

Last Flight Out

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I tapped the fuel gauge for the third time in five minutes. It made no difference, all it did was bounce on empty; I was running on fumes. One way or another I was going to end up back on the ground and it would be soon. I circled round, desperately looking for somewhere I could set the plane down. At least it meant that if I crashed, or more likely when, I wouldn't have to worry about there being a fire. Then again, given how the world now was, fire was the least of my worries.

When I'd taken off a few hours before, I'd done it in a rush and checking to see how much fuel was on board had hardly been my top priority; instead, it was getting out alive. I'd watched the horde of infected sweep up the road from the town, drawn by the hum of the generators and decided it was finally time to bug out. It wasn't like there was any one left to evacuate, well not anyone who really mattered. The last of them had come through the day before and all the chatter over the radio suggested there'd be no more airlifts. Not now; Not ever. Both the refugees and the infected had been working their way northwards from Glasgow and the central belt for the last few days, ever since the outbreak started, and now it seemed they were here.

I could hardly be accused of dereliction of duty for leaving when I did. I'd done my job; I'd kept the airport open, allowing as many of the soldiers and marines as possible to get out as they pulled back time and time again. The word on the ground was that Scotland was finished and all efforts were being concentrated on defending the hastily-erected blockade at Hadrian's Wall. That was their grand plan for protecting the rest of the country. Despite the fact that there were still several million people there, all desperate for salvation, the north was being abandoned and the ancient Roman fortification revived more than 1500 years after it last served any useful purpose. If the strategy was to have any chance of halting the advance of the infection, and the infected, they'd need everyone they could get and it had been my job to see that as many of those who'd been responsible for the failed containment in the north made it there in one piece. It was Dunkirk in reverse, with everyone trying to get south rather than north. But this evacuation wasn't by boats, it was by air, and the enemy was so much worse.

When the last transporter left the day before, I was promised they'd come back for me but when I'd put the call in, all I was told was to

hold my position, just in case. Just in case of what, I didn't know, but that was when I realised I was being scarified for the greater good along with everyone else north of the border. Right there and then I started looking round for other options. It was only a small airport so I had a choice of just three planes. The fact that I could only find the keys to one of them meant the decision was made for me. It was a little four-seater Cessna, the kind where the wings were fixed above the windows.

I'd just starting to inspect the plane when I became aware of a noise in the distance. At first it sounded like insects scurrying over fallen leaves, but as it grew louder it resolved itself into the sound of a multitude of feet pounding on tarmac. It took me a few minutes to get the plane going; by then the infected were at the gates. There were thousands of them all pushing and tearing at the chain link fence surrounding the airport. It was the first time I'd seen them in person rather than just on the news but I'd heard the soldiers, the ones who had been on the front lines, talking about their wild eyes that seemed to burn with hatred and anger; about how they could be on you in seconds, tearing into you, ripping you apart, spilling your guts across the ground while you screamed in agony. They wouldn't stop until you were dead. This is what the virus did to you, the one that started in Haiti and that was now spreading around the world. It was worst when it was someone you knew, so the soldiers said. I heard them talk about it; about how they'd made pacts to finish each other off if they became infected and couldn't do it for themselves. They'd rather die than become one of them. Yet, some of them had. I could see them in amongst those that were now surrounding me, easily visible in khaki uniforms that were stained with blood. The fence swayed and shuddered; it wouldn't hold, not for long at any rate. I revved the engine as the first section fell and they started to surge through. As I raced along the runway, the infected pursued me, the nearest almost reaching me just as I lifted off. I was safe and now all I had to do was make it far enough south to cross the barricade. Then and only then would I be beyond their reach.

As I circled, I tried to work out exactly where I was. Off in the distance, I could just make out the newly resurrected fortifications of Hadrian's Wall. I wondered if I could make it but it seemed too far. Instead, I turned my attention to the road directly below me, the one I'd been following for the last 30 minutes. It was the M77, the main artery that, until a day or so ago, connected Scotland and England. The one carriageway was jammed with the cars of people who'd tried to flee south to escape the outbreak but the north-bound one looked pretty

clear. It was wide enough that I'd be able to set the plane down but then what would I do? In amongst the cars I could see figures moving back and forth. From this height, they could have been mistaken for normal people but while I couldn't quite work out what it was, there was something about the way they moved that told me they were infected. I'd just decided to try for the wall after all when the engine spluttered for the first time. A minute later it spluttered again and I was certain I wasn't going to make it. I was going down on the wrong side of the wall whether I liked it or not.

With a final cough the engine died and I was left gliding towards the ground. The silence was disconcerting as I looked around, trying to pick out a landing zone. I settled for a point on the road about a quarter of a mile ahead and tried to prepare myself for the impact. That was when I noticed them; a group of about twenty tracking my movements as my altitude dropped. I watched as more and more of them emerged from amongst the jammed cars on the other side of the road. I hoped I could out-pace them and land with enough grace that I could make it out of the plane. If that happened, I was probably fit enough to make it to the wall before they got to me. I believed it. I had to, it was my only chance.

