

# The Last Pilgrims

Book 1  
Part 1 Novella

by  
Michael Bunker

# The Last Pilgrims – Part 1 Novella

© Copyright 2011 by Michael Bunker.

FIRST PRINTING September 2011

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form, except for brief quotations in reviews, without the written permission of the author.

**For information on Michael Bunker, or to read his blog:**  
[www.michaelbunker.com](http://www.michaelbunker.com)

**To keep up with The Last Pilgrims:**  
[www.lastpilgrims.com](http://www.lastpilgrims.com)

**Please “Like” our Facebook Page:**  
[www.facebook.com/thelastpilgrims](http://www.facebook.com/thelastpilgrims)

**To listen to Michael Bunker’s BlogTalkRadio program:**  
[www.blogtalkradio.com/michaelbunker](http://www.blogtalkradio.com/michaelbunker)

To contact Michael Bunker, please write to:  
M. Bunker  
1251 CR 132  
Santa Anna, Texas 76878

# The Last Pilgrims

Book 1  
Part 1 Novella

by  
Michael Bunker

**Fiction Disclaimer:**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and events either are products of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

# The Reason for this Novella

Reader,

This novella consists of the first part (the first 1/3) of the first volume of The Last Pilgrims series, by Michael Bunker. This novella has been produced as part of our grassroots plan to get bloggers, website owners, and other reviewers interested in The Last Pilgrims saga.

The Last Pilgrims is an expansive story that will eventually encompass at least three volumes. The story takes place 20 years after a devastating and systemic collapse of the modern socio-economic and financial system, and the destruction of the modern, industrial, grid-based system of life and living.

More than a “post-apocalyptic” novel, TLP examines the nature and effects of different social systems; differing views, and opinions on survival; preparedness, self-defense, pacifism, and the ways and means of living.

Michael Bunker’s non-fiction book Surviving Off Off-Grid succeeded as a self-published book because it appeared at a time when the whole world was being forced to examine the sustainability and survivability of the current system. TLP takes the philosophies and ideas expressed in Surviving Off Off-Grid and puts them in a fictional setting, a useful tool for examining one possible future in light of the decisions, mistakes, and opinions of the past and the present.

We are seeking the help of bloggers, website owners, reviewers, fiction lovers, and anyone else who can help us get the word about The Last Pilgrims out there. As of this writing, we do not have a publisher or an agent, nor have we sought one, so we are taking it upon ourselves to engage in marketing and publicizing the book and the series. We are offering this novella to you so that you can get a good idea of the nature, quality, and direction

of the book; and so that we can ask for your help in spreading the word.

The story starts out very local, and focuses in the beginning on a few main characters and a host of minor characters, but will expand and bring in more of the country and the world as our characters interact and face challenges, difficulties, and trials. Naturally, this handful of chapters is going to be a shallow representation of the depth and breadth of the whole saga, and, by nature the story is incomplete, but we hope that you will find it engaging and that it will show forth the panorama of possibilities in the story. Stick with it, because early reviews are very positive, and almost universally proclaim that it gets better and better as it unfolds.

### **Why we think you should help:**

First, based on the early feedback and comments, we believe that TLP is a fabulous story, and interesting and enjoyable read, with captivating characters and storylines.

Second, we believe that TLP is educational and helpful and that it points people in the direction of solid help and good advice in the areas of worldview, preparedness, survival, etc.

### **What we are asking of you:**

If you like the story, please help us get word of the existence of The Last Pilgrims out. We would like to ask readers to blog about the book; link to and comment about the book in your social media (like Twitter and Facebook); write a review of what you have read; submit reviews or comments to other blogs, forums, radio shows, etc. Any way you can help us get word to the world about the book will be helpful.

**Please “Like” and SHARE our Facebook page:**

<http://facebook.com/thelastpilgrims>

**Please link to and SHARE our website:**

<http://lastpilgrims.com>

We will be posting video trailers and other added TLP information on The Last Pilgrims website over the next weeks and months (the first trailer is now up, so please share it!), so please share those as they become available and continue in the campaign with us to make TLP successful.

Only very rarely does a book or story come along that can become a national and worldwide bestseller based solely on the strength and quality of the story, and its applicability to our perilous times. We believe that this is that story. If people know about the book, they will read it, and by word of mouth, this book will succeed. We need your help to let people know the story exists.

Early comments about *The Last Pilgrims*:

“Fantastic writing... excellent, well-crafted and imaginative... It is rare that someone has such aptitude to interweave so many elements into their work, that it not only conveys a very important message, but it is also a true pleasure to read. Your well-developed characters, the really well considered plot, timing and flow of narrative have really helped in creating a true masterpiece. You really made me stop and think about a life that is possibly lurking not far in the future, when having almost instant access to people, places and material possessions would be impossible. - Natasha

"I'm HOOKED! It took until Chapter 5, but now I am getting on the internet daily, just to see if there's another chapter posted. Waiting for the next installment reminds me sometimes of the Saturday serials at the 10-cent movies and reads like an action movie. -William

"You are making this too good. I'm almost in despair that each chapter end forces me to wait before I get more story. It's like waiting for next week's installment of LOST..." -Ryan

"Wow, I was on the edge of my seat for the whole battle! I think it just keeps getting better." - Roger

"Every chapter I read becomes my new favorite! It was very interesting to get such a personal account of what happened after the crash. Not until I read SOOG did it occur to me that it didn't really matter how "prepared" my family was as long as there were unprepared people living around us. I think The Last Pilgrims will help more people see the error in their belief that they can "wait it out" until things get back to normal." -Joleen

# Table of Contents

Prologue.....	11
Chapter 1 - Jonathan.....	18
Chapter 2 - Jonathan's Letter .....	29
Chapter 3 - Gareth.....	37
Chapter 4 - Ruth .....	47
Chapter 5 - English .....	57
Chapter 6 - Phillip .....	69
Chapter 7 - Jonathan.....	80
Chapter 8 - David .....	89
Chapter 9 - Timothy.....	100
Chapter 10 - Ruth .....	110
Chapter 11 - Gareth.....	120
Chapter 12 - Ana .....	130

# Part One

# Prologue

**I**n the two decades following the collapse of the imperial Western powers, and the destruction of the industrial system, much of the medieval system of monarchy and aristocracy had reasserted itself throughout the world.

The collapse of the unviable and unsustainable world system had watered the earth with blood in a way that very few could have imagined, and only 20 years later, most of those who had lived through the crash now wonder how that system had managed to last for over 200 years.

Across a massively depopulated continent, ancient superstitions and idolatries had multiplied as the new monarchs adopted Napoleon's idea that a monolithic state religion, even if it were a false one, was necessary to the peace and security of the realm. The freedom to practice one's own religion, or to practice no formal religion at all, was rare, indeed, following the collapse. North America had come to resemble Old Europe in more ways than one.

Although the most ancient of motivations—greed, avarice, and covetousness—were behind most of the persecutions and genocides of this new era, these were almost exclusively carried out under the pretext of religion. The Bishops and Cardinals, much as they had done in Europe six centuries earlier, had multiplied like locusts across the land and served the more predacious monarchs as willingly as they did their own bellies.

Although much of what was once the United States had been conquered and placed under the fiefdom of some newly formed kingdom or another, large areas of the country—usually the wildest and most inaccessible parts—were still under the control of 'plain' peoples and sects. Akin to Amish or Mennonites of the past, they universally rejected absorption into the realms of those regal idolaters who intended to force the

practice of predominantly ceremonial religions, contrary to their own beliefs, upon them.

The *Vallenses*, one of the largest and most well-known of the ‘plain’ sects in the South, were branded as heretics by the religious orders of the region in order that the King of Aztlan, as he greatly hoped, could either subjugate them or remove them from his Kingdom. Due to the rather inhospitable climate and the relative inaccessibility of the region, the King had heretofore met with little success in bringing the Vallenses under his domination.

The dioceses of most of Central Texas and the Hill Country were, for the most part, still in open rebellion against the King of Aztlan, and persecutions and martyrdoms were not unheard of.

The Vallenses considered themselves humble and obedient servants and an exceedingly peaceful people. They only wished to farm their lands, raise and nurture their families outside of the predatory control of people with whom they had nothing in common, and to serve one another in humility and meekness.

The Bishops of New Rome had, over the intervening decades, sent missionaries and emissaries to the Vallenses in order to receive their voluntary submission, to both the King of Aztlan, and the accepted religion of the realm. Though they met with no success, the missionaries were always treated well by the plain people, and they had been assured that the Vallenses desired no Kingdom in this world, and that they sought only to be helpful and productive citizens in the realm. However, they had no intention of abjuring their religion or the free practice of it.

Though some of the Vallenses’ co-religionists from former urban areas and regions easily controlled by New Rome had capitulated and had brought themselves and their parishioners under the umbrella of the capital, the Vallensian people of Central Texas and the Texas Hill Country had resisted any amalgamation into the Kingdom and religion of Aztlan.

Of late, the duty and obligation of the subjugation of the Vallenses had fallen to the Duke of El Paso, an ambitious man

who had been a drug kingpin before the collapse. The Duke intended, by whatever means necessary, to foully and finally bring an end to any resistance in Central Texas.

The Vallenses, who had been led for some 30 years by their own Elders, elected from among themselves, foresaw the evil that was coming—both the collapse and the global disasters that followed. They believed that the Providence of God had guided them to their lands and to a way of life that left them mostly unharmed and untainted by the collapse of what they called ‘The World System’. They were thus largely unaffected by the fall of the system of commerce, industry, and society that ruled and reigned via *mammon* prior to the collapse.

The Vallenses believed that the lamp of the apostolic faith continued to burn among them, and they did desire to be a light of life in the darkest of the last days of the epoch.

Opposition to the King of Aztlan, who now reigned from his capital city of New Rome in the Sangre de Christo Mountains of what was once northern New Mexico, had united many militant bands of ‘freemen’ who, like the plain people, would not bow to either nearby prelates or distant kings.

Among the Vallensian low-rolling hills, valleys, and plains, there were smaller sects and men of independent mind and action. Some of these groups interacted and traded with the Vallenses, and supported their freedom of lifestyle, worldview, and belief. The more militant of these groups consisted of what had become small, autonomous military units or armies (New Rome would call them ‘terrorists’ and ‘insurgents’).

The relationships between the pacifistic Vallenses and the militia armies are complex. Although the Vallenses openly trade with, and often materially support, the freemen, against the laws of New Rome, their relationships are still often tense and strained. The plain people desire peace and tranquility and reject violence in pursuit of those aims. Most of the plain people believe that the violent actions of the militias, even if they are defensive and measured, bring more attention and persecution upon all of the people of the region. Their own history provides ample evidence in support of this view.

Only a decade ago, in the midst of the coldest days of a very cold post-collapse winter, a great tragedy befell the Vallensian people. Months prior to the tragic massacre, a handful of Vallensian traders were returning to their homes via the Old Comanche Road, when they were captured by a mounted unit of Aztlani soldiers under the command of Santos, a lieutenant in the service of the Duke of El Paso.

The Duke, answering a call from the King of Aztlan and the religious leaders of New Rome to purge the land of heretics and rebels, had sent out raiding parties in hopes of capturing Vallensian traders. New Rome hoped to gain from the captured men intelligence about the militias, after which the Vallenses would be executed as an example and warning to the rebels. The traders were dragged from their wagons, tied up, and hauled over 80 miles to San Angelo, now a frontier town amidst the vast and virtually ungovernable western expanse, where they were burned at the stake in the city square.

In response, a unit of militia riders stole into Santos's camp at night, taking the Aztlani commander hostage, and killing all of his entourage. Santos was carried back into San Angelo by night and was left impaled on a pike not far from where the Vallensian traders had been burned.

The Duke of El Paso, offended and enraged (Santos had been his brother-in-law), seeking to appease both the King and his own wife, had ordered a large army to march on a Vallensian colony to the East of San Angelo. This was an unprecedented attack, both in type and in scale. The Aztlani leadership had, prior to this event, been cautious and measured in their attacks, especially when those attacks called for them to move a large body of men across vast distances, in particular when traversing areas under nominal control of the freemen militias, without supply lines or pre-positioned material.

On their journey, the army was harried by freemen nightriders and raiders, killing several of their troops. Nonetheless, the army arrived mostly intact and had stormed suddenly into the innocent Vallensian colony, hoping to kill every man, woman and child. Those Vallenses who were not killed in

the initial attack fled eastward into the freezing night, carrying their young and their old with them.

The fleeing Vallenses—most without winter clothing—made it to the rolling hills and valleys of Central Texas, where many of them froze to death over the first few nights due to lack of food or shelter. Along the path of their flight, over 100 people—mostly children, the elderly, and the family members who would not abandon them—were found lying on the ground, dead from hypothermia.

Babies were found in the frozen clutches of their mothers, and aged couples were found dead in icy embraces.

This massacre had a polarizing effect on many of the free people of the region. Most Vallenses believed that the royal reprisal, though monstrous and murderous, was the result of the rash actions of the militant freemen. Others, including free traders, believed that the colonists had suffered because of their unwillingness to defend themselves. They had made targets of themselves, and they had suffered for it. In the years that followed the Winter Massacre, the Vallenses had attempted to persuade the militiamen with whom they had contact to be more cautious and circumspect in their responses to Aztlanian tyranny. “We do not want to pay for the vengeful notions of freemen honor,” they would say.

