, during the evening, and still untouched. Kamil didn't have time for it. He had spent the day calling various service providers to secure the needed permits. When things finally settled, the flight was canceled, and his shift ended. He jumped on a bus home after twelve hours of work. He felt drained.

He opened the apartment door, and the first thing he saw was a big duffel bag on the floor and a pilot's uniform on a chair. The spare bedroom door was closed, and somebody was snoring in there. Kamil entered his room and collapsed on the bed without undressing.

Chapter II

Someone hummed a vaguely known tune in the bathroom while the water ran. That was upsetting, as water was an expensive commodity in Malta. Kamil opened his eyes and stepped out of bed. He had already been awake for a few hours as he couldn't sleep properly. His dreaded norm was waking up reflexively at 3am, a consequence of night shifts and irregular sleep patterns. He figured he would need at least an entire month off to put himself together and revert to normal sleep. The dump heat of the summer didn't help much, either.

He entered the kitchen, filled a pot with water, and put it on the gas-fueled stove. When the water was about to boil, he added a few spoons of coffee, turned the gas off, and allowed the drink to brew. The singing continued in the bathroom, and Kamil focused on it. He could distinguish the lyrics here and there. Whoever was in there was singing about a girl who was never afraid as she pictured everybody naked.

Suddenly, the door opened, and a short, well-built man, wearing only a towel around his hips, entered. He was in his forties. His hair was lightly colored and cropped military style. A short-trimmed mustache covered his upper lip. He looked at Kamil, smiled, and instead of

saying good morning, he inquired - 'Are you ever afraid? How do you cope with it? How do you picture people?'

Kamil smiled back, studying him.

'I don't picture them naked, that's for sure. I have my morality. But I like to picture them having sex.'

'What? Having sex?'

'Yeah! Picture the ones you dislike doing it, with their soft parts flailing around. How do you think they moan?'

'You call this morality? You're so fucked up, dude!'

'You asked for it!'

The guy wearing the towel approached Kamil with his right hand stretched. 'Thomas Steiner! Just to have our formal introduction done! I'm glad to meet you in person!'

'Kamil Piogazik! Happy to meet you!'

'I hope you didn't get upset. Cracking jokes make people smile!'

'Not at all!' Kamil replied placidly. 'How was your night?'

Thomas thought for a second, and a grin appeared on his face.

'I heard people fucking!'

'Mmmm, yeah! The walls! These buildings are kind of shitty!' Kamil told him apologetically.

'I liked it!' Thomas winked at him.

He went to his bedroom and came back dressed in a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. He sniffed around the kitchen, like a greyhound, and asked - 'Do you have any coffee around here? You are a flight dispatcher, right? I thought you, mouse clickers, run on the stuff!'

Kamil pointed the pot on top of the stove.

'Oh, Turkish style! I love Turkish coffee!'

Thomas helped himself, filling a mug, then continued to inquire - 'Do you have a TV in here?'

'I don't need one!' Kamil replied. 'I can listen to the neighbors.'

'How about Wi-Fi?' The interrogatory continued.

Kamil pointed his chin towards the yellow sticker glued on the fridge door. 'There's the password!'

Satisfied, Thomas produced a small silver laptop, logged in, and worked quietly for a while, sipping the coffee and being watched by Kamil. A few news titles about the African war popped up on his screen.

'Good stuff,' he said, looking at the mug and slapping the laptop shut. 'How about breakfast? Is there a place around here? I need some chow!'

Kamil quickly inventoried his finances, thinking about buying food at the nearest Convenience Store. That would have been cheaper. But he also had his pride.

'Sure, let's go,' he shot back. 'I know a place.'

Not long after, both occupied an outside table at a small restaurant close to the main boulevard. Kamil was slowly chewing a ciabatta while Thomas enjoyed a full English breakfast.

'Is it good?' Thomas inquired, looking at Kamil's meal.

'You should try one! It's delicious.'

'You don't look like eating much!' Thomas told him while digging into his plate.

