

Accompaniment
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Chapter 1

He was about to fasten his seat belt when he said, “I forgot something.” He lifted the shoulder harness over his head, unlocked the door and opened it.

By the time she’d absorbed what he’d said, he had stepped out into the dimly lit hanger. From the right-hand first officer’s seat she turned around to the passengers and said in Expranco, “we will be leaving in just a minute.” She tried not to stare in frustration at the pilot’s back, and hoped the passengers were not staring in frustration at her. It had been hard enough to get everyone in the plane at the same time, now she feared some would get out again to take another picture.

He walked stiffly towards the back of the hanger, his hands thrust into the pockets of his old jeans. The floor was cracked concrete, stained and polished with oil. Along the wall parallel to the airplane was a row of workbenches in dark, scarred, wood, covered with a spray of wrenches, bolts, cutters, measuring instruments, shards of aluminum, engine parts and gauges. Shelves above the benches held grease-stained manuals, bins of screws, clips, washers and myriad other small items.

Near the back corner of the hanger there was a wooden door leading to a storage room. He pushed the door open and went into an even darker space. A few feet wide, it was full of boxes. A propeller was propped against the back wall. He didn’t turn on the bare hanging bulb, the faint illumination from the main hanger was enough. He knew this storeroom, it was his bedroom. Near the back, on the sidewall, was a thin mattress from a cot lying on a plywood sheet placed over several parts bins. He approached his bed, kneeled down in front of it, bowed

his head and prayed, five times quickly, “Lord Jesus come to my aid, O God make haste to help me.” He did the sign of the cross, and rose pushing himself up with his hands, wincing at the pain in his knees. Coming out of the room, he shut the door softly behind him. He went back to the plane, walking slowly, limping a bit, looking at the ground.

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From the trip journal of William Synder

I admit I was a little nervous about flying on some crazy plane, what sort of maintenance would they have done, and probably not current training either. But, we were standing around just before take off getting a briefing from the guide. She was explaining really complicated things like, “don’t take flash pictures of military,” – are people that stupid? Yea, probably so. Anyway, I was looking around at our plane, I’d heard about these DF500s, that some were still flying here, and there it was. I’d always hoped I’d get a chance to fly on one, they are so classic. I saw this guy, obviously the pilot, doing his walk around. I started watching him. He was being so slow, taking his time, looking at everything. He held each propeller blade like it was solid gold. He touched everything. I just knew he knew every weld of that airplane, every wire. He opened up all these access panels, looked inside, closed them up so carefully, patted them after he’d closed them. I figured we were safe.

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The pilot and the guide ran through the checklist for engine start, their hands playing a duet on the controls, their voices making rhythm as they ran down the items. She was not a pilot but he had insisted she learn to work the checklists with him. She’d seen him take off by himself, or do the whole procedure when someone else had been sitting where she now was, but he claimed he needed her to do this with him.

Just before he was to hit the engine start button, he looked out of the windshield, caught the eye of the kid standing by the closed hanger door and pointed at him, smiling solemnly. The kid sprang into action, bending his back against the heavy, metal door. He pushed like his life depended on it and slowly the heavy door scraped along its dirt-filled track and groaned open.

The pilot hit the start button and engine number one whined to life. He looked to his left and watched the propeller blades begin to turn, the turbine catch and the engine run up to idle. They clicked quickly through the rest of the checklist and she waited for him to start number two. For some reason he liked to wait a bit, watching the first one they had started. He glanced down at the engine gages on the center panel, touching each lightly in turn as he verified they were showing nominal. "Engine start checklist, number two."

Once number two had started to turn, but before it was delivering power, he released the brakes, and using power from the left engine, steered the aircraft out of the hanger onto the tarmac.

The night was full, with just the glow of city lights diffused over them. They swiveled around and headed for the southern end of the airport. This had once been Kansas City's main airport, before a big new one was built north of the metro area. After the rebellion, the military took over the commercial airport. Major airlines could still use it under tight control. Flights like this one found it less burdensome to launch themselves from a taxiway of the older airport. All the runways had been built over or dug up.

The airport was deserted except for the three or four resistance members who'd come to see them off, showing their thanks for the visitors. Standing by the hanger door, they waved at the passengers and crew. The flight was neither prohibited nor allowed. If challenged, they'd say they were only going 120 miles to Manhattan.