The free militias, on the other hand, increased their numbers, their training, and their intelligence gathering. Keeping the memory of the Winter Massacre alive in the minds of innocent people became one of their greatest recruiting tools.

There were other incidents and, as time passed, tensions grew.

The King of Aztlan, from the moment he had assumed power, desired absolutely to rid himself and his realm of all ‘heretics’. He had on many occasions requested, even *demand*ed, his underlings and bannermen to sweep the Vallenses and all of the free militias from Texas soil.

The king’s decrees did not have the desired effect for a number of reasons. First, the Vallenses lived in areas over which it was very difficult to impose rules or laws from outside. Furthermore, following the collapse, the roads had degraded

(some naturally, others by the willful acts of rebels and saints), making travel difficult, or even impossible. Finally, as most remote villages were hostile to Aztlan, it would have been nearly impossible to maintain a full-time fort or base so far away from Aztlani-controlled areas.

Second, the freemen militias patrolled most of the areas of Central and West Texas that were not directly and effectively under the active control of Aztlan.

Third, those local rulers were not keen to incur a loss to themselves and their own people. The Vallenses were the most productive producers of food and goods in all of Texas, thus a ruler was more likely to be immediately concerned with meeting the needs of his people than obeying a distant King. Oftentimes the belly trumps the heart.

In many ways, the world had returned to what most people had once believed was the idyllic and romantic days of kings and knights. However, once it became real, the romance was harder to appreciate. Still, many saw it as an act of God, who had hewn down the weeds and brambles (the deceitfulness of riches and the cares of the world) that choked out the Word and the way God would have men live.

Some of the same people who had once programmed computers, sold cars, or built shopping malls now plowed fields, picked cotton, and hand-dug their own root cellars.

So much of the old world had been an edifice built on shifting sand. Like an onion, technology had been layered upon technology until only a handful of people actually knew how anything really worked. People made their lives increasingly dependent on a structure that was less and less reliable and destined to crash. The amount of raw materials needed to maintain the most critical technologies on which the entirety of the advanced world balanced so dangerously was mind-boggling.

Prior to the collapse, the whole world could be shaken by what were, by historical standards, relatively minor natural (or unnatural) disasters. In their ignorance, people shut their eyes to the perilous condition of the entire system, ignoring the signs of the impending systemic collapse.

Like Rome and Ancient Greece before it, the Western lifestyle, coveted by the entire world, had created a very productive system (one that was both enviable and unviable). The system was unsustainable, as it was reliant on an increasing number of consumers, while a very small and ever shrinking number of people, using ever more advanced (and therefore tenuous) technology and machines, provided for most of the means of life, living, and survival.

New wonderments, gadgets and entertainment devices would appear daily, as if by magic, to keep the people stupefied and working mindlessly at highly specialized tasks in order to be able to afford a “dream” that had been concocted for them in the boardrooms of large corporations and in the advertising offices of Madison Avenue. The world had become a cult of dependency, and the deception was so complete and so overwhelming that to question it was considered de-facto proof of insanity.

In the end of the old world, nobody was responsible, yet everyone was complicit. The collapse was as inevitable as the arrival of a new morning. Almost everybody died.

# Chapter 1 - Jonathan

Jonathan handed the sealed letter to the post rider, knowing that it could take anywhere from a few weeks to several months to travel from Central Texas to the King of the South States—that is, if it ever got there at all. It was a typical Texas summer morning and it had never really cooled down overnight so that the heat was on them early as they stood under a sky as blue and as immense as any imagination could have ever conjured.

Communications had degraded significantly in the 20 years following the collapse, and although many people, even Jonathan, clearly remembered the days of instant messaging and cellular text service, those short-lived aberrations in the pattern and method of communicating had long since come to an inauspicious end. Post riders were, considering all of the dangers and obstacles they faced, remarkably effective and efficient at delivering important communications over long distances, especially when traveling east — away from the dangers of Aztlan. This was no Pony Express; nonetheless, he was hopeful that, at some point in the future, the King of the South States might be reading his letter.

One beneficial result of the collapse had balanced out the slow nature of long-distance communications... everything else moved slower too. Armies took weeks to transverse distances they used to cover in hours or days, or even in minutes—with helicopters and jets and parachutists dropping from airplanes.

He and several Vallensian friends had hiked out to meet the post rider down south of the Bethany Pass just off the Old Comanche road about a half-mile south of Bethany. The summer hadn't been a particularly wet one, but the buffalo grass

- where it grew - was still green, waving softly in the warm morning breezes.

He had decided to meet the rider out on the road in order to keep all speculation, concern, and gossip in Bethany to a minimum. Even as he handed the letter over to the rider, he hoped he was doing the right thing for his people. "May the Lord keep you well and safe on your journey," he said, holding the reins as the post rider mounted his horse.

There was no time for a reply because, just as the last words slipped from his mouth, an arrow sliced the air between them, burying itself in the gnarled bark of an ancient oak tree behind them. Jonathan reflexively, almost instinctively, reached up and pulled the rider by the collar from his horse and down to the ground where they both began to low-crawl towards a small, brush-covered hillock just off the road, in the hope that it might afford them some protection.

The men of Jonathan's party swarmed around noisily, shouting to one another as each tried to identify the direction from which the arrow had come. Several men came and surrounded Jonathan and the post rider, creating a protective wall around him.

After a few moments, they began to make their way slowly over the hill towards the pass and in the direction of Bethany. Almost immediately, and before they were able to even react, eight mounted men who seemed to appear out of nowhere surrounded them. All were dressed in the garb of freemen militia; heavily armed with what once would have been called 'primitive' weapons.

These were warriors and young, and only a few would have been even born before the collapse. With the exception of the older leaders, these men had experienced none of the comforting and corrupting influences of the pre-crash world. They were evidently born to battle. Several of the freemen had longbows in addition to the swords and knives they all carried. Jonathan stood upright and examined the faces of the men, looking for some clue as to their intentions, when the familiarity of one of them struck him. *Phillip*. As sure as anything in the world could be, he recognized his old friend, who now looked

back at him and smiled stiffly. “I suppose that arrow was a gift from you, old friend?” Jonathan asked.

“It was not ours,” Phillip responded, still smiling. “If it had been, you’d be dead. It was fired by an assassin... one that most likely snuck between our lines overnight.”

“I accept that it wasn’t your arrow, but I was not its intended target either. From its trajectory and direction, I would say that it was aimed at the post rider.”

Phillip’s eyes widened and he grinned almost imperceptibly. Turning to the man on his right he whispered a command and the man nodded obediently and rode off to the South. “Ten of my men are out there, already searching for the shooter. I issued my orders as soon as I knew that you were unharmed. The messenger I just sent to follow them will make sure that they keep him alive when he is captured. We’ll need to talk to him. If he has been sent to kill a post rider, there might be more that we need to know.”

Phillip rode over to the oak tree and pulled the arrow from it. He examined it for a moment, and then rode back to the company. “This is an Aztani arrow. The wood used to make it is unlike any found around here, and the fletching is helical, rather than straight. I’ve pulled plenty of these from the bodies of friends. I have no doubt about its origin.”

Jonathan gestured to the post rider, and with a slight nod, the rider galloped eastward carrying the letter to the King of the South States.

“It seems as if no time at all has passed since I saw you last, Phillip,” he said, after a brief pause, “but we both know that it has.”

Phillip looked up from examining the arrow. “Yes. It has.”

“It’s good to see you alive and well after all these years. Of course, we had heard word that you were out there... fighting. But,” Jonathan rubbed his beard, “it is hard to know anything for sure these days.” He looked his old friend in the eye. “I am so happy to finally see you. Let’s go into Bethany and get something to drink. It’s hot and I feel as if I have seen a ghost.”

Jonathan, indeed, felt as if he were in the presence of a ghost. Or a myth. Or maybe a legend. Still, there was no mistaking his old friend. Phillip was only a few years younger than him, but the militia leader was a hard, leathery man, muscled and firm—a man of war and of action. His eyes were piercing, blue, and deep.

Phillip beckoned to his men, and they responded instantly; moving in an immediate, well-coordinated response. “We have some business to attend to here first. We’ve had a mission failure, and there will need to be an... inquiry. Please go on back to Bethany. I know where to find you, and I’ll be along in good time.” Without another word, Phillip turned and rode back over the hill, followed by his entourage. In seconds, they were gone.

Jonathan and his men made it back to the village in good time. Although somewhat shaken by the turn of events, he really was glad to see Phillip. Phillip had once been his closest friend, and for many years since then, Jonathan had heard the stories, the legends, of *Phillip’s War* against Aztlan. It seemed clear now that, maybe for some time, Phillip had been creating and guarding a buffer zone around the Vallenses community, and, more particularly, around Jonathan. This new situation – the two leaders actually meeting together – if it became widely known in Aztlan, could cause troubles for Jonathan and his people.

The village that the Vallenses called Bethany was a still a small one, but it had grown significantly in the last 10 years. Very few people lived in the town proper, but several stores and small shops lined the main street and many of those who worked in the shops lived in small homes of adobe or stone construction in the town. For anyone with knowledge of history, Bethany looked as a small village in England or France might have looked only a few hundred years ago... with some Old American West exceptions. There was the blacksmith shop that flew the banner of Grayson the Smithy, and a General Store not unlike many that dotted the American West during the first European expansion into those lands. The town now had a Cooper, a Wheelwright, a Cobbler,

and a Brewer, and a small mill powered by mules and human muscle and sweat.

Bethany was neat and ordered, like the homes and lands of all of the Vallenses, and it may have been most notable for what it lacked. Owing to what had happened to the world over the last few decades, there were no ‘poor’, no beggars, no thieves, no highwaymen in the town. Some attributed this fact to the presence in Central Texas of the militias, but it could not be denied that everything seemed to have a meaning and purpose, and the town gave off an essence of safety and security, of peace and of contentment.

Jonathan and his men entered the public house, which offered all that its name implied, and a little bit more. It was a pub, but it also was the primary meeting place and conference center in Bethany. Jonathan glanced at the oaken walls, decorated with postings and notices—advertisements or requests for anything from barter labor, to ratting dogs, to cattle. The pub was constructed of thick old oaks, drawn up by oxen from along the Colorado River and hauled North, where they were hewn and placed by hand. The structure was one of the few buildings in Bethany made entirely of wood.

Jonathan related the events of the day to the rest of the Elders and men of the town who were present in the pub. They listened with fascination and not without some trepidation. “The *Ghost* is coming here?” they whispered to one another, in childlike awe. Jonathan was amused.

“Phillip is an old friend and not a phantom. He will have information we need. However, meeting with him could be... problematic if word of it gets to the Duke or the King,” he explained. “We’ll have to accept the risks, and probably much more than that. We are neither at war with Aztlan, nor in alliance with the freemen militias. We speak freely to both sides, and the King will just have to accept that.”

“The King will accept no such thing.” It was David, his 25-year-old son, who responded. “Aztlan is not in the business of *understanding* our situation,” he said, with respect, but not without a hint of sarcasm. “You give them too much credit, Father. Aztlan wants us destroyed and out of their way. They

will use any pretext for war against us, as you well know, and meeting with the leader of the resistance will be interpreted by them as an act of war. Not that I oppose it, because I don't, but you know it is true."

"Agreed," Jonathan replied, looking his son in the eye. "But our actions are not dictated by New Rome or El Paso. We do not answer to commanders of freeman base camps hidden on the Colorado, or in the desert, or up on Guadalupe Peak. Our actions are dictated by what is right and good—what is honorable."

David smiled, "I'm glad to hear you say that, Father. Then let us join forces with Phillip, have war with Aztlan, and be done with it!" Restrained laughter filled the room, as Elders and laymen alike watched the son jovially jab his father.

Although pacifism was the official position of the Vallenses, and had been from the beginning, not everyone was in agreement with it—at least not in the present situation. David, the pastor's own son, was among those who, though non-violent by nature and up-bringing, believed that the time had come, and was now long past, for armed resistance, or, at the very least, active material support of the freemen militias.

The light-hearted dispute among the men in the pub devolved into a more general discussion of current events, Aztlan's belligerence and genocidal intentions, and the state of the world as they knew it. Eventually, the conversation drifted back to Phillip and his Ghost militia, and to the speculation as to his reasons for actively defending Bethany and protecting Jonathan.

After an hour or so, Phillip and several of his men rode up to the public house. Jonathan watched through the large, open, glassless windows as Phillip's men wordlessly took up defensive positions throughout the village. Everyone assumed that a larger force of militia were out there, posted outside of the town, primarily to the West and South.

When Phillip entered the pub, a palpable silence settled on the room. Only the occasional whisper could be heard, as Vallensian men examined Phillip the Ghost and looked around

at one another in awe—resulting from both fear and simple curiosity.

There was not a man present who hadn't heard of Phillip and of his exploits at the helm of his tiny army. Some of the Elders looked suspiciously at the militia leader. They vividly recalled the events and aftermath of the Winter Massacre, the names and frozen faces of the dead imprinted in their memory forever. Others admired Phillip, and secretly (or in some cases, not so secretly) hoped that the Vallenses would decide to help the freemen in their war against Aztlanian tyranny and aggression. It was a room divided by passions, policy, and principles.