'No, I don't need much!'

Thomas studied him. Not too tall, lean, maybe sixty kilos, dark-haired and suntanned. He looked at his own milk-white arms and chuckled.

'You look like you came out of an oven!'

Kamil laughed, pointing towards the sky.

'The sun is danger,' he said, mimicking the Maltese accent. 'This is what they say around here.'

'Have you been long in Malta?'

'Long enough. Three years!'

'And do you like it?'

Kamil scoffed.

'The sea, yes. The traffic and the buildings, no! But I don't plan to stay here forever!'

Thomas looked at the cars that hardly moved on the road.

'Looks like London during rush hour!'

'Have you been there?'

'I'm a pilot! I've been everywhere!' Thomas laughed.

'Tell me about it! I've been everywhere from behind a monitor!' Kamil chuckled. 'Great fan of Street View too!'

'Eh, that's life!' Thomas consoled him.

'So, are you from Germany?' Kamil started after a break.

'You can say that. I was born there but spent most of my life in the US. I have citizenship, so I can proudly proclaim myself an American!' He pronounced the last words, accentuating the Yankee accent.

Kamil laughed. 'Did you fly a lot in there?'

'In the Air Force. After quitting, I flew mostly around Africa. You can make good money there.'

'Fighter planes?'

Thomas didn't reply, resuming his chewing.

'I have a PPL. I fly from time to time too!' Kamil confessed.

Thomas stopped eating and looked at him. A big smile radiated on his whiteish face.

'You don't say! You didn't write me this!'

Kamil returned the smile.

'Not everything is to be disclosed early, is it?'

'Yes, Sir, Mr. Mystery Dispatcher! Flying is great, is it?'

'Flying is!' Kamil approved. 'But aviation sucks,' he scoffed.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that flying gets us closer to the gods. Aviation is an industry like any other, but insanely expensive, stressful, and riddled with sky-high egos.'

Thomas stopped chewing again, scrutinizing Kamil.

'Yes, Sir! You have a point here,' he approved after some thinking. He started to like the guy in front of him.

'And I also must add that some stressful jobs are meagerly paid in aviation.'

'Mmmm, yeah, you're right again,' Thomas mumbled, with a full mouth.

'I mean, nobody tries to get rich, but payment can be at least fair. But let's put this aside. What's next? What are you going to do?'

Thomas remarked on the note of anger in Kamil's voice and the sudden change of topic. He realized the guy wasn't happy with his job. This spined an idea inside his head, but he kept it to himself. It was too early. He needed to look deeper into the problem. But things were going in the right direction for the business he was planning.

'I'm gonna get myself a car first,' he said. 'Then I have paperwork to do.'

Kamil remembered he had to collect his car from the shop.

'I can borrow you mine. I'll pick it up today. The mechanic texted me. Can you drive on the left side of the road?'

Thomas scoffed. 'I told you I spent a lot of time in Africa. In many countries you drive on the left in there.' Then he burst into laughter and continued. 'They drive on the left even when the general traffic goes on the right, or vice-versa.'

'It means you'll be immune to the Maltese traffic! Are we done here? I need to go.'

'Guess so!' Thomas said lazily. 'Good stuff, this food! Hadn't eaten something good in days!'

A few hours later, Kamil was fumbling with his mobile in the kitchen when the apartment door opened, and a sweaty and tired Thomas showed up. He made a dash for the fridge but, to his disappointment, found no water in there.

'What the hell! No water, no soda, no beer?!'

'I have sensitive teeth, buddy!' Kamil told him without lifting his eyes from the phone.

'Shit! This heat got me! And what's wrong with all these people, always shouting at each other in the streets?'

Kamil looked at him, smiling inside.

'Cut the American bullshit about small countries, you filthy imperialist,' he told him, imitating a villainous Russian accent. 'Maltese are spiritual people. They like to talk. It takes me half an hour to go to the shop, five minutes away, because I have to stop and talk to everybody.'

Thomas finished drinking a gallon of water from the tap, picked up some papers from his room, and then started again towards the door.