By the time they reached the runway, both engines had warmed up. On the taxi, the pilot had tested all the controls to the commands of the co-pilot. They got to the end of the taxiway just as they finished. She'd get out the maps after they were airborne. Anyway, he knew the route by heart.

He nodded at her. She turned around, reminded the passengers once again about seatbelts and not to move around until she said it was OK. She turned back, settled in her seat and cinched her belt and shoulder harness down tight. For a second or two they hung there, absolutely silent, the pilot staring at the end of the runway. She tried not to be impatient.

"Takeoff," he called. He pushed the two throttle levers to 25% power, held them there for a second to verify the engines were accelerating evenly and then pushed the levers forward to 80%. The turbines whined up louder as the aircraft started to move forward.

Her heart sank. 80%? Another slow roll. Last time he'd only set 75% and they had staggered into the air, gaining altitude slowly, wallowing far too close to the buildings for her. Why so slow? she'd demanded after they landed. "It has more dignity," he'd shrugged. "A crash has no dignity," she'd responded.

She'd had to think about his answer for a couple of days before she'd figured out what he meant. He was slow, dignified. He walked slow, he talked slow. His face moved slowly. He flew their little plane like it was the greatest of jetliners, hardly ever making it dance and swoop across the sky like it was capable, preferring stately turns and elaborately lined up approaches. Another had commented on this, teasing the pilot for a swelled head, thinking he was captain of the president's plane. She knew that was not his reason at all.

She had been relieved back in the hanger when he'd told her a rotation speed three knots faster than last time. They'd have more speed before committing to the air.

Bouncing down the uneven taxiway, they reached the speed at which they should continue into the air even if one engine failed. “V One,” she called out. They reached the next critical speed. “V R”. He pulled the control yoke back and the nose rotated upward and they rose into the air -- with more dignity than last time, she thought. At forty feet off the ground he began a slow, very slow, turn to the west. At four hundred feet she got out the maps and navigation card, but they’d set the radios on the ground.

At a thousand feet over the western suburbs he began to level off and set cruise power. He’d merge them into the skyway. Their aircraft ran with the transponder turned off and the recognition lights intentionally dimmed. With all their electronics and lights suppressed, they would avoid registering on the air traffic control radar, or on the radar of other aircraft, or so they hoped. They took the responsibility to stay out of the way of anyone else. She assisted him on a sweep of the horizon. Once fully into the skyway, though at an altitude under other potential traffic, he nodded at her. She turned around and began talking to the passengers.

“You can unbuckle your seatbelts now, but we really recommend you keep them on. As you know, we will go to Manhattan to refuel. We have enough to make it into the mountains without refueling, but this will give us more reserve and it will help our story if we are seen to land, and we sign in there.” Nine eager faces were leaning forward in their seats, straining to listen to her over the engine noise.

“We’re flying west, you’ll see the Kansas River below us. We’ll go just north of Lawrence. Lawrence was founded by people opposed to slavery. You know how in the first war for freedom fought on this land that it was burned by the forces of repression. The Resistance honors it as one of the places of martyrdom and inspiration for the second struggle for freedom.”

She turned back around, always wondering what these speeches meant to their passengers. The pilot could bury himself with the technical things; she had to deal with a dozen passengers. Each trip was completely different. So far this one was going well, no one had really panicked so far. She sighed; she should remember the sacrifice that people were making to come here.

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From the trip journal of Efantua Wang

When I saw the plane I just about freaked! It was so tiny, and the walls were so thin. And that pilot! He, like, looked about a million years old. I just about quit. But Jane and Kelly and I decided that if we died together it would just be so romantic. We were talking about our funeral and how everyone would say nice things. Then we just started giggling, and I felt better.

I really want to see the children; that's what I came for. Those stories we heard were just so tragic. I can't believe what the government does here. Oops, I shouldn't say that, we were told not to put too much politics in our trip journals.

I'm really tired out. First the flight here went on forever and they didn't tell us much. Then all that spookiness about getting to the airport. Have to leave our hotel at night, dodge all over the city, have a cover story. I don't really think we're likely to get stopped. God, I don't know what I'd say. I'd never make it as a spy!

Our guide, Juanita, is just so heroic. She tells us about all this stuff, and you know, it doesn't bother her. Says this is her ninth time taking people on an accompaniment trip. Can you believe it?! I had to screw up my courage for months to do this. Some of the previous trips have actually gotten to walk with refugees as they go back to their homes in the little villages near

Georgetown. That would just be awesome! Of course, the one that got zapped by one of the Guardians wasn't so cool. They claim they're more careful now.