Phillip nodded to the assembled Vallenses and greeted them individually as he made his way through the gathered throng to where Jonathan had risen from his seat. Phillip and the Vallensian pastor embraced as old friends ought, and Jonathan clasped Phillip's arm and back as he guided his guest into a seat of honor at the head of a long trestle table carved exquisitely by Vallensian hand out of the reddest Mesquite wood.

"Welcome Phillip, and may God's grace, mercy and protection be upon you and your people," Jonathan intoned, almost sadly.

"And upon you all," Phillip replied. "It was not our plan to disturb you today, or to interfere with your business in any way. However, it seems that the attack on the post rider—if that is indeed what it was—has altered our plans."

"It was God's will," Jonathan stated plainly, and all of the Vallenses nodded their agreement.

"Then God has also willed that you face your attacker, because my men caught up with the Aztlanian assassin. He had not fled very far. He was captured as he stopped to rest by Mud Creek and was taken to custody." Phillip dropped his head and fiddled with his hat, which he had removed upon entering the pub. "If this had been merely an assassination attempt upon your person, Jonathan, we would have already dealt with him according to our own justice. He'd be dead, and we'd be gone. But it seems that an attack on a simple post rider, when the leader of the Vallensian people is only steps away, requires that we spend some time questioning the man." Phillip glanced

around the room before adding, almost as in afterthought, “He surrendered peacefully enough.”

“Where is he?” Jonathan asked.

“My men are holding him just outside of the village. We wanted your permission to bring him in, since he is bound and in our custody.”

“If he is not armed, will you untie him and bring him here?”

“No, brother,” Phillip replied seriously, “we will allow you to *assist us* in questioning him, but only if he remains bound. If you don’t agree, we will take our leave and deal with him in our own way.”

Jonathan looked up into the dark oaken rafters before closing his eyes in thought. After a pause, he nodded to Phillip. “Given that you leave me no choice, I suggest that you bring him,” Jonathan sighed, shaking his head, “with one proviso—the man may not be killed or harmed while he is on our soil.” The Vallensian men whispered among themselves, some indicating disagreement, while others nodded solemnly.

Phillip nodded to one of his men who was then standing outside the open window, watching the proceedings. The man signaled to an unseen compatriot and, moments later, the assassin appeared at the door of the pub, in the very effective control of three of Phillip’s armed soldiers.

Soon, a rush of activity ensued. Tables were moved, chairs were stacked along the walls to provide the observers a better view, and an area for questioning was cleared near the center of the pub. David Wall provided a chair for the Aztlanian prisoner, and, for the longest time, there was silence, as the men in the room pondered on how to conduct the proceedings. After much shuffling and whispering, Jonathan rose and approached the bound man.

“I am Jonathan Wall, Pastor to the Vallenses. We welcome you, in these unhappy circumstances, to our village. We pray that no harm comes to you here.” Jonathan paused to collect his thoughts. “We would like to know of your mission, and of your intentions. We would like to know why you have attacked us, as we are peaceful people, and why your government

seeks to do us evil when we strive only towards good.” Jonathan paused again before continuing, “But let me tell you a bit about the situation you face, so you do not try to deceive us.” Jonathan approached the prisoner and crouched down before him, “These soldiers are not with us. They are not part of us. They don’t care for your life or your soul. It is most probable that, barring some divine intervention, you *will* die today. If you lie to me, we will all know it, and your fate will be sealed by your own hand. It will be an act of suicide, which we do not believe God forgives. If, however, you are killed today by these men, against our will and your own, after you have dealt honestly with us and have provided us with the answers we seek,” Jonathan paused a moment for effect, “your death will be a murder, and will be on the head of another. I desire to help you, not hurt you, regardless of your aims or intentions.”

With that, Jonathan stood up and began to pace back and forth before the prisoner. “Here is where I am confused... First, you are a single assassin, obviously capable of infiltrating many miles behind the military lines of very able and wary militiamen. You are obviously skilled, and trusted by those who sent you. Yet, your shot missed the target, as if intentionally, as it was evidently not blocked or deflected in any way. My fourteen-year-old daughter could have made that shot, and successfully too. I, thus, cannot fathom how an assassin could have missed.” Jonathan stopped for a minute, and then scratched his head. “Second. Given that you were able to sneak through the lines of the freemen militia, it is incomprehensible that you would not use the same precautions on your return journey. Instead, you took your sweet time, and were captured out in the open, resting by a creek. That makes it seem, at least to me, that you wanted to get caught. Why?”

The men in the pub began to whisper to each other excitedly. Obviously, these were the factors that many of them—even the men who had been there during the attack—had not considered. Jonathan continued...

“Third. Your arrow was obviously that of Aztlani military. If your intention was to kill either the post rider, or me, by using an Aztlani arrow, you would have openly announced the

belligerent intentions of New Rome to deal murderously with us. Such foolish action could prompt neutral people, and even some among ourselves, to join the likes of Phillip in their fight against Aztlan army.” Jonathan looked around the room, silently indicating that he recognized that many of them privately hoped to join the battle against Aztlan. “Your actions betray you, my friend, and they make me wonder what your true intentions are.”

“He is a spy, sent here to infiltrate us!” David exclaimed, pulling on the sleeve of his father.

“Let’s ask him. If he is smart enough, he will not lie to us, given the implications I outlined for him,” Jonathan retorted calmly. “Are you a spy, sir? Are you here to infiltrate our peaceful people? What did you hope to learn?”

The assassin was clearly nervous, but not to the extent that would be expected under the circumstances. It seemed to Jonathan that all of his actions had led their captive to this moment. He knew what he was doing. He was a short man, but athletic and strong. His black curly hair was in stark and ironic contrast to the very short, almost military hairstyle of the pacifistic Vallensian men. He was young, probably a *middling* - born just before the collapse - and he had obviously been trained in military tactics, probably in some Aztlan school. His voice was steady as he addressed Jonathan. “I am not a spy, but I have been trained as an assassin. I did miss on purpose, and I did use the Aztlan arrow intentionally to signal that purpose to you, sir. My target, at least by orders given to me by my superiors in El Paso, was the post rider and not yourself. The Duke, and the King for that matter, would never assassinate you, Mr. Wall, at least not based on the current situation. You are as safe against Aztlan violence as any man could be. The Duke ordered that the post rider be killed, and preferably in your presence. Your letter was never to reach the King of the South States.”

“But you missed on purpose?” Jonathan asked.

“I did”

“Why is that?”

“To warn you, sir,” the assassin replied, his eyes staring intently at the Vallensian leader.

“To warn me of what?”

“Of war, sir.”

As the word slipped out of his mouth, a blood-curdling scream froze everyone in the room. The tension had been so thick, that it had the men—Vallensian and non-Vallensian alike—hanging on every word exchanged between the prisoner and Jonathan. The scream came from the throat of one of the Vallensian men, a farmer, and seemed to paralyze all present, including Phillip’s guards, which seemed to be its intent. As the man moved forward, he brought forth a dagger that had been hidden in his belt, covered by his Vallensian vest. In a split second, he struck the bound assassin.

Almost instantaneously, the sword of Phillip the Ghost flew from its sheath, the finely honed blade slicing soundlessly through the neck of the farmer Ronald Getz. Getz fell to the floor, bleeding profusely from the gaping wound in his throat. He bled out in seconds.

Jonathan’s glance followed upward from the still twitching Vallensian farmer until it settled on the Aztlani assassin. The dagger had missed its mark and the hilt of the knife stuck out of the man’s shoulder. He was clearly in pain, and appeared shocked, gasping for air, as Vallensian men and Phillip’s soldiers alike rushed to him.

The eyes of Jonathan the Pastor and Phillip the warrior met as blood dripped from the tip of the sword of the Ghost.

# Chapter 2 - Jonathan's Letter

TO

HIS GREAT MAJESTY

RICHARD the FIRST,

KING of the SOUTH STATES

Sir,

At the hazard of relating events and history that are already well known to the King, it is necessary that I provide you with a brief (or as brief as will suffice) summary of the recent history of our people and our lands before and after the collapse of the United States of America only twenty years ago.

In the intervening decades, despite hardships and difficulties—not unlike those faced by others that survived the upheavals that followed the collapse and dissolution of America and the industrialized system throughout the world—our people have not only survived, but have thrived in what was once considered the inhospitable land and climate of Central Texas. Thus, it pains me to say that our land is currently and unhappily under the thumb of the Kingdom of Aztlan and his puppet, the Duke of El Paso.

The entire world knows of the continuing miracle of our preservation and success, of the growth of what was once a nominal and largely unheard of sect into a mini nation-state of over 20,000 souls, and of the proliferation of Vallensian colonies in Texas and elsewhere in North America. Prior to our lands

coming under the pretended civil control of the Kingdom of Aztlan, we were sought out, and appealed to, by virtually every ruler and nation in the known world, *your own nation not excepted*, to remove ourselves from Texas and to relocate to their countries. They valued our wisdom and hoped that, with our help, they too could bring the wilds of their own lands, now uncultivated and unproductive due to massive depopulation and a lack of expertise required to survive in the current climate, under that benevolent dominion and tillage for which our people are now universally famous. Notwithstanding the numerous generous offers—including that most graciously made to us by your own respected predecessor—we have chosen to remain in our own lands, believing that God Almighty has given these plains and hills unto us in order to magnify His own glory in the taming of such a supposedly inhospitable place even in this difficult time. This is our home.

Our people have overcome so many adversities, as well as the attacks and genocidal intentions of our enemies; and, having endured it all, we again stand in peril of the loss of our lives and lands.

We find ourselves, as a peaceful and passive people, under the threat of annihilation and genocide by the treacherous King of Aztlan, who—despite our peaceful ways and productive lives—desires to bring us into subjection to his own mind and sovereignty (via his pestilent hirelings). He aims to impose upon us his oppressive military tyranny, as well as his own religion—one that is abhorrent to our people and inherently contrary to our own.

We did come into this land over 30 years ago, separating ourselves from the Kingdoms of This World, in order to live our lives peaceably, producing our living from the land by the sweat of our own brow. By choosing this simple way of life, we were no burden to any man or government. We lived and worked with the intention of being a blessing to those ‘round about by making of our poor desert rangeland good and productive soil, and by being an example of good stewardship and responsibility to the people who then lived in the cities and towns around us. This we did diligently, obeying all of the commandments and

requirements of men and magistrates that were not specifically contrary to the commandments of our God, and doing harm to no one at all. Our own countrymen that have relocated into Your Grace's country may bear you witness that our conduct has always been pure and holy and that we in no way have tried to gather unto ourselves power, prestige, or position. We have not, heretofore, born arms against the King of Aztlan; rather, we have submitted ourselves (as much as we are able)—according to the commandments of our God—to those civil magistrates with whom God has seen fit to burden us.

During our first ten years on the land (the decade before the collapse), we worked tirelessly, and had managed to build our infrastructure—constructing barns and out-buildings, and working to make productive soil out of what was once marginal range land. We captured rainwater by building ponds, tanks, and cisterns. As much as we could, we relied on our own productivity and the improvement of our lands in order to provide the basic life necessities for ourselves. We weaned ourselves from the common culture of consumption, and, in effect, created a viable, alternative society—one based on production, rather than consumption. During this time, we devoted much of our own precious time and resources to teaching others to do as we did, and actively participated in helping others to learn to survive and thrive in the difficult times that were certain to follow.

When the collapse came, we were not taken by surprise, as most people were; and though we had no way of knowing exactly when that collapse would come, we were absolutely certain that it *would* come and therefore we had prepared diligently for it.

Following the initial maelstrom of violence that accompanied the collapse of the *Just-In-Time* system of consumer supply, there were uncountable disasters and civil wars leading up to the inevitable dissolution of the civil governments based on that system, and a restructuring of the global political landscape. In the aftermath, many disparate fiefdoms arose, each vying for civil power and authority in the vacuum that resulted from the collapse. We took no part in that struggle for power and in no way sought to gain from the global demise.

The tragic die-off and depopulation of the continent, the end of the availability and ubiquity of readily available and inexpensive power, the re-localization of just about every resource, and the subsequent restructuring of society along the lines and model of medieval Europe—all of these factors brought about a ‘New World Order’. However, it was not at all what had been expected by the bulk of the world, and certainly did not resemble the teachings by modernist religions prior to the collapse. The ‘New World Order’ was formed more along the lines of the Old World Order—as newly formed nation-states came to the conclusion that modernization, industrialization, and liberalization had been primary causes behind the inevitable collapse. Thus, it was largely accepted that—under the new circumstances, with remarkably smaller populations—monarchy was very likely the best and most sustainable way to govern a greatly depopulated and transfigured world.

Although we were not untouched by the global tragedy, and have suffered greatly, we praise our God that we were protected from the bulk of the violence, anarchy, and bloodshed that destroyed much of the former country in the aftermath of the collapse.

The primary area in which we were correct concerning the manner of the collapse was in our prediction that there would be a loss of power on the global scale, rendering most “modern” technology unusable. The massive loss of life and infrastructure brought about by the collapse (or rather, the inevitable destruction that followed) was beyond what most people imagined. I praise God for sparing us from the worst of it, protecting us via our remote and seemingly unattractive location, our predilection for preparedness and sustainability, along with the many other deliverances we experienced via Divine intervention.

