

YOU CAN TAKE THE MONEY . . .  
BUT YOU CAN'T RUN . . .

# AIR SIDE



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# AIRSIDE

By James Swallow



***Noun: airside***

***“The area of an airport terminal beyond passport and  
customs control.”***

## TWO

*‘Der nächste bitte, next please.’* The desk agent had the enthusiasm of someone whose shift was minutes from ending, for whom the ticks of the clock could not come quickly enough.

‘Good evening,’ offered Kevin, with an equal lack of intensity, advancing towards the check-in.

‘Welcome to KnightSky Air.’ The woman – German, middle-aged, and business-like with it – displayed a plastic smile that didn’t reach her eyes. ‘Any hold luggage, sir?’

‘No, just these carry-ons.’

Kevin had made an art of austerity in his packing over the past few months, stripping it down to the absolute minimum that would fit in an overhead locker, all so he could get on and get off the plane as swiftly as possible. Anything that could pare off even a few seconds from the tedium of air travel was worth the effort. Standing beside a baggage carousel was the dullest part of the ordeal, staring blankly at other people’s cases drifting by while you waited vainly for yours to emerge.

He handed over his passport and ticket. The agent eyed the paper dismissively. ‘You do know that you can use your smart-phone rather than print a boarding pass?’

'I'm aware,' he replied. 'I just prefer . . . You know. *A real thing*. Something in my hand.' As much by trade as by personality, Kevin was an engineer, and that mind-set brought an attachment to physical objects and a healthy scepticism about the reliability of technology. The one time he hadn't brought a paper copy, he'd been stuck at Gatwick for hours when KnightSky's buggy smartphone app had decided to eat his flight reservation.

'It is more efficient,' the desk agent said pointedly. 'Better for the environment.' She inclined her head towards a sign extolling the virtues of the airline's green policy, complete with a guilt-inducing photo of a polar bear clinging to an ice floe.

Kevin had gone through this conversation on each flight in and out of Barsbeker. Normally, he would have let it go, but today his tolerance had worn to nothing. He resisted the opportunity to suggest that the airline actually *do* something about their awful environmental record instead of dumping responsibility on their passengers, and settled for some light sarcasm.

'I'll offset my carbon footprint by not getting out of bed for a week, OK? Can we . . . ?' He made a vague *move-this-along* gesture.

'Of course, sir.' Her fingers racing over her keyboard, the desk agent switched off the smile, and replied in the tone of voice one would use to say *whatever, idiot*.

Kevin's gaze slipped to the neighbouring desks, to the Elite Class counter for LuftFluger's flights to Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. They even had a length of red carpet



to walk down. He wondered what it would be like to board an airliner and turn *left* for a change.

*No money for indulgences, Kev-oh.* Kevin heard the words of Colin Fish echoing in his head. *Got to watch the pennies, eh?*

Colin was Kevin's business partner and the co-owner of Luna Designs, the money guy to Tyler's engineering savvy. He prided himself on squeezing every pound until it screamed, and while that was a useful asset to for a small-scale enterprise like theirs, there were times when Kevin wished he could afford to dine on steak instead of quarter-pounders.

Everything he had earned, everything asset Kevin owned had been poured into keeping Luna afloat, and now he wondered if it had all been tossed into a black hole. The wave of his bleak mood started to build again, and the desk agent picked up on it, seeing the shadow pass over his face.

Her expression softened and her tone grew sympathetic. 'Sir, I'm sorry, but there is a problem with your boarding pass.'

Kevin sighed. 'Of *course* there is.' The day had not quite finished the business of repeatedly kicking him in the balls.

She told him the laser scanner wasn't registering the barcode. 'It happens a lot. If you had the app on your phone . . .'

He leaned forward. 'Can I have that back?'

The desk agent returned the pass and Kevin pointed at the forest of black bars on the sheet. 'The printing impinges on the space around the lines. Should be clear all the way around, otherwise the scanner glitches when it tries to read it.' He smoothed out the paper and scraped away some of the offending ink.



‘How do you know that?’ said the woman. She re-scanned the pass and her computer gave an agreeable chime.

‘We use the same kind of thing at my company,’ he explained. ‘Automated handlers scan the product, send it where it is supposed to go. If the code’s smudged, it doesn’t work.’ Kevin reached into his shoulder bag for a sample – he always carried a few to hand – and passed an empty, tan-coloured water bottle to her. It too had a barcode embossed on the side. ‘Here, keep it.’

‘Thank you.’ The desk agent exchanged the bottle for his now-stickered pass, and weighed the container in her hand. ‘Very light.’

‘But strong. Made out of recycled paper. Lasts for months, but it’s also biodegradable. Much better for the planet than those.’ He jutted his chin at a plastic water bottle sitting next to her keyboard.

‘Oh, *toll*,’ she replied, turning it over. ‘*Luna*,’ she said, reading out the logo on the bottom.

‘We make them,’ said Kevin, and then sighed again. ‘We try to. It’s not easy convincing the pop makers to switch from plastic and cans, you know?’

‘Pop?’

‘*Limonade*.’