Anyway, we'll get to see some villages, meet the people, hear their stories. That will be good too. I hear these revolutionary villages are just amazing.

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Juanta and the pilot exchanged a few comments as the flight progressed westward. She was impatient to get past Manhattan. That would bring the most risky part of the trip, but also the most peaceful. She posted the navigation cards and he nodded acknowledgement.

She had persuaded him they should do a scan early in the trip. The movement unnerved some of their passengers, and she wanted them used to it before they went on the long jump and their lives depended on her doing a good scan. He couldn't see the reason for it, no Guardian came this far east, but he gave into her. "Scan?" she said into her headphone, and he nodded. She unbuckled and slid her feet up onto the seat, pushing up with her arms. Awkwardly she turned around, half standing on her seat. Everyone was looking at her.

"I'm going to scan the sky, part of our precautions. I'll do this several times during the trip." She turned around again, facing front, reached out with one foot and put it on the arm rest of the pilot's seat. He always moved his arm away from her when she did this. Grabbing for handholds, she stood up.

Above the center of the cockpit was a shallow bubble of plastic that Resistance mechanics had added to the plane. Standing with one foot on the pilot's armrest and one on her's, she was tall enough for her head and shoulders to extend into the bubble. Once there, she raised her arms and tugged on a cord and a cloth snugged around her torso, blocking what little light came from below. A pair of headphones was plugged in up here and she put them on to

communicate with the pilot if needed. A small pair of binoculars was stuffed into a homemade leather pocket on one side and she pulled them out as well.

Up here was like being in another world. The bubble allowed her an unobstructed view of the starry expanse of the night sky. Up here there was no politics, no group to lead, no problems. She looked overhead for a long moment, just to see the stars. Then, using the binoculars she looked carefully around in all directions, seeing no aircraft at all. She did a second scan. She never wanted to come back down.

But she had to. Slowly she unhooked and stowed her gear and climbed down, got herself seated again, and told the pilot they were clear. He nodded.

Chapter 2

In close to an hour they were approaching Manhattan. They had made a radio call to the flight service station that served as control tower in off hours. This was more for anyone who might be eavesdropping than because the rather casual airport there needed any warning.

Even their archaic aircraft had enough navigation equipment to guide them right to the runway. Or it would have had prior to the military ripping all the electronic landing systems out of the airport. This was supposed to make it harder for rebels to use the airport. What it had done is make all the commercial flights leave, leaving the airport to the Resistance and a very few corporate flights.

The pilot, she strongly suspected, could fly the approach to the runway blindfolded. But he always insisted in taking bearings from several nav aids, cross checking their position. He always asked her to help with landmarks and setting the radios. She at first had thought this was patronizing her, getting the little girl to help just like a big person. Later she began to see it was part of the rituals he surrounded himself with.

They had been descending, crossing over the river one last time, skirting the town to the south. She saw the landing lights and beacon of the airport up ahead to their right. Suddenly, she realized she had forgotten one of her speeches. She swallowed, and turned around.

“Can I have your attention, please? We’ll be landing in a few minutes. Please make sure your seatbelts are tight and don’t move around until we are on the ground and I say it’s OK. Manhattan was settled by colonists who came from free territory. They were sponsored by people from Boston. They gave up their homes to come here to make a statement in support of freedom for all people. The university here was one of the first in the nation to admit women. The town continues that progressive tradition now and is a place of support for us.

“We’re going to be on the ground for just a few minutes. Please, everyone should use the bathroom here, we have a long flight ahead and it is better if we reserve the toilet in the plane for emergencies. There should be someone on the ground to direct you to the bathroom. Do not wander off and do not talk to strangers. It is very important that you do not wander off. Stay together.”

She turned around. Was she scaring people? But if she didn’t emphasize security people would do the most amazing things. It was so hard for them not to just do whatever a person in a uniform told them to do.

They turned right, flew north parallel to the runway, and then turned 180 degrees to land on the shorter North-South runway and quickly taxied off the runway onto the tarmac. They bounced towards an old stone hanger with the words “Manhattan Municipal Airport” illuminated by several individual fixtures that splashed a weak light on the faded script. She heard one or two comments on the “quaint” and “little” airport. She was glad the pilot only spoke English.