As we had rejected most modern technologies long before the collapse—deeming them detrimental to our safety, our security, our peace, and the simplicity of our lifestyle—we had many advantages in the very hard years that would come.

After a year or so had passed from the worst events of the collapse, many cliques, sects, and entities started vying for

power. Our own region fell under the pretended authority of the first Kingdom of Mexico, a realm hastily thrown together by criminal political and military groups south of the former border, in an attempt to fill the vacuum of power left by the dissolution of the government of the United States.

Our lands were in the far Northeastern region of this dominion; thus, owing to difficult travel conditions, we were mostly left to ourselves during the few years of this period.

Moral judgments aside, the first King of Mexico did us little real harm—though I am certain he would have consumed us and/or enslaved us for our productive capability had he been able or permitted to do so by God.

Shortly after, the power of the King of Mexico waned due to the over-extension and over-reaching of his grasp. He was unable to control his northern reaches (especially the drug cartels and criminal enterprises) any better than the nation of Mexico had done prior to the collapse. Thus, when he had run out of ammunition for his guns—and when most of the more productive citizens had been killed or had fled from his poor management and insatiable greed—the King of Mexico was overthrown by the citizenry of his own realm. The new power vacuum didn't remain for long and, within a year, the people of Northern Mexico (the former border states) found themselves overwhelmed by the onrushing invader from the West.

The King of Aztlan—whose Kingdom and power constituted the heavily armed drug gangs, once at war with one another along the border between America and Mexico—sensed the weakness of his own kinsmen within the first Kingdom of Mexico. He swiftly moved his armies westward and, through murder and violence, absorbed the northern portion of the Kingdom of Mexico into his own Kingdom. Regardless of what Aztlan claimed, the King was only able to maintain any real control of the former border regions from California to as far as El Paso in Texas, including the southern Rocky Mountain areas in the former New Mexico that he had first conquered with his initial northward push during the early days of the collapse.

On the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo mountains in the former New Mexico (in a place once known as Taos), Aztlan constructed their new capitol which they named New Rome.

The collapse marked the end of more than just the industrial, digital, and consumer revolutions. The drug revolution died with it too. This, in my view, was a foregone conclusion, given some very important and inescapable facts:

The population of North America—according to rather conservative estimates—was reduced by almost 90%, thereby destroying the primary market for illicit drugs. Admittedly, these numbers are estimates, since we have very little information from any of the areas in the northern regions of North America.

There was no coherent, recognizable, accepted currency for many years that followed. Even corrupt farmers were unwilling to dedicate hundreds of acres to drug production when most of the people were starving, and when there was no easy and transferrable means of exchange.

In the absence of the soul-deadening comforts, artificially created and sustained by the former social, cultural, economic, and financial system, very few people who survived were tempted to use drugs. Moreover, former drug users were ill prepared for the new hardships, and rarely survived. Thus, the problem took care of itself.

The collapse of the former, rather lucrative, means of support for the Kingdom of Aztlan meant that evil had to seek other financial opportunities. Kings and nations generally resolve to follow one of two policies as it pertains to feeding and supplying the people:

Supporting and protecting the productive capabilities of the people, encouraging them and incentivizing them to work hard and be productive, or,

Reliance on consumption, specialization, aggression, tyranny, and military conquest in order to maintain and expand the Kingdom.

Every nation-state—whether its citizens realize it or not—travels down one of these two paths. While it is obvious that your own highness has chosen the former and most godly route, the King of Aztlan has openly chosen the latter.

We have not accepted this usurpation, though we are officially under his dominion. Our lands were our own and were worked and improved by our own hands long before any usurpers came to claim divine right over our soil.

As Your Highness knows, we have been courted by many monarchs because of the inherent value that is annexed to our right management and benevolent dominion of our soil. What, then, can be the reason that the King of Aztlan and his wicked magistrate the Duke of El Paso, despite all of the benefits he, his fiefdom, and his people would enjoy by dealing benevolently with us, have determined to destroy us unless we succumb to his rule?

Why does he deal harshly with us, when we seek nothing but peace, and—if left in peace—we might help feed his people and help his Kingdom prosper? Is it not that the King of Aztlan and his compatriot, the Duke of El Paso, seek to pacify and homogenize the entire rightful Republic of Texas in order to use it as a launching pad and base for the invasion of your own realms? If my assumption is incorrect, what other benefit could there possibly be to this usurper King?

Would your own highness waste resources and manpower to subjugate or obliterate a peaceful and productive people in your own realm? Of course not!

The belligerent actions of the King of Aztlan only make sense if it is his intention to unite himself with his co-religionists in Louisiana to move militarily against a more profitable foe. It is our belief that our destruction or subjugation is only an intermediate step by the King of Aztlan in his overall plan to make war against your own Kingdom—a fact your highness ought to urgently consider.

Our people, who are ever grateful to Your Highness for any benevolence shown to us, are not willing to make war against the King of Aztlan, although many would have us do so. We are peace lovers and we believe in eschewing all violence. We believe that the ‘sword of just defense’ lies in the hand of legitimate civil magistrates, and, before God, we call upon those magistrates to do what is right—to protect the innocent and punish all evildoers.

While we do rely on Providence and the goodness and mercy of Almighty God to defend and protect us, we appeal to you, His servant, that you might be a sword and a scourge in the hand of the Mighty King of Kings, to protect His beloved.

I am your obedient servant,

Jonathan Wall - Elder and Pastor among the Vallenses

## Chapter 3 - Gareth

Gareth stirred in his large Vallensian bed. It was an unattractive but comfortable one, consisting of a hand-stuffed mattress, amply filled with goose down, and possibly cotton, wool, or whatever else was soft and near at hand. The bed frame was made of tall, gnarled, hand-hewn mesquite posts, serviceably fitted together with oaken pegs. The bed stood quite high off the ground to take advantage of any cool breeze that might flow in through the windows. Handmade mosquito netting hung over the posts at the head of the bed, ready to be draped over all four posts at night, when the windows were all opened to let in the June night air.

The mattress rested on ropes drawn very tightly through holes drilled through the frame. Overall, it was a nice bed, Gareth thought.

The heat was a constant, but bearable. Jonathan Wall had designed his house to remain as cool as possible throughout the summer. The house was built mostly below ground level, with only 3 or 4 feet extending above the ground where windows brought in breezes and carried out the heat. In portions of the house - according to Wally the cook - underground "pipes" hundreds of feet long brought in cool air, just like air-conditioning, only without any electrical power. Even in blistering heat, the Wall house remained quite comfortable. Still, for the 25-year-old Gareth, raised at nearly 7,000 feet in the mountains of Aztlan, terms like 'hot' and 'cool' were certainly relative.

Outside the window, the ground fell sharply and he could see that the fields on the other side of the drive were ripe for harvest. He watched as the wind made waves in the golden wheat that flowed on for several thousand yards before crashing uneventfully into a pecan orchard. The sky was as blue as any he

had ever seen, even in the mountains, and unspotted by any clouds whatsoever.

A sharp pain shot through Gareth's body as he tried to twist his torso so he could get a better look out of the window. The wound to his shoulder was healing slowly, but he knew that it would take time before the pain subsided. The injury had been severe, but non-lethal. The infection that set in after only a day in custody was what had nearly killed him.

Jonathan and his famil attacked Gareth's infection very aggressively, using dozens of anti-bacterial and anti-viral herbal remedies, including large doses of fresh, spicy garlic.

The most effective cure, though, to Gareth's delight, was copious amounts of beer brewed according to the most ancient traditions. Wally informed him that beer, when brewed naturally—according to the recipes used by the ancient Nubians, Hebrews, and Egyptians—created *tetracycline* in the human body—a powerful broad-spectrum antibiotic. This fact was discovered in the last decade of the 20th century when archeologists and scientists detected tetracycline in the bones of mummies dating back 3,000 years, and concluded after much investigation that the tetracycline was a byproduct of natural beer production. Subsequently, many historians and scientists concluded that naturally fermented beer was likely responsible for halting many of the plagues that devastated Europe during and after the Middle Ages.

It seems that when Europeans stopped drinking the infected water from filthy rivers, which were infested with deadly bacteria, and started drinking naturally fermented beer, the plagues were stayed and the populations of Europe stopped decreasing. Even babies and children were given beer instead of water and their mortality rates plummeted. In this way, beer had likely saved the world. As for Gareth—he was mainly just glad that beer had saved *him*. Jonathan had promised him that after he had recuperated sufficiently, if it were possible, he would show Gareth how beer was brewed at the Wall's ranch.

Gareth had been brought to the Wall homestead after the farmer — actually an Aztlanian spy named Ronald Getz — had attacked him in the pub. Getz's bloody death during an attempt

to stop Gareth from reporting the pending attack on the Vallenses, had shocked the community, and it was still the main topic of conversation among the Vallensian people.

Gareth was still not sure exactly where he stood among these plain people, but he was glad to be alive, and to be able to move forward with his personal mission.

“Good afternoon, Assassin,” Phillip greeted him jokingly.

When exactly Phillip had entered the room, Gareth could not say. *I hate it when he does that!*

“Peace be unto you, Ghost,” Gareth responded, showing exaggerated irritation with Phillip’s manner of entry by spitting out the word ‘ghost’ with emphatic, but almost playful derision. He knew that Phillip hated the name ‘ghost’ as much as he himself hated being called ‘assassin’.

“One day, perhaps when you deign to get out of your invalid’s bed, you and I can work out our nicknames in the yard, with swords, like peaceful gentlemen,” Phillip retorted, smiling.

“I would never fight you Phillip. I’m told that you never lose a fight, you can walk between the raindrops, you never leave footprints, and you cannot be killed. Only a fool would engage in swordplay with a spectre.”

“I’m afraid,” Phillip said, rolling his eyes, “that both my prowess and my abilities are highly exaggerated.”

“They say the infection got into my blood, which is why my recovery has been a bit delayed,” Gareth changed the subject, “but I can tell you that there are worse places and worse ways to spend a summer. The Vallensian peasant food is fabulous, and the beer mugs are bottomless. Who would have known? I’ve gained twenty pounds while almost dying of an infection from a knife wound.”

“A scratch, really—nothing to cause a grown man to spend a week in bed,” Phillip teased.

He was obviously enjoying himself, so he continued. “I’ve had at least two dozen such nicks and I cannot recall a single one that even made me sleepy. You are strong young man; you should have bounced back in no time at all.”

“Well, Ghost, I am clearly not the man you are, but then, neither are you. Still, they do tell me that I’m healing and getting stronger.”

Gareth prodded the knife wound gingerly, testing the area with his fingertips. He noticed that, almost imperceptibly, Phillip showed some satisfaction that he was improving. He sensed from his many conversations with the militia leader over the past week that Phillip was somehow ashamed or angry with himself that he had not moved fast enough to prevent his prisoner from being harmed while in his custody. Maybe that was why he visited so often.

“If Vallensian hospitality and food have anything to do with it, I’ll be fit enough for hanging in no time.”

“Sadly, they’d not have you hang. They’d have you as a pet dog, curled up on the hearth, nibbling at their dainties from a bowl. They are pacifists, remember.” Phillip stroked his long, graying beard, looking out of the window as if in deep thought. “As for me, Assassin, I cannot decide whether I would rather see you hanged, run through with a sword, impaled, or made into a eunuch so you can fetch me beer and apples.”

“I can tell that you are growing fond of me, Ghost.”

“Maybe I am. Now, enough fun. We need to talk.”

Gareth had become accustomed to daily sparring with Phillip. Sometimes Phillip would spend most of the day with him. Still, he knew that the battle of tongues was just a prelude and that the militia leader inevitably wanted more intelligence from him about Aztlan, El Paso, and the Duke.

All light jesting aside, he knew that his future would be decided as soon as he was well enough to walk. There were those who still did not believe him. They didn’t believe that he wasn’t a spy, and that he had actually come to warn them and encourage them to defend themselves. Some folk saw his manner and means of arrival as suspicious, and he really couldn’t blame them for those suspicions. They rightfully wondered why he had not just walked up and announced that he was a traitor to

Aztlan, and that he had critical information for the militia and Jonathan.

It is true, Gareth thought, that any number of things in his seemingly complicated plan could have ruined his opportunity to warn Jonathan and the Vallenses. He could have been captured or killed by the Ghost's militia as he made his way toward Bethany. Confident in his abilities and training, Gareth did not see this as likely as some apparently did.

Some Vallensian folks said that his stunt with the arrow could easily have been missed altogether or mistaken by Jonathan. If Jonathan had not decoded the message in his mind fast enough; if Jonathan had not indicated to Phillip that the post rider was the real target; if Phillip had not noticed that the arrow was from an Aztlani quiver; then the militiamen men might have immediately killed him when they caught up with him as he waited for them by the creek. *True*, Gareth thought. *Any of those things might have happened.* But what alternative was there? His goal was not just to warn the enemies of Aztlan. His goal was not even to be believed by Jonathan. His goal was *to be trusted*, because that was the only way that he was ever going to accomplish his own private objectives.