‘Pick up the pace, please?’ A terse, plummy voice issued out from behind him, and Kevin turned to see a man with an expensive suit and an impatient, purse-lipped expression. Like Kevin, he held a British passport, but unlike him, he



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also clutched one of KnightSky's frequent-flyer cards, clearly expecting it to smooth the path for him.

Kevin returned a sour look and made a show of stepping aside. 'Be my guest.' Mr Gold Card didn't hesitate and barged past to the check-in. Kevin gave the desk agent an apologetic look and walked off, heading to the arch that delineated the landside and airside sectors of the airport.

The departures gateway was a sunny yellow, to hint at the idea of warmer climes and holiday fun awaiting those who passed through it.

Kevin had nothing like that to look forward to, and he glanced at his wristwatch as he joined a short queue for the nearest security lane. The bulky Promaster told him he was on schedule, with plenty of time to make his flight, provided nothing else went wrong.

*What are the odds of that?* Kevin asked himself. He fiddled absently with the strap of the titanium watch; made for divers, it was one of the few extravagances he allowed himself, and while the closest Kevin had ever come to scuba was swimming-pool snorkelling, he held on the fantasy that one day he might actually be able to do the real thing.

His boarding pass was rechecked, rejected, and rechecked again, earning him stern looks from the unsmiling customs officers manning the automated barriers. Kevin couldn't hide his tension, which made him wonder if he looked shifty, and that in turn made him even more self-conscious.



He went through the motions of the next stage of security, where a scanner arch and x-ray conveyor belt were waiting. *Belt off, jacket off, coins and phone and watch and wallet in the pockets, bags in the tray, trays on the conveyor.* Kevin completed each action with the robotic precision of a veteran traveller, aware that every move he made was being scrutinized.

Ahead, a group of noisy Englishmen in football shirts clowned around, generally making life difficult for the customs officers, and Kevin kept his distance, not wanting to be associated with their disruptive behaviour.

He watched his trays roll away as he stepped through the metal detector, and heard a strident ping. *Problem.*

‘What now?’ he muttered.

Another security officer used a sensor wand to give him a close inspection, and the offending issue turned out to be foil from a half-tube of boiled sweets in a trouser pocket. Satisfied, the officer waved him on.

When Kevin reached the other end of the conveyor, his trays had vanished.

His heart jumped in his chest. Everything he needed was in them, money and credit cards, passport and ticket. If they were stolen, he literally would have only what he was stood up in: not even a belt to stop his trousers slumping at his waist.

‘Herr . . . Tyler?’ A laconic voice with a thick slice of the local burr drew his attention. Kevin pivoted on the spot, finding not a security guard, but a uniformed police officer at a counter off to one side. Kevin’s trays were arranged in



front him, including his passport open at the photo page. The policeman beckoned. 'Come, please?'

'Here, mate,' said the last of the football fans, as he elbowed by to join his friends. 'Don't let him take you out back and grab your nuts, right? Reckon he fancies you!' The comment drew a torrent of mocking laughter that did nothing for Kevin's anxiety, which flipped through a roller coaster rise and fall as he approached the policeman.

He felt relief that his stuff hadn't taken a walk, then trepidation over whatever had caused the German cop to pull him out of the line.

*Could it have something to do with the deal?* He shook his head before the panicked thought could take root. *Unlikely.* His anxiety saw connections that didn't exist. Or so he hoped.

Kevin took a deep breath, forced himself to adopt a neutral expression, and uttered the mantra of every innocent man. 'Is there a problem, officer?'

The policeman frowned at the question, deep lines building across his oval face. He had searching brown eyes set behind a pair of black-rimmed spectacles, and the kind of bulldog quality Kevin always associated with coppers. He was a few years Kevin's senior, wearing a stab vest emblazoned with the word POLIZEI over a light blue shirt. He made a show of taking off his peaked cap and putting it aside.

'Herr Tyler,' he repeated, cocking his head, 'what kind of explosives do you have in your bag?'

'*What?*' Kevin felt his colour rise and he froze on the spot. His unease jumped through the roof.



‘We have detected traces of volatile materials.’ The man had an identity pass hanging off his vest, and Kevin saw the name Alfons, B. written on it. He gestured with a chemical swab, giving the Englishman a measuring look. ‘Perhaps you have been on a military base recently? Are you *in* the military?’ He said the last in a tone that suggested he thought it unlikely.

Kevin had the sudden impulse to say *I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you*, and he let out a nervous laugh. ‘Uh, no,’ he managed. ‘Wh-what kind of material? Did you detect, I mean?’

Officer Alfons glowered at the readout of a device in front of him. ‘Cellulose residue.’

‘Oh. *Oh!*’ Kevin snapped his fingers, as his brain caught up with what was happening. ‘I have production samples in my carry-on. Cardboard bottles. They have a cellulose component in them, they might have tripped your, uh . . .’ He trailed off.

‘May I?’ Alfons asked for permission to open his bags, but didn’t wait to get it. The policeman rooted through the contents, deliberately taking his time.