He parked the plane by the gas pumps, shut down the engines and got out to see to refueling. She climbed out of her seat, fished out her flashlight and got out ahead of the passengers. Turning she pointed her flashlight at the steps to help the passengers see. The first down the steps stopped at the bottom to look around and to exclaim about how dark it was. Others backed up behind them, but eventually they were moving in a line across the tarmac, passing by the front of the hanger. She opened a small door and stood back to let them go into the tiny flight office. A narrow corridor was framed by the hanger wall on one side and a counter on the other. “Bathroom in back,” called out the agent behind the counter. People busied themselves with getting in and out of the one-person bathroom.

She talked with the agent. No reports of low Guardians. No weather concerns, but he hadn't received any updates. When the pilot came in this became an issue. The agent refused to budge.

“Come on, man, it's July in Kansas. Warm nights and wind from the southwest. Who cares if it's 75 or 85?”

The pilot looked at the agent like he wanted to kill him but said nothing. She stepped in, they had this fight every trip. The pilot wanted accurate data, the agent wanted to sit there and look romantic for the female passengers. The truth was they could fly without the data. The truth was that the agent's cell leaders had told him a dozen times to get the data.

Eventually she became aware that one of the passengers, a shy young man in his 20's, was now standing beside her.

“Something about weather?” He evidently knew a little English to understand the pilot's question. “Because,” he went on, “I've got a dataport.” He reached into his pocket and brought out a tiny computer, unfolding its screen. He punched a few buttons, bringing up a weather map and forecast for western Kansas and eastern Colorado.

She took the precious device, laid it on the cracked Formica counter-top and looked at the pilot.

He leaned over, putting both hands on the counter top, and looked at the bright, shiny dataport. He'd heard of these. The screen detail was amazing, the resolution must be 20 times what he'd ever seen. For a second he just marveled at the image but didn't notice the content of the map.

“Ah, I can bring up the forecasted conditions, if he wants.”

She translated for the pilot, and, the spell broken, he quickly absorbed the current conditions over their flight path. He nodded. She told the passenger OK, and he reached in, his hand passing a few inches under the pilot's nose. "Sorry," he said softly. He hit a few buttons and the map changed. "This is the conditions expected at about 4am. Figure that's when we should be crossing into Colorado."

Again she translated, and the pilot studied the map, still not saying anything. The pilot looked at the passenger. "Winds aloft? About 5am? At the Front Range?"

She translated, and the passenger hurried to help. She saw the agent get up out of his chair and pose in the doorway, murmuring at one of the women as she squeezed past to go outside.

After the pilot had studied the map, he thanked the passenger in Expanso and walked out of the building back toward the plane.

She also thanked him, and reminded him to turn off his dataport and place it in the metal box they had at the back of the plane so the automatic signals would be muffled so no one could detect that they were out here. He looked embarrassed and assured her he would.

Back in the cockpit, the pilot tried to remember the numbers for wind and pressure, he should have written them down. For a moment in the office he'd been overcome with longing. The screen was so bright, so sharp, the vast array of information so intoxicating, that he'd felt that he was about to fall into the screen, swim into the world of saturated colors inside the machine. His cockpit instruments looked clunky to him, like a child's toy compared to that dataport. He looked through the windshield into the dark space and breathed heavily for a moment.

Juanita had stepped outside of the florescent-lit office and was letting her eyes adjust to the dim tarmac, lit only by scattered pools of light from several bulbs on poles. The air was mellow and soft, enfolding her in comfort and filled with the smells of grasses with a seasoning of petroleum. She closed her eyes and listened to bird calls, the cicadas, and the hum of motors far off. She was out of the big city that made her feel so uncomfortable. Opening her eyes, she caught a brief flash of light, far to her left, headlights coming on the divided highway at the edge of the airport. It slowed, and she tensed up. It turned on to the approach road.

She spun around, ripped open the door, thrust her head in and shouted, “Everyone! On to the airplane now! Please, get back on now, it’s urgent – someone’s coming!”

A few people had drifted back towards the airplane already, some were having smokes on the tarmac, but there were still a few inside the flight station. They all looked blankly at her, and for a second no one moved. She clapped her hands. “Now! Get on the airplane, hurry, I’m not joking! We don’t want to be all over the place when they come! Please, hurry!”

One of the local mechanics had come from the far door to the hanger into the flight station. He jumped forward and began to push passengers gently forward towards Juanita.