Sooner than I expected, I felt the ground effect lift the plane ever so slightly. It told me I would be on the ground in seconds. I squirmed in my seat, trying to judge how far behind me the infected were. I figured it was about 300 yards. The wall was about a mile ahead; so close and yet so far away. I wondered how I was going to make it. I was fit, but I had little idea whether I really could out-run them over any sort of distance. Yet I had no choice. I pulled back on the stick and felt the rear wheels touch followed by the front one. The plane bounced once and then again. As it settled down I saw a pothole ahead of me. I twisted the stick to the left, but with no power I had little hope of avoiding it. I missed the hole with the front wheel but the one on the left hand side at the back struck it, sending the plane spinning towards the central reservation, and the steel crash barriers that lined it. I slammed on the brakes but it was too little too late. There was a sickening crunch as the front wheel buckled, sending the nose crashing into the ground. My head smashed into the dashboard and I blacked out for a second. When I came to, I could feel blood dripping down the side of my face. It took me a moment to work out where I was. Then I remembered the infected. I glanced out of the left-hand window and saw them appearing over the brow of a small hill to my north. I tried to open the right-hand door, but it was jammed. I put my shoulder to it and found it wouldn't budge. I tried the other one. It swung open easily but that was when I realised I couldn't move: my legs were trapped.

I turned back to the infected. They were closer now and I could hear them. The noise was something between a roar and a growl that sank

deep into my soul. I looked at my legs. While the right one wasn't badly trapped, there was no way I was getting the left one free; a large piece of metal had pierced my thigh and blood poured from the wound. Even if I could pull it out, I'd bleed to death before I got more than anywhere near the wall, and I'd never be able to move faster than the infected.

I pulled the door shut again and flipped the latch. I closed my eyes and listened. Over the sound of my heart pounding in my ears I could hear the infected as they raced towards me. With panic bubbling up in my stomach, I tried to work out how many there were. I couldn't get an exact number, just the impression that there were a lot. I opened my eyes and stared down at my legs again; then an idea came to me. It was a trick an old medic had once told me about. I looked around for something I could use. The only suitable thing was the seatbelt. I felt around for my penknife and then used it to cut the seatbelt into a long, thick strap. I wrapped it round my leg, higher up than the metal and tied it as tight as I could get it. Next, I took a screwdriver from amongst the tools that had spilled into the floor of the plane in the crash and pushed it between the strap and my leg before twisting it to tighten the makeshift tourniquet as far as it would go. I gripped the metal and took a deep breath. The pain as I pulled it free was so blinding I almost passed out but somehow I kept it together. I looked at the gaping hole it had left behind as it slowly filled with blood. No gushing. No spurting. Just seeping. That was about as good as I could hope for. It looked like the tourniquet was doing its job, at least for the moment.

There was a sudden bang on the side of the Cessna, somewhere back near the tail. I glanced up. The first of the infected had reached me and there was no longer any chance of escape. I felt the plane start to rock as others arrived. Then the first one drew level with the window. He stared at me for a moment. He was tall and thin, and dressed in a light grey suit that was now little more than rags. He'd lost a shoe somewhere and his face and hair were caked with dirt. He looked human but there was no hint of humanity behind his eyes; instead they burned with rage. He screamed and threw himself at the glass, pummeling it until his knuckles were bleeding. More and more appeared with every passing second until I was surrounded. Some climbed onto the nose and started banging on the windscreen. It had already cracked in the crash and they would be through it in no time.

I felt for the holster that was strapped to my side. Finding it, I pulled out the pistol a departing soldier had given me as a thank you for my help. It felt heavy in my hand. I lined it up with the first of them; a young woman, maybe in her early 20s. She showed no fear, or hint of recognition that a gun pointed at her head, she just kept pounding on the windscreen. I'd never fired a gun before but at this range I could barely miss. I paused for a moment, trying not to think about what I was about to do, and then slowly tightened my finger on the trigger. The

noise inside the confines of the cockpit was deafening and the gun almost jerked from my hand. As if in slow motion, the girl's head exploded as she fell backwards off the plane and crumpled to the ground. I felt sickened by what I'd done but knew I had no choice. None of the others seemed to care or even notice. Gripping the gun more firmly, I lined up the next shot and fired again, and then again. For a moment the windscreen was clear, and it fleetingly crossed my mind to try to scramble out, but before I could move another clambered up, followed by a second and a third. My ears were ringing from the shots but I could still hear the infected as they hammered on the fuselage all around me, making it jump and shudder.

I heard glass breaking and turned to see the window on the left had given out. The man in the tattered suit was desperately trying to clamber in, his grasping arms reaching towards me. I fired twice, missing him both times. The third time I finally hit him and he slumped where he lay half in and half out of the window. I left his body hanging there in the hope it might stop others following him in. The windscreen shattered and two infected tumbling into the cockpit. I stared at them, frozen with fear as they scrambled to get to me. Then a realisation washed over me: there was only one option left. As I pressed the barrel against my head, I felt their hands tearing at my torso and their teeth biting into my flesh; I was surprised about how little it hurt. My hand shook and I hesitated, but I knew it was the only way out. I took deep breath, knowing it would be over the instant I did it, and pulled the trigger.