To ride up to the Ghost's militiamen and claim to be a traitor to Aztlan would just as likely have gotten him killed. In Aztlan, it was said that Phillip's ghostmen generally shot first and asked questions later. The militias were suspicious and paranoid, and—according to some—that is what keeps them alive. The militia might trust information that they extracted from a captured enemy, but they were very unlikely to trust information freely given by an Aztlani traitor.

So... what if he had snuck through the militia lines, and had gotten to Jonathan without being intercepted? That certainly seemed like the most obvious option; in fact, it was the one he had pondered the most, as he rode over the many hundreds of miles eastward from El Paso.

Still, had he chosen that path, there was some likelihood that Jonathan or the Vallensian people would have believed him. They might even have heeded his warning, but they would have remained just as suspicious as they are now, only the suspicion

would have been universal. Jonathan would not trust him, and he would never have gotten to meet Phillip at all. Aztlani refugees didn't get an audience with the Ghost merely by calling for it.

Certainly, he never would have gotten Jonathan and Phillip in the same room, which had been the real coup, considering Gareth's goal. Phillip would have reckoned it as a trap. Many Aztlani refugees had found a home among the Vallenses, but building trust with the plain people of Central Texas took time. The spy Ronald Getz had been living and farming among them for years. The *real* message that Gareth needed to deliver was urgent. He didn't have years to build up trust.

Yes, his plan was risky, and probably full of holes. At best, there was a 40% probability that it would come off right. Still, it was worth the risk, given that he needed an opportunity to get Phillip and Jonathan together. He saw no other way to accomplish it. It was believed in El Paso and in New Rome that Phillip and Jonathan had not spoken in years - in fact, the Aztlanis wanted the two rebels to stay estranged more than they wanted just about anything else. Above all, then, Gareth wanted to rekindle the relationship between Phillip and Jonathan.

Even if he had failed, Phillip would have eventually learned of the Duke's plan, but weeks and maybe months of preparation time would have been lost.

Yes. It had been worth the risk. Jonathan was a good man with a spectacularly sharp and curious mind and he had pierced through the cloud of confusion and correctly interpreted Gareth's intentions. Phillip, though he was still cautious, had, at the very least, determined that—regardless of his intentions—an assassin was valuable for gathering new intelligence. Exposing Getz as the spy had been a bonus that had earned Gareth a reprieve in Phillip's eyes—at least for now.

“Quit staring out of the window you assassin dog,” Phillip snarled, “I need answers from you!”

“What could you possibly still want to know?”

“For a good part of the last week, you've been rather delirious from your feigned infection. I've humored you because

you are weak and obviously addle-brained. But now I want to go back over some things again.”

Gareth sighed deeply, rolling his eyes in exasperation. The game continued. Phillip mixed up his questions, changing directions randomly, asking about various facts of which he already had perfect knowledge, trying to trip him up, or catch him in a lie. The interview was peppered with well-planned diversionary questions, often followed by long stares designed to keep Gareth talking.

“We’ve had a rolling guerilla war with the Duke for many years. Why has he decided to engage in a full-scale attack now?” Phillip asked.

“He is being pressured by the King who has some intentions on moving his borders eastward but cannot do so, as long as a huge chunk of Central and Eastern Texas remain either ungovernable because of militia activity, or in the hands of the Vallenses. The Vallensian people reject his authority along with that of the Church. There are even rumors that the Vallensian colonies in the Piney Woods have signed a treaty with the Duke of Jackson in the former Mississippi.”

Phillip pulled up a wooden chair and sat next to Gareth’s bed. “I guess I just don’t see much here that is new or surprising. Why the change? What is the plan?”

“You have to understand that the King has both a dream and a nightmare. If you understand those two things, the rest of this is easy,” Gareth said.

“Then talk to me; explain those royal dreams and nightmares.”

Gareth lifted himself up in the bed, propping himself up against the headboard. The sounds of cicadas and birds drifted in on a warm breeze. He reached down and took a long drink from his ever-present mug of beer.

“The dream is simple. The Duke of Louisiana is a very religious man, and he has fully embraced the faith of New Rome. He is secretly allied with Aztlan, even though he is nominally under the authority of the King of the South States. He is also very ambitious.

“Aztlan and Louisiana have you in what could become a very effective vice, and they intend to squeeze at any moment. The King dreams of uniting the entire South of what was once the United States into a single Southern Kingdom.”

Phillip shook his head. “Considering that there are tens of thousands of us who will never submit to New Rome, it is a problematic dream at best. In addition, we could rely on the support of the King of the South States, who is friendly to, or at least tolerant of, our religion and overtly hostile to the beast that is Aztlan,” Phillip said.

“Now, we get to the nightmare,” Gareth continued, pointing towards his own head to emphasize the point. “The King’s bed is drenched with night sweats when he envisions two very scary possibilities. The first is that the King of the South States, with all of his wealth and resources, might come to the aid of the Vallenses. The other... actually the more frightening of the two possibilities, is that Jonathan will cast off his reckless and defeatist pacifism and join you in a rebellion against Aztlan.”

With that, Gareth drew closer to Phillip. There was excitement in his voice and a sparkle in his eyes as he spoke.

“Jonathan is the key. With one word, he could unite the whole world against Aztlan. He is admired or feared everywhere, even in New Rome. It is most probable that the King of the South States will not move, even on the Vallenses’ behalf, unless Jonathan Wall agrees to fight.”

Gareth sank against the headboard, clearly exhausted by the interrogation. “I cannot say that all is lost if you cannot convince Jonathan to join you, but...,” he let the thought linger, as if to suggest that the danger is unspeakable.

“Jonathan will never fight. This I know,” Phillip said softly. “We waste time speaking of it, because it isn’t going to happen. We have to plan to make war with Aztlan without him.”

Silence fell on the room, as the Ghost and the Assassin pondered on all the possibilities they would have at their disposal if only Jonathan would fight. Before long, Phillip shook his head as if he was shaking off the remnants of doubt, or cleansing himself of his wishful thinking.

“Let’s talk about Aztlan. How many soldiers is the Duke bringing and how long until they get here? Which way will they come, and what arms will they carry? Sit back up you assassin dog, and tell me what you know!” He was deliberately harsh in addressing Gareth, as if scared of becoming too friendly with him.

“They will most likely come up the remnants of the road that used to be called Interstate 10; at least as far as the trading post in Ozona. From there, they will probably turn Northeast and stage in San Angelo.

“Up until now, San Angelo has really been a border town between the desert wastelands and the beginnings of the ‘ungovernable’ lands in Central Texas and eastward. I would say that the Duke plans to carry out a devastating attack, using as many as five-hundred to over a thousand soldiers, hoping to wipe out any militia units he encounters along the way. Then he’ll try to march to Bethany, killing and burning as he goes, destroying villages and hamlets until he gets to Bethany, which is considered the capital of the rebellion.”

Gareth stretched out his wounded arm and, wincing quite a bit, swung his legs over the side of the bed, before finishing his thought. “You know what he’ll do if he gets to Bethany.”

“Lay back down, fool!” Phillip interjected. “I don’t need you falling out of bed, fainting, or passing out from the excess of beer.”

Gareth laughed. “I need to stretch a bit, and I’ll need to be more mobile if you are going to hang me any time soon.”

Phillip gave in, probably figuring that he indeed needed to start moving about. The militia commander helped him to his feet. At first, he wobbled a bit, but soon steadied himself against the bedpost.

“I’m still not sure about what you are telling me, Gareth,” Phillip said, shaking his head. “You are talking about the Duke marching five-hundred to a thousand men *or more* across the desert, in the height of summer, with no supply lines and very little support along the way. They’ll have to carry

everything they need along treacherous terrain and unmaintained roads. I-10 hasn't been a highway in almost two decades. It's more like the surface of the moon since most of the pavement has been dug up or removed. The Duke is either very stupid, or very sure of himself."

"Well, Ghost, I don't think that he's stupid. But he is certainly arrogant, which will work to our advantage."

"So, you're sure that he's coming?" Phillip asked, head cocked to one side, eyes squinted at Gareth.

"I am."

"Then, we'll just have to make sure that he never gets to Bethany."

## Chapter 4 - Ruth

Ruth Wall stood as still as the old ugly mannequin in Mrs. Palmer's sewing shop down in Bethany; her spear poised only inches above the dark mouth of the coon den. She was backed into a salt cedar bush, leaning on the lowest branches for her balance, moving nary a muscle as she waited for the huge she-coon to stick her head out.

Minutes passed, and she started to be concerned. The sweat was beading down her face and the drops were gathering on the tip of her nose. She blew upwards, hoping to disperse the gathering droplet before it dripped down into the opening of the hole—scaring off the she-coon.

She looked up for just a moment, feeling the slight breeze on her face as she turned her head very slowly towards the sun. It was almost four o'clock; nearly time to be heading back home.

Just as she had almost convinced herself to give up and head back to the ranch, the she-coon made her appearance. Warily, the creature poked her head out of the den. Like lightning, the spear came down with tremendous force and pinned the animal's head to the ground. Ruth's knife appeared almost magically in her hand, as she drew it from her homemade leather sheath. The coon was bled out and gutted in a moment.

Ruth tossed the coon into her hunting bag, picking up her walking stick, her bow and a quiver full of arrows. She gave a short whistle for Louise, her yellow blackmouth cur dog and, feeling quite satisfied with herself, glanced back at the sun. After re-checking the time, she started her short hike back home.

Louise came trotting back from the edge of the woods where she had been laying in the shade, trying to stay cool. She was a good pig dog, which was almost a necessity in these parts, but didn't care for coon hunting one bit. Louise lived and breathed for chasing and hunting pigs.

At fourteen years old, the redheaded Ruth was quite an accomplished hunter—not nearly as good as David, her older brother, but pretty good nonetheless. Her father told her that she was the best female hunter he had ever seen, and that was praise enough for Ruth.

Hunting was almost a full-time job, especially when there were guests to feed. In particular, now that the Aztlanian assassin Gareth was staying with them and was eating them out of house and home. Not to mention all of the militiamen hanging around as guards and escorts. For a ranch owned by pacifists, home had come to resemble an armed camp.

Ruth loved to hunt, so she wasn't complaining. Still, it seemed like a thankless task, as she did notice that Gareth seemed never to be full. Even when he was sick and delirious with a fever from his infection, he still had a huge appetite. Ruth was just glad that she didn't have to do all of the brewing it would take to keep up with Gareth's appetite for Vallensian beer. Gareth still couldn't figure out how the Vallenses had icy cold beer in the summertime, which was a good source of humor, since no one would tell him.

The ghostmen usually provided for themselves, and prepared most of their own meals out in the woods away from the house. Her father, being the kind man that he was and a gracious host, would still impose on them to send a few men each day for a full-on supper at his table. They really didn't like any attention, and were uncomfortable in the company of many people, despite the fact that they appeared to be tremendously honored to be asked to sit at table with Jonathan Wall. Despite their discomfort, there were usually at least two of them at supper every night, most likely just to please and honor her father.

Ruth was glad that there was nearly always fresh game for the table. Father told her that just about everyone had figured it all wrong before the crash. In almost all of the post-apocalyptic literature, he said, it was predicted that over-hunting would have wiped out all of the game after a collapse. He explained that, because most writers had a bias towards industrialism and the status-quo, they automatically assumed that almost everyone was going to survive any collapse.

The books, many of which Ruth had read, usually called for millions of deaths, but generally predicted some kind of eventual return to the same ‘consumerist’ system her father believed had caused the real crash when it happened. In reality, the true number of deaths had dwarfed the fictional estimates. Most people didn’t even realize how at risk they were. Father called them ‘unviable’, and said that, throughout their entire lives, they had existed suspended on nothing and sustained by a system that could never last.

The fact that only a small percentage of the entire population actually survived through the first few years after the crash, didn’t surprise her father; and it had changed everything. There was *no* shortage of game, at least not in Texas. In fact, there was such an abundance of game, many of the predators that had long ago been abundant in Texas had returned and were fast multiplying. The wild pigs had actually become a nuisance. Like mesquite trees, they were fine and beneficial in reasonable numbers, but of late, they had become a real problem. They had no respect for fences, could devastate a wheat field in a single night, and were constantly destroying property.

Ruth could not even remember a time when there had not been wolves, mountain lions, and even some bears. According to her father, before the Industrial Revolution all of these predators had once been quite at home in Texas. However, prior to the collapse, only the occasional mountain lion lived in Central Texas, and the bears and wolves had been mostly eradicated.

Whenever her father talked about the times ‘before the collapse’, Ruth was fascinated. To her it all seemed unreal. Just imagine the foolishness of those people! They didn’t even know how to hunt or grow their own food! Ruth would hush and listen intently when the older folks talked about that time. She really couldn’t get a good grasp on what it had been like back then. It all seemed so bizarre. Father had said that there were over 25 million people living *just in Texas* before the collapse! Ruth shook her head as she tried to imagine it. Some things she would never really grasp. She could understand it, but it wasn’t truly *real* to her.

But it *was* real. She had read many of the books in Father's library. She especially enjoyed reading the history books, and some of the fiction books that portrayed life as it had been in the last fifty years before the crash. It sounded like another world. She had also read her father's messages to the world before the crash - his attempts to warn them of the upcoming devastation.