Juanita swung back outside. The access road was long, and the vehicle was still well away from them, she might get everyone onto the plane at least. But if this was military ... well, she could probably still talk themselves out of trouble, but god, if someone did something crazy.... They knew there was a risk using this airport, Ft. Riley was just to the west and it was still active. It held a full division that had been deployed more than once for security details in urban areas. Deep within the fort was a model city where they trained soldiers in how to work crowd control. Guardians had even landed on the military airfield. Maybe making the flight service call was not a good idea after all.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted towards the airplane. By the dim lights she could make out figures and just barely see faces. People seemed to be moving so slowly, as if they had all the time in the world. She was starting to panic. Was everyone here? She turned around and saw two passengers coming out of the flight station, agitated and looking around.

“What’s going on?” one of them said.

“Come on, get on the plane please. This could be trouble, we don’t know who it is, get on the plane NOW!”

Should she go to the plane, had the pilot heard? Should she go find the person farthest from the plane and bring them in?

The tall kid with the dataport, William, she thought his name was, came bounding out of the hanger. He’d left the flight office, probably to look at the planes in the hanger. She could brain him for that, what if he’d been left behind? But now, at least he was moving at a rapid trot towards the plane, a serious look on his face. He raised his head and looked intently at her. “Get them on board, tell the pilot we have to go now!” she called to him. He nodded and stretched into a run toward their craft.

She pivoted around and ran back towards the flight office. Three people had come out of the door, blinding her with the florescent glow from inside. The door snapped shut and she couldn’t see, her night adaptation having temporarily gone. She could hear their voices, sounding alarmed and interrupting each other.

“Is there anyone left?” she called.

“No that’s it,” it was the voice of the mechanic.

She waved to the passengers to speed up, waited for the last one to get even with her and turned to follow them toward the plane.

“What’s going on?” It was Jaka.

“Visitors.”

“Well, who is it?” he looked at the approaching headlights.

“Not now, just get in the plane.” She didn’t want to say military, it might be police, it might be some other agency. It could be nothing.

“We’re not doing anything wrong, here. Be good to dialog with the police or whoever.”

“Please, not now, we don’t want to get in any conversations.”

He’d come to a stop twenty feet from the plane and was looking at the lights of the car, now closing in on the airfield boundary fence. She remembered that he was an aid to some member of the European Parliament. In the meetings before the trip, he’d always been disagreeing with her, always implying that once people knew his connections that they would grant everyone on the trip special favors.

“They could detain us, and we don’t want that. We don’t want to answer questions and we don’t want them finding the supplies we have in the cargo. Now, please get on the plane.” She continued to edge towards the plane.

“Come on, they’re almost here.” It was William from over by the plane. He raised his voice “Juanita, just you two left.” She could hear a whistling sound and the thumping vibration in the air that meant that one prop had been started up.

Juanita took a few steps toward the plane. Jaka realized he was all alone on the tarmac, and turned and walked toward the plane.

William was standing at the passenger doorway, holding the door. Jaka went by the two of them and climbed up into the plane. She nodded at William, and he jumped up through the door into the plane. She came up behind them, pulled the door shut. As she did, she heard the prop on the far side of the plane wind up rapidly to full speed.

They started to back up, twisting around away from the gas pump. She climbed over the center console, and fell into her right-hand seat, breathing hard from more than simple exertion. The pilot backed the plane around a half circle, using the left hand prop in trust reverse mode and applying brakes to the right-hand main wheel. By the time she was in her seat, he'd killed the reverse thrust, was moving them forward and flying through the engine start checklist for the right-hand prop.

The car crossed onto the airport, pulled up onto the unfenced tarmac and turned to park in front of the flight service office. The driver got out and stood by the car, looking at the plane. He was backlit from the hanger sign lights, but his military uniform was unmistakable.

Inside the plane no one was talking. Some were gripping each other's hands and all were looking out at the soldier. Juanita said nothing, her breath still coming back to normal. They were moving across the tarmac toward the taxiway. There was still a few seconds when the soldier could gesture for them to stop, use his car to cut them off or maybe even shoot them. Had he seen who was in the plane? Did he know about their flight in particular, or was this just bad timing? Was it an officer or an enlisted man?

The pilot grunted. "I think I know him, it's the mechanic's brother." Juanita gave a sharp intake of breath. It might be the mechanic's brother but that could mean anything. The soldier could be going through the motions of a patrol and really didn't want to deal with the hassle of reporting them, or maybe the mechanic was a source for the military or the two brothers hated

each other or something else entirely. The soldier could be off his normal patrol, just seeing his brother. Or they could have just avoided jail. She didn't want to find out. She wondered if her resistance cell leader knew about this connection.