'Hey!' Kamil stopped him. He threw him a pair of car keys from the table. 'Maybe you need these,' he said, pointing

to a beaten Punto with scorched paint on the roof, parked under the window. 'Be careful with the battery. Sometimes, the cable from the positive terminal moves, and the car will not start. Open the bonnet and stick it back to the battery.'

'Cool! A real limo!'

Thomas got the keys and asked - 'Does it have A/C?'

He laughed, seeing the look on Kamil's face. He opened the door and stepped out of the apartment.

'It does,' came the answer when he closed the door.

The Punto deposited him next to an old stone building in Ta'Xbiex. After circling for half an hour, he finally found a parking spot near the marina, which stretched next to the street. Thomas took a look at the luxury boats moored in there, thinking. But it still was early. Many things had to be solved first.

He entered the building, happy to be away from the scorching sun, and smiled at the smartly dressed receptionist seated behind a massive desk with an aviation company logo engraved on it.

'Hello there,' he told her. 'I'm here to see Mr. Novak. He is waiting for me.'

The young lady smiled back, measuring his stature with her dark eyes. He saw her blushing and thought she was not a bad bet.

'Who should I announce,' she precipitously asked, without being able to mask the smile and the excitement.

'Just tell him Thomas is here, will you, sweetie?'

She complied, dialing a number on the phone in front of her.

'Mr. Novak is waiting for you. First floor, first door on the right,' she added when Thomas was already at the bottom of the stairs.

'I know where he is,' he winked at her.

He knocked on the door and entered without ceremony. Novak was there, waiting and puffing on a cigar. He stood up from behind his desk and shook Thomas' hand.

'How is it going? It's been a while!' He gently punched Thomas in the shoulder. 'Make yourself comfortable. Let me pour you something from the ice!'

'Thanks, but I'm driving!'

Novak looked funnily at him.

'It's Malta! Nobody will ask you anything!'

He offered him a double with ice floating in, and Thomas accepted it smiling.

'You installed yourself nicely,' he told Novak, looking around the room.

'Do ya like it? It has a view,' he pointed at the marina.
'How about you? Did you find anything?'

'Yeah, just temporary. I share a flat with a guy.'

Novak laughed.

'Why not with a woman?'

'Soon!' Thomas replied, showing his white teeth in a smile.

'Yeah, these things won't take you long!' Novak acknowledged. 'You didn't change much!'

'Old habits die hard!'

Novak laughed again, leaning on his chair. He picked up the cigar, puffed a few times while Thomas sipped from his drink, then asked.

'What do you think so far?'

Thomas put a folder stuffed with papers on the table.

'Piece of cake! I already found an operator who is willing to accept us. In fact, they are dying to accept us. The

registration process may be trickier, but it is solvable. This country runs on AOCs and 9H registered aircraft.'

'Would it not be better to stay privately?'

Thomas shook his head.

'Not really! We'll save a lot of money on an AOC!'

'But we'll have a lot of restrictions!'

Thomas scoffed.

'Don't worry about it! As long as you make the papers look right, nobody will ask you anything.'

'We need a dodgy operator in this case.'

'Or a dodgy dispatcher,' said Thomas. 'I'll take care of it, don't worry! I have it all here!' He pointed his index to his head.

'A dodgy *good* dispatcher,' Novak corrected him. 'Do you have someone in your mind?'

'Maybe! But I need to go deeper into it. These things need time!'

'Sure!' Novak agreed. 'Just be careful! We don't need anything sipping out!'

Thomas laughed.

'Nothing will! I can be very persuasive when needed.'

Novak smiled at him, squashing the cigar in the ashtray.

'OK! I'm gonna look into this later today, and we'll talk tomorrow.' He said, pointing at the folder on the table. 'I need to think about it.'

Thomas finished his whiskey, putting the glass on the desk.

'Sure! If you need anything else, you know how to find me.'

He stood up, heading towards the door.