The fun part was when the older people would talk about technology! *What magic!* She had seen some of the devices, although they were all powerless now. 'Phones' no bigger than a stone, which were used to talk to people anywhere at any time without any delay. There were also computers, all linked together to share information across a huge 'web' called the 'internet'. As a result, you could find out anything in the world just by typing questions on your computer. It all seemed very useful, but Father said that people soon became addicted to the technology, and risked their lives and the lives of their families by being dependent on it. Father talked about how the Bible had warned against such a time, but that people wouldn't listen. The Vallenses were referred to as 'legalistic' for rejecting most of the technology, or at least any dependence on it.

As Ruth walked along, deep in thought, she heard the tell-tale silence of Louise locking into a ready and listening stance. Then, like a shot and without any command, Louise rocketed into the oak grove down by the creek. A pig.

Ruth moved with practiced precision. Before Louise even reached the trees, Ruth had dropped her game bag and her stick, and had drawn an arrow from her quiver, smoothly feeding it onto the bowstring and drawing it back. She knew from where Louise went into the trees, and from the sound of her bark, just where the pig would most likely come out.

She took a deep calming breath, just as her brother David had taught her, willing her heart rate to steady, as she sighted down the arrow. Just before the feral hog broke through from the trees, with Louise snapping at her heels, Ruth had a strange and untimely thought. *I wonder if Tim is watching.*

The thought passed in an instant. Timothy was responsible if he was hit by an arrow, she reasoned. She

calculated the lead, and let the arrow fly, watching as it found its mark, striking the hog just above and behind the left shoulder, traveling into the chest area, piercing organs along its path, and exiting low and on the right side of the pig's underbelly.

The stunned hog slowed down enough for Louise to catch up with it. She grabbed it by the back leg and spun it to the ground, evading the hog's head as it swung around gamely trying to gut the dog with a swipe of its 3-inch tusks. As Ruth approached, Louise finally pulled back, barking up a storm.

This was the most dangerous time, when the boar was wounded but not dead, so she advanced slowly in a crouch with her knife drawn and ready. She trusted that Louise would have intercepted the pig if it had tried to charge her, but she was cautious anyway.

After a few minutes, the pig had lost all of its energy, and—giving up—it lay its head down in the dust. Ruth moved in quickly and carefully, pinning the head down with her foot, as she jabbed her knife into the pig's throat, cutting the carotid artery. She made a clean slice across the pig's throat to give the blood a route out of the body, as she dragged the rear-section of the pig uphill in order to use gravity to facilitate the bleeding.

She guessed that the hog weighed somewhere in the neighborhood of 90 to 100 lbs. Not a huge pig, but it would provide anywhere from 35 to 40 lbs of meat for the Wall's table tonight. She was glad that the pig hadn't run off with her arrow, as she and Louise would have had to track it in this heat for a quarter of a mile through the brush. That happened more often than not. This kill-shot had been nearly perfect, and had destroyed at least three major organs as it passed through the pig. According to David, piercing three organs was the ideal if you wanted to drop the pig where it stood.

As soon as she was sure the pig had bled out completely, she went to work almost mechanically, gutting it, using the hillside to provide gravity to make her work easier.

"Nice kill, Ruth! Not bad at all... *for a girl.*"

Ruth turned around to see Tim watching her from the edge of the woods. She figured that he'd be around here somewhere. Tim was one of Phillip's ghostmen. He was 18

years old, and it had become obvious in the past week that it was his job to watch over her like some kind of bodyguard. She was unsure of how she felt about that.

Tim did a good job. She usually couldn't figure out where he was, though it had become a bit of a game between them, as she was always trying to locate him whenever she was hunting. She almost never could. He kept his distance, moved almost soundlessly, and was never upwind.

"That was an expert kill-shot, Timmy. Not one of you ghostmen, not even Phillip, could have done it better," Ruth boasted, working with her knife without pause on the pig carcass.

"I don't know; I've seen Phillip kill a pig without even loosing the arrow. He just thought about it and the pig surrendered."

"Whatever, Timothy," she retorted in a mocking tone. "Hey, be a pal and help me get this meat back to the house." They trussed the pig carcass onto the walking stick and carried it back to the house between themselves.

Ruth really didn't like hunting for pigs in the summertime. Pigs were usually winter food, but their numbers had multiplied so much over the last few years, that they were becoming a nuisance. As a result, they were hunted in large numbers even in the summer. The Walls didn't mind the extra meat. When they didn't have visiting guests (which wasn't very often), they would grind the meat into sausage, lacto-ferment it, smoke it in the stone smokehouse, and dry it. Dried, smoked sausage was one of the primary foods for the Walls whenever they travelled, because it was perfectly preserved without any added processing. It was also very convenient, as it could be carried in a backpack, a pocket, or a satchel, ready to eat at any given moment.

This pig, though, would be tonight's supper for the Walls and all of their guests. The old cook Wally (she called him 'Walleye') would roast it on a spit over an open flame. Ruth's mouth watered just thinking about it.

As they walked back to the house, Tim and Ruth talked about hunting and the hot summer, as Louise trotted back and

forth, darting underneath the pig as if she wanted everyone to know that she had been the one to find it.

Technically, according to the *ordnung* of the community, she and Timothy were never allowed to be alone together. Tim was supposed to watch from afar and keep her safe. But no one would say anything to him for helping her carry a heavy pig back home. And she really did enjoy his company. Timothy was nice.

Back at the house, Wally half-heartedly scolded Ruth for bringing him another pig so late in the day. "This is the third pig in five days, girl! And here we are only hours from supper!"

Ruth knew that, in truth, Walleye was always pleased when he could cook up a nice pig for supper. She would tease back by telling him, "Ok, Walleye, sorry about that. I'll feed it to Louise and the rest of the dogs." Then he'd say, "No, no, no... it's alright. I'll cook it up anyway."

Everyone was always happy with roast pork on the plate. Ruth liked it slightly charred and glazed with honey, served with onions and basil from the garden, accompanied by pickled beans from the root cellar, and *nopal* cactus juice sweetened with honey. No one ever complained if supper was a little bit late when they knew that a pig was on the menu.

Ruth went into the stone springhouse to sit down for a moment, relishing the cool air inside. The springhouse actually wasn't built on a spring, as most springhouses were. It was built mostly below ground, about 20 feet from the large icehouse. The stone walls of the structure were nearly two feet thick. The ice-melt from the icehouse flowed down an underground pipe through the thick wall and into the springhouse. Stone gutters had been built around the inside walls of the icehouse, and the icy water filled the eight-inch deep troughs. When the dripping water had risen enough that it crested the dam on the trough in the South wall, it flowed down into a deep cistern where it could be pumped up via a hand-pump when it was needed. The icy cold water was the perfect place to store perishables, such as cheese, butter, leftover food etc., and the trough was nearly always full of jars and crocks of goodies, along with sealed jars of beer.

Ruth would hang meat from hooks in the ceiling rafters of the springhouse where it would stay cool until Wally could come, usually in the early morning, and cook it for breakfast, or process it for longer-term storage.

After she had cooled herself down a bit, Ruth hung the skinned and gutted coon carcass from a hook. She then walked down the stone pathway past the woodshop to the tannery where she gave the coonskin to Ana, who dropped it into a bucket of cool water she had recently pumped up from the springhouse cistern. From her bag, she took out the brains of the hog that she had wrapped in grass after gutting the beast, knowing that Ana would find them useful in her tanning process. Tanning was still somewhat of a mystery to Ruth.

Ana was a widow, about 45 years old, dark-haired and still quite pretty. She was the official tanner of the Wall ranch. Tanning was a full time job on the ranch and Ana was known throughout the Vallensian territories as one of the best tanners around. Ana's skins, at least all those that were not used right there on the ranch, were bundled and taken to Bethany, where they would be traded for salt and other necessities that could not be produced on the ranch. Ana, like all of the other workers on the ranch, were well taken care of, and Ruth's father treated them all as if they were part of the family.

Ana the tanner had come to live and work on the Wall's ranch many years before Ruth was born, and she told fantastic and often frightening tales of life before the crash. Ruth sometimes got into trouble with her father for repeating Ana's tales. Father said that Ana would have been a great fiction writer, and sometimes even he would sit and listen, fascinated by the stories Ana could tell. But, on the rare occasions, when he would fall under Ana's spell, like clockwork, after about 20 minutes of listening, he would shake his head and gruffly order everyone back to work. "Distractions!" he would say.

Ruth didn't have time for tales today. She thanked Ana and headed back to the house to clean up. Father would be home soon, and she wanted to talk to him about her day. She could not wait to tell him about her pig, and the perfect kill-shot that had even impressed Tim the ghostman. She also wanted to

sit at her father's feet and hear him talk about whatever news he had from Bethany.

In the olden days, Father told her, people would sit around a glowing box and be entertained by strangers who hated them and wanted to brainwash them and do them harm. That didn't make any sense to Ruth. What nonsense! People must have been silly back then, or really stupid. How could watching devil's plays in a magic box be anywhere near as entertaining as hearing Ana's tales, or father's news, or playing tag in the yard with the other children, or hiding from work in the springhouse?

Ruth's father arrived home from Bethany just as everyone was sitting down to the table. Gareth, Phillip, and Timothy all sat at Father's table. It was the first time that Gareth had been to the great room to eat. Everyone was a little excited to see him, as it meant that he was getting better. He smiled a lot, joking that it was the beer that had healed him.

To Ruth, Philip and Gareth seemed to be like close friends, comfortable enough to argue incessantly and tease each other something awful.

Ruth bowed her head as her father made a speech and a prayer about the Walls being blessed to have such honored guests. He reminded them all that, in such trying times, it was good to have friends, even if they did not share the same views on everything. Then he told everyone, like he usually did, that Ruth had gotten the pig for the evening's supper. Ruth always liked that part, as everyone smiled at her, thanking her for the delicious meal. Then Tim told everyone the story about how Ruth shot the pig. She protested that he had made it seem more dramatic and heroic than it really was, but she still blushed and was happy about the whole thing.

Then, suddenly, everything went horribly wrong.

It started when three of the ghostmen interrupted the supper to speak to Phillip privately. Ruth watched as Phillip put his hand to his mouth and silently shook his head. He spoke in hushed tones to the ghostmen, before returning to the table. He didn't sit down.

Phillip was ashen faced and his eyes had closed to mere slits when he began to speak. Ruth felt her stomach sink, and it seemed like all of the air in the room had been sucked out of the back window. She closed her eyes. Whatever it was, it was bad news.

Phillip said, "I apologize for interrupting your meal. I've just been alerted that two of my men are dead. My wife and two daughters are missing. They've been taken."

## Chapter 5 - English

Whether he liked it or not, Sir Nigel Kerr was called ‘English’ or even ‘Sir English’ by everyone who knew him. He no longer disliked it. It had become who he now was. He reasoned that it could be worse—he could be have been called *Sir Kerr*. After all of these years in America, and three years now in El Paso, he now preferred just this nickname. It was like being a dog named dog. Besides, being English (either dog or man) would have seemed appropriate if only his being so weren’t the only thing authentic about the place.

The ducal castle in El Paso, if one could even call it a castle, could have been considered eclectic if that word really meant ‘a dissonant mix of ugly and disconnected styles’. Still, one thing could not be disputed—the ducal headquarters were appropriately named. The castle was called La Chimenea—*The Chimney*, and as the name would aptly suggest, it was always hot—brutally and relentlessly hot.

La Chimenea had not been designed or constructed to maximize or capitalize on any particular cooling principles. Though the main structure appeared to be covered in adobe, and slightly resembled what could only be called a Southwestern desert version of a medieval castle, for some reason the castle was bereft of any of the expected cooling benefits of either adobe or medieval castles.

Through some flaw in design, construction, or both, the castle more closely approximated a large earthen oven—gathering the extreme heat throughout the day, and exuding it throughout the night.

The obsession with castles, keeps, and siege walls, and basically all things medieval, was a natural result of necessity, combined with the mentality born of a return to monarchy, along with a general lack of what had become known as ‘modern conveniences’. Post-modern survivor instinct forced by hardship

into antiquated thinking in a new and often violent middle age almost naturally resulted in monstrosities like the ducal castle in El Paso. But La Chimenea reflected both the spirit of the city and the duchy it sheltered.

The 400-year-old city of El Paso, ‘The Pass of the North’, along with the Mexican sister city of Ciudad Juarez across the Rio Grande river, had once claimed a population of over two million souls. Though the metropolitan area itself was one of very few densely populated areas not completely destroyed by riots, bombs and fire, the population had diminished steadily from the nearly two million at the time of the collapse, to around 50,000 people only twenty years later. This number did not take into account the ducal army that was usually quartered outside of the city, which numbered around 8,000 men.

The urban area had been reduced in size to a few square miles, around which had been constructed a 30-foot high concrete and steel wall, mostly built out of the materials and debris—remnants of what used to be a highly populated city. Unlike other areas, El Paso had not been reduced by bombs and fire, but rather by the inevitable deconstruction that usually accompanies the death of an empire.

Once the Duke had accomplished the task of enforcing some stability and peace on the city (along with the state religion of New Rome), he had cordoned off several blocks of the downtown area, including the old Camino Real Hotel. From the hodgepodge of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings, he had proceeded to fashion what he thought was an acceptable version of a medieval castle. A late 20<sup>th</sup> century addition to the hotel, a 17-story tower, was what had earned the castle the *Chimenea* moniker.