They should have taken off to the south, but the winds were pretty light, and they had little time and a great deal of runway so the pilot taxied then at a fast pace out to the south end of the runway, and without pause or asking for clearance, the swung them onto the runway, applied maximum power and had them accelerating quickly.

Chapter 3

From the trip journal of Robert Covington

Well, we had our first brush with the reality of the war. A little thing really, a soldier got to close for comfort. I know Juanita wouldn't have wanted us to talk to him, was worried about how some of the younger, less experienced people would react, and rightly so.

That young fellow William came through in spades though. Was cool, helped everyone on the plane, practically lifted my wife on. I saw how he just fell in supporting Juanita, acting as a loyal and proactive assistant. He's such a shy guy, but he was very poised in that little emergency.

I felt a little shudder go through me when we saw the soldier, and my dear Alicia and I looked at each other and we knew we were both wondering if this was the time. We've talked about how if this is the time for a trip to go bad, the time when someone gets killed, then we hope it is us and not some of these young people with their whole lives ahead of them. We know it is wrong to court martyrdom, and we certainly don't want it, but we've lived our lives, our children are launched in life, we've held our grandchildren and I can think of no better way to go then to step forward to give up what little time we have left on this earth for someone else. If this should come, I can only hope our courage will not fail us.

But, I know we were both very glad when we all made our escape.

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From the trip journal of Jaka Ckandson

I don't think Juanita handled that very well. We have a right, guaranteed by the 19th Universal Convention on the Rights of Non-Combatants to be here and to go where we wish. The Resistance has been granted belligerent status by the European Parliament and the United

Nations, and I'd be surprised if any soldier would want, on his own, to court the issues that interfering with a representative of that parliament would bring. That would be a very serious matter, let me tell you!

It would have been a good opportunity to really give a message to the rank and file that what they do here is being watched. Hustling us away like that was pretty destructive of us making our point. I'll have to find a time to take Juanita aside and try to educate her to some of the politics of all this. She's inexperienced, has probably never been out of the United States.

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From the trip journal of William Synder

I hope I didn't offend anyone back at the flight station. That pilot looked a little miffed when he left, even though he did say thanks. I was just trying to be helpful, but I'm afraid I looked like I was bragging. Gosh, it had never occurred to me that the government could track us by the signals, or the content of what I was looking at, but they're right. I was thinking of giving the dataport to someone here, but I'd better ask if that's OK. I'll put it in the box once we level off.

It's so hard to know what to do. I want to help, but we were told that is an arrogant assumption that we have anything to help them with. We must have heard a thousand times that we are here to learn, to listen, not to talk or help. But they need help. It seems silly not to give some things to them, we'd hardly miss it, and it could actually save lives. Back at orientation, I'd asked about giving them the dataport, and they really came down on me about it.

It must be nice to be a doctor, everybody talks about the doctors who abandoned their cushy lives to work with the poor in the villages. That sort of help from us is OK, I guess.

Nobody seems to need engineers. Don't they have bridges to build, need roads, clean water or have weapons to fix? Somebody should figure out how to jam the Guardians.

And then the soldiers. God, I hope no one knew how frightened I was. I was waiting for Juanita to ream me for going off by myself, but I was paying attention. I was keeping track of where people were, watching if people were getting back on the plane. I'd notice when it was getting time to go. I wasn't lost, but no one will believe that if she yells at me. I don't know what I'd do if she went after me, arguing about it sounds so weak. I'd just have to apologize.

And then, god, I just froze, stood there like a dummy when she called out the warning. I hope in all the mess no one noticed that. BoJa is standing there, just daring the soldiers to come at us, and I'm hiding at the plane.

And she asked me to tell the pilot to get going and I got right up to his face before it dawned on me that I couldn't speak a word of his language. I gestured at the left prop and spun my hand in a circle and just said words. "Juanita, go, leave, rapid, fast." I pointed to the car lights and said, "danger, trouble, go, rapid." Did more of that. I do know the English word for "military", and a lot of English words are similar to ours, and apparently I hit on enough that he got the idea for he killed the cabin lights and went to work at warp speed. God, what an idiot I am. I sure wish I had some talent for languages so I could have been of use.

I wanted to sit up next to the cockpit so I could see the pilots work, but I didn't get there first, and now I'm back here in the middle. Maybe on the return flight. I'd love to talk to the pilot, but since I don't speak English, I guess that isn't going to happen.