'Thomas!' He heard Novak behind him. 'Let that girl down there be!'

Thomas sighed, then closed the door behind him.

Later in the evening, he saw Kamil entering the apartment with a big, black laptop under his arm. He slammed it on the kitchen table and dumped an equally black and massive mobile phone beside it.

'Night shift,' he heard him complaining. 'Hope I will get some sleep!'

'Are you guys allowed to work from home?' Thomas inquired, not giving a damn about Kamil's night shift. His thoughts were someplace else.

'Yes. There aren't enough people for regular shifts, so the one who has the afternoon also takes care of the night one from home. On-call duty. Sometimes you sleep, but mostly you don't. It is enough to wake up once, and your entire sleep is fucked!

Thomas nodded absently.

'How was your day, by the way?'

Thomas didn't answer.

'Hey, Thomas! You OK? How was your day?'

'Oh, sorry! Guess I got lost in my thoughts! Yeah, it was great,' he said, looking at Kamil. 'How was yours?'

'Busy! I think I'll resign!'

'How come?'

'Too much stress! I need a break! I don't think I'll ever want to deal with aviation after!'

'And what do you want to do instead?'

Kamil laughed.

'Why? Are there not enough jobs in this world?'

'There are. But I thought that having an ordinary job is not so cool.'

'And you think having a stressful one paid the same as an ordinary one is?'

Thomas felt the anger in Kamil's voice. He already knew this was a sensitive topic, but Kamil calmed down and continued in a gentle tone.

'Do you know what I hate about it? It is not the job itself! It is the purpose of it. When you do something creative that helps people, it is cool. The same applies when you do something for yourself. It's worth busting your ass! But this job here burns my nerves to have some rich asses go shopping in Milano or to impress their girlfriends in the air. I know it is called business aviation, but many of these flights are not business-related. Sure, we also have serious clients, entrepreneurs who create stuff, employ people, create new jobs...Only a handful! You can feel them from afar. They know how to be rich and how to use their planes responsibly. But most people don't! And putting all this aside, there is also the environmental factor here. It is a polluting industry! And I'm part of it!'

Thomas scrutinized him carefully, raising an eyebrow.

'You know I also work as a business pilot, don't you?'

'And? That should make me fear you?' Kamil chuckled.

'No, Sir! It means both of us are stuck in the same shit!'

Kamil wanted to reply that money makes the shit bearable when it comes to pilots but refrained from it. Some things are simply not to be said! After all, who knew...maybe pilots had the same emotional stress as dispatchers, but in a different way.

'Are you not tempted to do something else?' He asked instead.

'No, I'm OK. My boss is not an ass, and I don't bust my back working.'

'You don't need any dispatchers in that operation of yours?'

Thomas laughed.

'You just said you no longer want a job in aviation!'

Kamil wanted to say something, but his mobile chirped. His facial expression changed abruptly from a smiley one to intense concentration. Thomas watched him pick up the phone, acknowledging whatever he heard and opening the laptop. He quickly set himself to work, sending emails, preparing flight routes, and talking on the phone. Looked like the whole hell had gotten loose for him. As far as Thomas could tell, he had trouble with the weather for some aircraft. A pilot was sick and needed to be replaced by another. Some handling providers situated halfway around the world needed help to source

a specific kind of beverage for the passengers. Was it acceptable to use a different one?

Thomas went to his bedroom, but he deliberately left the door cracked open. He heard Kamil's professional voice talking on the phone, cold as ice, emotionless. The guy's fingers were glued to the mouse and the laptop's keypad. Thomas knew there wasn't much to see but knew of the intense intellectual effort next door. Landing permits were requested, flight routes were plotted, aircraft performance was analyzed, safety matters were tackled, and VIP services were arranged.

It was late in the night when the activity in the kitchen dwindled. Kamil slept with his head on the table next to the laptop. In Thomas' room, the bed was empty, but the door leading to the balcony was open. A dimmed mobile phone light revealed someone's presence out there.

'Hey! It's me! I found our guy!'