Soon, workers had been summoned to remove most of the vestiges of the radically contrasting and contradictory architectural styles and facades. Battlements, bastions and parapets had been added, and in order to somehow homogenize the gruesome beast, most of the visible surfaces had been coated in some kind of adobe mixture. The outcome was rather dreadful.

A more practical result of the Duke's projects was a city and castle that were legitimately defensible against a moderately sized army using mostly medieval style weaponry. Still, there was no denying that La Chimenea was an ugly stain on Texas, and on the Rio Grande valley. Moreover, English found it an almost impossible environment in which to work.

Every so often, he would make a mental note to ask the Duke to have the chief architect and builder of the castle drawn and quartered or hanged for incompetence. Executing the perpetrator of this heinous abortion of a structure was not likely to ever happen, since the Duke himself had been the designer and chief contractor of the castle; but the joke always made English feel better and always irritated the Duke.

El Paso's heat usually made him think about the cool air of the northern mountains of Aztlan, which inevitably channeled his thoughts into a rut wherein he re-examined again all of the circumstances that had so radically changed the trajectory and reality of his life.

He had no time for that just now, as he had a stack of correspondence and intelligence to go over with the Duke. Still, even as English willed himself to do his duty and give his report and get it over with, the warm air and the view from the castle window dragged his thoughts into that rut of reflection.

El Paso was still foreign to him. This place could not be any more different from either of the two other places he had once called home.

It seemed a hundred years ago that Nigel Kerr was a 25-year-old foreign visitor on holiday, skiing with friends in the high mountains of New Mexico. That was when the collapse happened and everything in his young life changed.

English never imagined that his fun-filled adventure to America was going to be permanent. He could still vividly remember his parents' home in the English countryside, even though he had not seen it in over 20 years. He could remember the day of his departure. He was saying goodbye to his parents, telling them that he would be home in a month or two. He made a promise that, when he returned rested and refreshed from his skiing trip, he would buckle down and take life more seriously.

English had been raised on his parents' farm where he had slopped pigs, shepherded sheep and milked cows. As a boy, all he had wanted was to get away, see the world and have adventures. Now he knew that the ignorant dreams of children often determined the way of old fools.

At the age of 18, he had joined the military. As a soldier, in only a few years, he had indeed traveled the world and met exotic people. He had killed them because his government wanted him to, not because of any wrong they had done him. Various socio-political and economic reasons were routinely offered as an excuse for state-sponsored murder, but those reasons only salve the consciences of those who are already suffering from internal corruption and denial.

He had returned home spiritually depressed, morally confused, and with an intense desire for peace and simplicity, hoping to — in some magical way — purify his conscience.

At 25 years of age, he was back to being a student. Farm life was just not working out for his generation, what with the endless need for money and all the expensive rules, laws and hindrances. Farming, to English, seemed an idyllic and unreasonable fantasy. Thus, higher education promised a more realistic answer to his overwhelming angst.

On his birthday, his parents gave him an all-expenses paid trip to America. He had determined to spend the bulk of the trip skiing in the Southern Rockies. He hadn't determined to pass through what had always been referred to as 'The End of The World as We Know It'.

His passage to America had been uneventful, and without portent. The early stages of his trip were just as he had imagined. Then **THE DAY** arrived.

On the morning of the collapse, he and two American friends rode horses through the drifting snow to a remote cabin owned by an artist they had met while exploring around in Santa Fe. Why they had chosen that day to ride into the mountains, he could not say.

This particular artist lived on a mountainside just east of what was once known as Taos, New Mexico. Taos was then well

known as a haven for artists, beatniks, leftists, environmentalists, and other assorted potheads and hippies.

The artist, Goffrey Byrd, was about stereotypical for the area, which made the day trip interesting, as one of English's American friends was a right-wing, special-forces, mercenary type genius that he had met while serving in the mountains of Afghanistan.

After a spectacularly insightful argument between the artist, who happened to be a communist, and the mercenary, who happened to hate communism, the group had decided to work out their political differences with copious amounts of alcohol and a good old-fashioned snowball fight.

The snow battle was in full swing, when Goffrey received a call on his cell phone. He barely had a signal, but he caught enough of the message to understand that things had gone very, very wrong in the world.

Goffrey's closest neighbor with a television was higher up the mountain, several miles up a twisty snow-covered road. The group rode silently and pensively, wondering what was going on, and how it would affect them. The mercenary was full of speculation and supposition, most of which turned out to be correct and helpful.

Staring out at El Paso shimmering in the summer heat, he shook his head. The rest of the memory blurred, like the waves of heat rising above the city—the endless reports of the economic crash and then staring at the television while society just unraveled in real time; the panicked actions of an impotent government as the dominos cascaded outward from the crash; riots in stores, in neighborhoods, and then in whole cities. Within days (rather than weeks or months, as some had predicted) the world had changed forever.

Within a week of the crash, all communications and electrical power had been lost permanently.

The next few weeks the group spent learning how to survive a winter in the mountains. He recalled long, endless hours of guard duty; eating wild cats and hares trapped from the

forest; bottomless cups of pine needle tea; shooting at looters and bandits, while simultaneously trying not to waste ammunition.

After a period of five weeks passed with no news at all from the outside world, the men had seen the mushroom cloud, or at least the uppermost part of it, rising into the clear blue sky to the South. They rightly guessed that the cloud had been a nuclear device going off in Albuquerque.

English's present way of life was entirely different to what it used to be. The world was different. What he called 'the world' had grown to immense proportions after the crash. England might as well be on the moon, and he could just as well have gotten on a spaceship when he left home 20 year ago.

He smiled a bit as he watched the endless mule carts being pulled through the open portcullis at the main gate of the castle. He was on another planet now. He had gone back in time, even if he was in the future.

The terror he had felt back in those first few days, weeks, and months on that mountainside in New Mexico seemed overwhelming to a young man accustomed to life's luxuries. Still, English knew now that he would trade everything he had today, including his titles, his lands, and his prospects, to go back to those days. Things had been clearer back then... and cooler. Now, he was playing this deadly game, permanently soaking wet from the sweat. How could he escape this infernal heat?

In the three years since the King had sent him to El Paso as Secretary to Duke Carlos Emmanuel, English had complained about the heat incessantly. Even in the winter. He had hoped that his endless vocal protestations of discomfort would cause the Duke to send him back to New Rome, and to his home and lands there.

Alternatively, he could eventually have enough of my moaning and decide to kill me, English thought, which would be almost as good. He took out a handkerchief and wiped down his face. Even the bloody breezes were hot here!

English had no love for the Aztlanis, no real love for his King, and even less love for his current master the Duke Carlos Emmanuel. In his own private correspondence, he referred to

the former drug dealer and current Duke of El Paso with the acronym CEPIC which stood for *Cocaloco Everyman, Pretender-In-Chief*. He laughed to himself, thinking that, if the spies ever opened his mail, they would be forever trying to figure out what CEPIC meant.

He also referred to the Duchy of El Paso as ‘The Duchy of Wastelandia’, but usually only under his breath or into his cup.

Being an Aztlani Knight on paper didn’t erase the reality that he was, for all intents and purposes, an unwilling slave to the King, sent to the court of Carlos Emmanuel as a spy pretending to be the his ducal secretary. And that was only the first play in the game.

English gathered the latest correspondence and intelligence from his own secretary, a young man named Pano, and exited his large office into the Great Hall that lead to the office of the Duke. In his mind, he called this walk the *paseo de la vergüenza* which meant ‘the walk of shame’. It was funnier in his head and with his English accent.

The Duke was already waiting for him; thus, he approached the King’s desk in his usual formal manner, and greeted His Grace with a bow. “I have the latest communications and intelligence to share with Your Grace.”

The Duke was a tiny joke of a man, a clown-royal, known before the collapse as an extremely violent middle-man who would do anything, betray any friend, violate any trust, and murder anyone necessary to maintain his position and to move up in the Juarez drug cartel.

Carlos was only a few inches taller than a grade school boy, and he wore silly elevated shoes that, rather than making him appear taller, only succeeded in making him look completely ridiculous. He further attempted to augment or amend his youthful looks with a cartoonish handlebar mustache that connected and outlined his face via a very thin beard-line border for his overly effeminate jaw. English always thought that Carlos was a caricature of a miniature Mexican bandit with self-image issues.

“No whining about the heat, then?” the Duke teased, glancing at his secretary out of the corner of his eye.

“Were they to heat the furnace in this desert hell-hole seven times more than it was wont to be heated, Your Grace, you should not hear a peep from me.”

“Don’t tempt me, English. I’ll hear your report, but zhooo should know that the King is going to want to hear news of the Crown Prince. I do hope zhooo are working on something to tell him?”

The Duke tried so very hard to mask his heavy Mexican accent, but he could not. No matter how hard he tried, whenever he said the word ‘you’, it usually came out sounding like ‘jew’. When he was especially successful, like today, it came out more like ‘zhooo’.

English had prepared a response for this very issue. He smiled reassuringly at the Duke. “I am writing to the King personally today, Your Grace. The Crown Prince was sent here to be trained and disciplined, so that he is ready to rule Aztlan one day. That is what the King has commanded, and that is what we are doing—we are training the Crown Prince.”

English walked towards the full-length window that looked down into the Duke’s private courtyard. The heat and the topic made the sweat run profusely under his woolen officer’s tunic. By rule, he only had to wear the official tunic when he was in the presence of the Duke, or in royal company, but he had chosen to wear it almost all of the time as a silent protest and to emphasize his own personal suffering to himself. It was his version of the ‘hair-shirt’ once worn by priests and others to cause private discomfort and irritation. Its purpose was supposedly to bring on humility and a disregard for the flesh, so that the individual would become more spiritually aware.

He needed every victory he could get... and even private victories counted. His constant wearing of the tunic, along with his unwillingness to have it laundered in the castle laundry, had become a running joke among many of the workers of the castle.

“I think, perhaps, the King may want more detail than that. For example.... he may want to know where the Crown Prince is *right now*. Zhooo know, that sort of thing.”

“I will prepare a wonderful answer for the King, detailing the glorious exploits of his eldest son, under the tutelage and

training of those appointed personally by His Grace the Duke of El Paso,” English replied, bowing curtly.

“That sounds great, English, but sometime we gonna have to tell the King the actual location of his son, since he is not really training under me.”

“Military training, Your Grace, requires discipline, practice and—above all—secrecy,” English said, clasping his hands behind his back. “You are preparing for a military invasion of the badlands, with an incursion at least as far as San Angelo and maybe farther. This has not been done before; at least not with a force this size. I am certain the King would love to have his son and heir among the host, fighting against his enemies. However, Your Grace, we cannot risk letting the enemy know the whereabouts of the Crown Prince of Aztlan. The letters to the King could fall into the wrong hands. Surely both Your Grace and His Highness must understand that.”

“So zhooo will craft this response to the King? In the way you have relayed it to me?”

“I will, Your Grace.”

“If something happens to the Crown Prince, Sir English, I assure zhooo that 100% of the fault will be laid at your own door. I know nothing of the training or mission of the young Prince. I will deny everything.”

“I understand, Your Grace.”

“And, should the young Prince meet such misfortune, I will send the notice of the Prince’s death in a note placed in the box with your head.” The Duke nodded at English with satisfaction at his own creativity. “What else do zhooo have for me?”

English rifled through the papers, scanning them as if he were looking for something, though he had the contents memorized. “Let’s see... as you know, the attempt to kill the post rider sent from Jonathan Wall to the King of the South States failed. We have no word from the assassin we sent, but we are assuming that he is dead.”

“I see,” the Duke noted, obviously unhappy with the news.

“There is more bad news, Your Grace, but the day’s correspondence will end on a positive note, I assure you.”

“Go ahead with it then,” the Duke sighed.

“The failure of the assassin led to some of our other spies being compromised. The Ghost militia went on a spy hunt and uncovered several other agents we had strategically placed within communities in or near Bethany.”

“What does this mean?” the Duke asked impatiently, “We have no spies among the Vallenses anymore? And we are so soon to launch our attack?”

“Yes, we do, but most of them have been exposed, or, having been exposed, have subsequently fled.”

“But we still have men there? We still have means of finding out what they are planning?”

“We do, I can assure you, Your Grace. But there is no doubt that our intelligence gathering among the Vallenses has recently suffered a great setback, Your Grace,” English said.

“I assume that the Ghost militia and the Vallenses know that we are going to attack?” asked the Duke, shaking his head.

“We have to assume that they are aware that we are coming, Your Grace. However, I fail to see what they can do about it. The Vallenses will not fight. Every piece of intelligence we have indicates that Jonathan Wall will not join the forces with the rebels. The Ghost militia themselves can pester us, but we believe they cannot field more than 100 men at one time and place without risking everything. In any conflict, we will outnumber them ten to one.”

“Ok. And zhooo say zhooo have good news?”

“News *you* might enjoy, Your Grace,” English said, doing his best to hide his own disgust.

“Well... tell it to me, don’t keep me waiting!”