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They had taken off to the north and continued on that course to get around the end of Ft. Riley. The north end of the fort was largely unoccupied, mostly used for artillery target practice.

In the past, accompaniment flights like theirs used to cut off the northeast corner of the fort to save a few miles. Lately, however, there had been rumors circulating of construction going on behind barbed wire with oddly shaped buildings going up, so now they made sure they were well north of the boundary before turning west.

As they rose higher into the air the horizon became clearer, a line separating one shade of darkness from another. The passengers began to breathe again and talk back and forth with energy. Several got out their recorders for their journals.

After they turned west, the low hills began to die off and the lights of cities got smaller and farther apart. Scattered lights of farms could be seen in all directions. Juanita told them they could take the seatbelts off for a while, and soon little groups began to form. Jaka and Branka got a card game going with Robert Covington and Kelly. Jane and Efaunta were talking together across the aisle. Alicia Covington was falling asleep.

Callia had traded places with Kelly and began to practice her English on Juanita. Callia had asked Juanita about the last relocation move. Juanita already knew this was Callia's second accompaniment trip to the villages, but she hadn't heard the details and the two began to compare notes.

William had gone to the back to secure his dataport, then had been moved forward when Jaka came back for the card game and he was now behind the pilot alternatively gazing past him at the gages on the control panel and silently staring out the window to the south of their path.

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From the trip journal of Callia Akasanda.

Finally we are under way. It wasn't until we lifted off from Manhattan I felt the trip had really begun, despite that little run-in with the soldier.

All that happened before Manhattan, and even in it, was us working our way to the edge of the normal world. Civilization, rules, law and order, the government. Of course we were spies of a sort, but we were still in occupied territory and not really spies. Our global citizenship meant we were more or less immune. And it is a territory with hospitals, doctors, emergency services, data connections, judges, someone to help you when you get in trouble.

Manhattan was the edge, sitting in its array of low hills, it seemed the last outpost, the edge of the empire. The airport was down on the river plane, of course, but I imagined myself standing on one of the hills, looking west, just at sunset. Looking across the prairie towards the free territories.

And now we are flying there.

To go back, I guess what annoys me about the civilized spaces - those before we passed Manhattan -- was that they made possible normal conversation. Conversation about sports and business. And especially all the topics women are still expected to care about: clothes, who is dating who and the rest of that trivial dreck. Of course, there are plenty of guys just as obsessed with all that now, it's not just a gender thing. Almost no one, man or woman, wants to talk about politics, justice, war and peace.

I really wonder if some of those on this trip even have a clue what it is about. Maybe they thought we were going for a ride at Disneyland called "rebel adventure." I don't understand why they are surprised that we have to eat local food or be careful about security.

Efaunta, Jane and Kelly, why are they here? I know they will cry when they see a sick kid, but can they make a connection to the issues? The Covington's, I admire their courage, doing this at their age. William and Branke are hard to place. I'm really not sure what motivated them to come. Jaka thinks it's a good PR move for some political campaign, I guess.

What the hell was he trying to pull when the soldier was coming? What a dolt. But, I've been wrong about people before.

Oh, yea, the soldier at the airport. Sort of spoils my little analysis – or maybe proves it. Because if that soldier finds us a hundred miles to the west, we are dead, and if he finds us in Kansas City, it's nothing at all. And we just missed him in Manhattan. I wonder what would have happened.

I'd like to talk with someone about all this, the politics. But so far there isn't anyone really.

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As they came up to cruising altitude and leveled off, William couldn't take his eyes away from the window. He'd never flown this low before, and seldom at night. He looked out at the clusters of lights, the dark shapes of fields, roads, the occasional lake shinning silver-black and felt himself slipping away, floating, the droning engines and gently rocking plane pulling him free of all his concerns.

They flew to the north of a little town. From the pattern of lights and the reflections he could pick out main street, a school with its sporting fields, a grain elevator by the railroad track. He imagined all the lives there, the arguments, the groups. Kids, youth, adults, elderly. There would be churches and a cemetery, babies being born, people joining in marriage, dieing at the end of life. He began to imagine knowing all those lives at once and the awesomeness of the extent of the human experience began to overwhelm him. Each person caught up in their personal issues, so important to them, but so invisible from up here.