When he didn’t find anything that looked bomb-like, he ran a second swab around the bag and through the chemical sensor, then relented, apparently satisfied at the benign nature of Kevin’s shirts and underwear.

‘Very well,’ he intoned gravely. ‘Now comes the difficult part.’

Kevin blinked. ‘Pardon me?’ He had a sudden premonition of a strip-search and rubber glove session, the football fan’s warning ringing in his ears.

‘Now you must put it all back,’ Alfons explained, smirking slightly as he spread his hands, indicating the mess of unpacked clothes.

Kevin bit down on his annoyance, realising that the policeman was amusing himself at his expense. Typical cop behaviour, he reflected, like the man’s blunt question about the explosives. Designed to deliberately wrong-foot you, in the hope you might say something incriminating.

Alfons stood back, arms folded, and under his watchful glare Kevin did his best to restore order to the messed-up contents of his baggage. It was awkward in the cramped area alongside the security arch, and it took longer than he would have liked. At one point, the Gold Card guy strolled past along the express pre-check lane, grinning at Kevin’s predicament. Kevin resisted the urge to give him the finger as he carefully rolled his socks into tight cylinders and repacked them.

‘Sorry to inconvenience you,’ said the policeman, more to fill the silence than out of any actual regret. ‘But with the way the world is, we all have to do our part to watch out for the terrorists, yes?’

Kevin wondered how likely it was that gun-toting fanatics would target some unremarkable airstrip in the back-end of the German countryside. He zipped up the bag. He just wanted to be gone.

‘We are so busy looking for them, ordinary felons do as they please.’ Alfons continued, scowling at his own observation. Then he leaned forward menacingly, extending one hand to point at a poster on the wall. ‘Keep your eyes open, *ja?*’

Kevin glanced at the sign. It showed a woman frowning seriously in the direction of an abandoned bag, beside a telephone number for the airport's security hotline.

*Wenn du etwas siehst*, read the message beneath, *sag etwas*. 'If you see something, say something,' Alfons translated, then waved him away.

Kevin put his watch back on and checked it again. The buffer of time in his schedule was quickly dissolving, which meant he needed to get moving if he wanted to make it to the gate. The better places among KnightSky's cheap seats tended to go quickly once economy class boarding began, and Kevin had learned from experience that if he wasn't near the front of the line, getting the prized exit aisle row would be impossible.

He threaded through the duty-free area, following a trail snaking past ostentatious displays of perfume, gin and cigarettes, and emerged into the plastic reality of the terminal proper.

The rectangular building extended away to the north and the south. Exiting security, low-numbered boarding gates were on the left, high-numbered on the right. Two levels were open to the public, the upper for the incoming arrivals and the lower for departures. Broken up by thick pillars of white-painted concrete every few metres, the main concourse of Barsbeker airport was divided into sections for a few shops and a cluster of fast-food concessions on one side, with passenger waiting areas along the other. The latter were optimistically described as 'lounges' but in reality they were just rows of chairs clustered around TV screens suspended from the roof, forced up

against the glass looking out across the runways. *A fish tank has more style*, Kevin reflected.

The change in atmosphere after passing through security was palpable. Landside, where taxi drivers milled around with hand-written signs, or expectant families waited for their loved ones, there was a kind of weary flatness to everything – as if the building itself said *you're here now, you have no reason to stick around*. Landside didn't want you to dwell, and it didn't give you a reason.

In contrast, airside was an aimless no-man's-land, the null space where you weren't quite actually on the ground, but you weren't exactly on the wing either. Airside was anticipation, anxiety and boredom captured in a big glass box.

Kevin always felt disconnected in airports, as if part of him was rendered rootless, searching for somewhere to put down, to be grounded once again. Like theme parks, shopping malls and casinos, airports were more machines than they were buildings, pumping mechanisms made to flow humans from one end to the other as smoothly as possible. Airside was cut off from the real world, in a little pocket reality of its own.

The tiny wheels of Kevin's Pullman case ticked across the floor, as he steered it around other passengers who clearly were not in anything approaching the same hurry as him. He knew the best path to take in the shortest possible time, but that didn't account for the people who strolled, dithered and vacillated as if to a plan of their own. A plan to make Kevin Tyler's schedule fail miserably.

On a day when whatever *could* go wrong *had* gone wrong – catastrophically, ruinously so – every tiny delay or impediment that followed, no matter how minor, innocent or circumstantial, was one more jab directed specifically at him.

Kevin's attention was on that thought and not where he was going, so when the big man in the green jacket slammed into him, the hit was so hard he literally spun about with the force of the collision.

Shocked more than annoyed, Kevin looked up into the broken face of a streetfighter, all deep-set eyes and crumpled nose. He tried not to recoil from the aura of casual menace radiating from him.

'*Entschuldigung*,' said the man in the jacket, grinding out the word as if he were chewing on a chip of granite. The expression meant 'excuse me', but his tone made it sound like a dire profanity.

Kevin tried dredge up a feeble complaint, but the other man had already turned his back and walked away. Cheeks burning, Kevin snatched irritably at the handle of his carry-on and continued towards the departure gates.