He could pick out a section road, running straight into the distance until it faded in the dark. Along it a vehicle was traveling, marked only by its headlights. Was it a couple, fighting -

- or hugging? A man going home from a job he hated, a tired worker heading home to a happy house, a drunk coming home from a bar? Inside that car was a human story, infinite in complexity, but from the sky reduced to near microscopic scale. The empty fields on either side were even more mysterious, in their blankness hiding infinitely more. Did anyone down there look up and see their lights, a fragile skin holding the lives of a dozen people and wonder about them?

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From the trip journal of Branka Pokasas

In the name of Jesus Christ, in the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful. Amen.

So, I too will have a little story of confronting the lions in the arena, even if someone swooped in and allowed me to fly away before they even roared. I admit I am a coward, and that was close enough. I cannot imagine the courage of those in the mountains who face death so often and seem to grow in serenity by doing so. All have spoken to us about that, those in my class at seminary who have gone on these trips before me. God does provide, it is not words on a page, it is truth. Forgive me, O Lord, that I seek to put you to the test and see for myself.

A different kind of courage is needed by those who run the shelter at St. Mark's in Kansas City. That was a moving visit. We arrived and sat in that big, dark sanctuary. We were given a few minutes and I was able to use them for prayer and reflection. They locked the doors behind us, apologizing – imagine, apologizing! – that they locked the doors of a church, which in obedience to the command of Jesus to should always remain open to those who seek refuge. But the doors were closed against those who do not respect the refuge it gives.

A few minutes, and slowly they came, by twos and threes. They seemed to come up out of the floor, but we learned later they came from a crypt under the altar. Pastor David would not

do well on the media, his face is lined and gaunt. His voice is even and quiet and he does not create a fuss. You strain to catch his words. But when he put his hand so slowly and lovingly on the back of one of the refugees you understood why later that person spoke of how his touch was the touch of Jesus.

They live there, or hide there, in the crypt under the altar in that dark sanctuary in the middle of the teeming city. They've come from the mountains for medical help, or to try to earn some money to live on, or they've come looking for a family member who is in jail.

Others of them have left the city, left their lives of deception. Pretending to support the government just became more than they could do, or they lost their jobs because they were called security risks. They could, in good conscience, no longer could work for The Beast, the Whore of Babylon. These people are waiting to make their passage across Kansas into the mountains to a relative form of safety. They will give up material safety to find spiritual safety.

We heard how they plan to hitch a freight train with the connivance of some friendly workers, or how they will pretend to be a driver and go in someone's semi truck on a run to Denver. Two of them had actually come back to teach others how to be safe on the trip and dodge the roadblocks and checkpoints and how to avoid the vigilante groups that we hear roam unchecked in eastern Colorado.

We all felt enormously guilty that an airplane will take us in a few hours with little risk on the journey they may spend days undertaking. But they all told us how important we were and how glad they were that we were coming to the villages and that they would never dream of being jealous of our comfort. Those who have so little give more than those who have much. The widow puts in her mite and it is more than the offerings of the rich.

Our trip is called an “accompaniment journey.” We are there to accompany those who oppose the oppressive government and work for justice, to walk with them, and testify to them that they do not walk alone. I cannot imagine that my presence is of such value, but we have already been thanked so many times for coming.

All of us had tears in our eyes when one who had come back from Colorado told about how his brother was to have followed him but had never arrived. So, hearing nothing for some weeks, he came back to look for him. No one in Kansas City could help him, his brother had left a week after the man had, and now was missing. There was no way of finding out what had happened. The man planned to retrace the path his brother would have taken, there were some safe places along the way, he could inquire if his brother had made it that far, but then what? If they had seen his brother in Salina, but he never reached Goodland, then what would he do? He could not contact the police, couldn't advertise, couldn't ask at every hospital along the way. I had a feeling, however, that the man would do those things any way, or some of them, and put his own life at risk. The powers and principalities of this world would discover his inquiries and demand he give an accounting of his actions. So he would have to lie and deceive in order to do justice. To do less would be to abandon his brother and he couldn't face that.

What should I do? I still don't know. To go and witness to a government official would do nothing. I cannot take up arms and fight, that is not my calling. I can preach and encourage, but I have not earned the right to do so. I so admire those on our trip, Juanita, the pilot, and Callia, also who have a clear calling for justice and who know they are working for peace. The Covingtons are living saints, to stand in their presence is to feel the light of Christ that they reflect. I don't know what I should do; I pray that God shows me my calling.

Lord have mercy. Jesus have mercy. Christ have mercy.