“A little over a week ago, five of our spies, knowing that they had been compromised, took a wild shot in the dark. They had heard from a fisherman that some militiamen were guarding a shack down on the Colorado River. They did not know what they would find there, but they had hoped that, whatever it was, would be valuable to Aztlan. They disguised themselves as Vallensian farmers before approaching the militia guards, and

were thus able to catch the men unawares. The freemen guards were under the command of the terrorist known as Phillip, and it turns out that they were guarding Phillip's own wife and daughters. Our spies were successful in overpowering the guards and taking Philip's family into custody."

The Duke's face lit up as he rose quickly to his feet. He tugged on his ridiculous mustache in his excitement. "Where are these prisoners? Please tell me that they are being brought here to me?"

"Your Grace, it would have been impossible to get them across the badlands without the militias catching up with them. Phillip has used most of his available resources, as you can imagine, trying to recover his family, and the Vallenses have helped too. Hundreds of the plain people have been working in teams with the militia, scouring the area. However, our spies took them to a safe house a hundred miles North of Bethany. When Bethany is burned by your army, Your Grace, we will gather all of the captives, including Phillip's family, and we will bring them back here safely with the soldiers."

The Duke, obviously excited at the turn of events, came around the desk. When he was excited, he looked even more like a cartoon villain—dark and swarthy, with the look of the weasel to him. *Cocaloco*, English thought, as he adopted his most subservient look for the Duke.

"We may not need to bring them here, then, English. We will send a letter under the white flag to Phillip himself. Zhooo will tell him that when our army arrives in San Angelo, that he is to surrender himself and all of his militia. If he does not do so, his wife and daughters will be tried as heretics and burned at the stake." The Duke paused for a moment, looking his secretary in the eye.

"I am not bluffing. We will do it."

"I assumed that much." English swallowed with difficulty. "Is that your wish, Your Grace?"

"It is my wish."

"I will send the letter, Your Grace."

"One more thing, English."

"Yes, Your Grace?"

“The assassin you sent to kill the post rider,” he paused, looking out the window, “he is dead, I assume?”

“We must assume so, Your Grace. Most likely killed by the terrorist Phillip himself,” English lied.

“Have you told this man’s family?” the Duke asked.

“I was planning to draft a letter to his father today, Your Grace.”

## Chapter 6 - Phillip

The Ghost Militia didn't build fires at night. There were no cozy campfire scenes with the hypnotic, dancing, orange-yellow glow of diffused firelight emphasizing the faces of weather-hardened cowboys. Phillip's militiamen were both hunters and hunted, and most of them had lived their entire lives in this manner—outside, exposed to the elements, usually in close proximity to a horse. They knew that an open fire at night could get you killed.

At night, as in the day, Phillip's men disappeared into the surrounding hills and brush. They didn't have to be told what to do. Except for his current guests, each man had been in the unit for so long, that they moved as a single entity. When it was time to sleep, the men melted into the environment as creatures natural and indigenous to it. Each man would quietly eat his supper of sausage, jerky, or pemmican, with hardtack or maybe a dried tortilla. Tonight, perhaps a few of the men had spread a bit of sugared lard on their bread—those blessed enough to have any lard left from the trip to the ranch.

He chewed slowly and deliberately on a piece of dried sausage as his eyes, fully adjusted to the darkness, scanned the area and the horizon. What little moonlight there was gave a blue-black tinge to the juniper and low mesquite brushes that dotted the hills.

On nights like this one, you relied mostly on your ears. His guards knew the idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes of both horse and man. Each man standing guard had a baseline of expected sounds; they knew which man snored, and how loudly; which horses whinnied, how often, and why. From this cacophony of natural sounds and silence, the guard was able to determine if anything was amiss or deviating from the norm. Experience became a sixth sense.

Sometimes two or three men might break the routine, bunch up for a short while and talk in hushed whispers. But this, too, was part of the overall pattern. The need for interaction and camaraderie was understandable and even welcome. They were still human. Still, if they did congregate to talk, they were expected to operate as additional watchers. In their gatherings, they talked in low tones, with eyes and ears open, alternating between talking, listening, and scanning the area. During these powwows, no two men ever talked over one another, argued, or raised their voices. Within this warrior unit, even fellowship was military in its discipline and bearing.

He heard Gareth's heavy and untrained footsteps, as he approached. Phillip didn't bother to turn around, remaining crouched down low on the sandstone ledge.

"Greetings, assassin dog. If you intend to cut my throat, you'll have to do better than that. You sneak like a sasquatch."

"I know that you have eyes in the back of your head, Sir Ghost. I would never try such a thing. Most likely, if I was inclined to kill you, I'd shoot you from a great distance," Gareth replied, laughing.

"I'm no knight, friend, so stop with that 'sir' talk. I'll take your insolence only so much. *Ghost* is one thing, 'sir' is another."

"Yes, sir!"

He shook his head, and then held up his hand for silence, focusing his ears on a sound from the brush. "Ah... young Raymond Stone went to water a bush. So, why are you still up Gareth? Can't sleep under the stars? I'll admit; it can be difficult to find rest with both God and your conscience looking down on you."

"God sees through barn roofs just as well as castles. There is no hiding from Him. But, in case you were wondering, I've been sleeping just fine during this fortnight with you, Phillip. I'm becoming more at home out here as the days pass."

"Good to hear. Good to hear." Phillip pulled out his battle knife and sliced off a piece of the sausage, handing it to Gareth, who accepted it gratefully.

“I know that you didn’t want me to come with you,” Gareth said, seriously. “I hope I haven’t slowed you down.”

“Not too much. We’ve been unable to track the Aztlanis this way anyway. We’ll wait now for any word from the other militias, or from the Vallensian searchers to the North.” His head moved slowly and deliberately like radar, as he “watched” with his ears. “Tomorrow, if the Lord wills, we will meet up with an old friend of mine. He’s been at New Rome, and we’re hopeful he’ll have some news for us.”

“You... have a friend who’s been at New Rome? Wow. That’s an interesting twist.”

“Yeah, I figured that since you are an Aztlani spy and assassin, you’d enjoy a visit from New Rome.”

Gareth dropped his head, and responded seriously, “Phillip, I came along to help you find your wife and daughters. I know we joke around a lot, but I want to find them just as much as any of your men does. I want them to be safe with you. I pray that we find them soon.”

“I know, Gareth. I don’t doubt you, though I know that many do.”

“I am your friend, Ghost.”

Phillip looked upward. The sky was clear, and the stars were uncountable in their number, and unfathomable in their beauty. “In our line of work, you’ll understand that we don’t trust words very much. These men began riding together for their own reasons; out of their hatred for Aztlan, or because they refused to worship according to the dictates of New Rome. Some of them are here because their families were killed, or because they merely wanted freedom and saw the militia as the best way of obtaining it. Some came because they were orphans and they had no family. Now, they ride together because they *are* a family—a clan.

“Like family, they are united in the fundamental opinions of life and living. Yet, unlike a traditional family, they have bled and died together. Out here, the word ‘friend’ means something. In fact, it is from the Hasinai Indian word for ‘friend’ or ‘ally’ that we have the name Texas, which is our home. You might recall that, in the Book of John, Jesus said to his disciples,

‘Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you *friends*.’ With that, Phillip went silent for a moment, listening and watching, before he continued.

“You know, monarchs rule by right of blood—each son ruling in the place of his dead father—even if they despised one another in life and even if they had different beliefs. Thus, in a system of divine and royal right of heirs, the concept of ‘blood’ can be distorted and confusing. Out here, things are much simpler. We are kin by providence, and not by blood.”

“I understand,” Gareth said, pondering Phillip’s words.

The militia commander turned to Gareth and whispered, “These men do not value words. They ride with you, but they watch you. They’ll fight with you and die for you, or... they’ll cut your throat. I can’t tell which is more likely.”

“Well, let’s hope they *judge righteous judgment*,” Gareth said.

“It’s strange and ironic, you know,” Phillip added, “that one of the Indian words for ‘friend’ that some people believe became our word for Texas was the word *Taysha*. That conclusion is up for debate, of course, because others believe that our word Texas had to come from the Hasinai word for ‘friend’, the word *techas*. Anyway, one thing most everyone who discusses such things agrees on is that the word *Taysha* is also the Mayan word for *spy*.”

“You sir,” Gareth said, smiling, “are a fount of etymological irony. Good night, Ghost.”

“Good night, Assassin.”

The night passed uneventfully, and Phillip managed to grab a few hours of sleep before he was wakened by the sound of approaching horses. He jumped to his feet, prepared for anything, when he saw his militia outriders returning from their reconnaissance mission.

Soon, the entire camp was up and moving organically, preparing for the day’s ride. Very small fires—fires that did not smoke—were started, and each man would take coals from the fire to heat his own breakfast. A small hole, maybe four or five

inches deep and five inches in diameter, would be dug into the hard ground. A small hand shovel-full of coals would be placed into the hole, over which a small pot would be placed.

Heating up the mesquite coffee always came first. Each man carried a ration of roasted mesquite pods, and each prepared their own cup of coffee each morning. It was more practical this way. It would take too long to heat large pots of coffee, but only a few minutes for a small cup of water. When the water boiled, small broken bits of mesquite pods, roasted black, would be tossed into the water and boiled for a few more minutes. The sweet, highly caffeinated concoction was then poured through a rough cloth into a drinking cup and the 'grounds' were set aside to be buried with whatever other evidence might be left over from the night's stay. It was said that if the Ghost militia was ever tracked and caught by an Aztlaní army, it would be by the smell of mesquite coffee oozing from their pores.

Phillip credited the mesquite coffee with the great health and vitality of the militia—that, and the abundance of lacto-fermented foods in their diet. The militia had been riding for nearly 20 years, although most of the men were actually younger than that. Still, it was notable that disease was almost unknown among the freemen militias who lived primarily off the land.

After the coffee was prepared, the militiaman would refill the pot with a small amount of water to which he would add a handful of grains and maybe a pinch of salt. Sometimes, in the lean times, when there were no grains, another chunk of sausage or jerky would be added to the water and cooked into a broth. There was always plenty of meat. On good days, maybe an egg, or some other delicious creature or plant would show up in the pot.

When there was fat, the men might cook a portion of it down with a sprinkle of dried agarito berry powder or fresh prickly-pear cactus fruit added to the mix. They had become experts at providing what their bodies needed, and very little more. As a result, they were lithe and fit, and with the exception of Rollo the Mountain, the huge and muscular man-child of the group, none of them would have been considered large.

The outriders rode directly to Phillip and, by way of salute, each of them gave an almost imperceptible nod to the commander before sliding off of their horses. The riders split into three groups. From this point on, the motions of each of the men was akin to a choreographed ballet. Phillip crouched down with one of the outriders, as men surrounded him wordlessly, facing outward. There was no way of telling when they might be being watched, or when a sniper might be observing the entire scene from a thousand yards away via a high-powered scope. Thus, in an over-abundance of caution, whenever Phillip talked to outriders, spies, or whenever he received reports, the militia made sure that even his lips could not be read from afar. This scene was repeated three times, as each of the outrider and militia segments mimicked the routine Phillip and his sub-group followed. Only the man who approached Phillip had the real report. The other two meetings were diversionary. In this way, a watcher might not even know which of the militiamen Phillip was. No man wore any insignia of rank or identifying regalia. In every way that was apparent, Phillip was just like the rest of the men. Still, even without an outward sign, to his men, he was not only the leader, but also their hero, and their father.

“What news do you bring?” Phillip asked.

The outrider looked down, with some sadness. “We have no good word yet of your wife and daughters. We’ve almost come to the conclusion that they did not ride for New Rome, or for El Paso. We’re focusing our attention North now. The Vallenses believe that they have found some indication of a party traveling northward at approximately the correct window of time.”

“I want our men up there and in charge,” Phillip said, “I don’t want the Vallenses stumbling upon the kidnapping party and mucking things up. They are superb trackers, but they are not killers, and they’ll ruin any possible rescue attempt if they find them first.”

“Yes, maestro. We had anticipated that this would be what you wanted, and we have sent a force of twenty men to take over the northward search.”

“What else?”

“A little over a day ago, we captured an Aztlani messenger riding under the white flag towards San Angelo. He had a message for you.” The outrider handed the message to Phillip. It was sealed with the ducal seal of The Duke of El Paso.

“What did you do with the messenger?”

“We told him that we did not recognize or honor the white flag at this time. We said that until the captive women and children were released, along with all captives held by Aztlan, the militia in Texas will be operating under the black flag and had every right to kill messengers. No surrender, no captives, and no hostages. We went on with the threats for a while before letting him go. We assume that the black flag message will make its way back to the Duke.”

“I’m sure it will,” Phillip agreed, as he opened the letter.

\*\*\*\*

Attention: To the Insurgent leader named Phillip, and to all of the leadership of the illegal Rebellion against the Rightful King of Aztlan.

### HEED THESE WORDS!

In order to put an end to your cowardly acts of terrorism and your continued unlawful war against the rightful Liege Lord of the Kingdom, the wife and children of Phillip the Insurgent have been arrested and taken to New Rome, where they are to be tried on charges of Heresy and Treason!~

Upon their conviction by the New Office of the Inquisition, they will be turned over to the secular authority to be burned at the stake.

Upwards of 20 times you have been warned to cease your activity, Phillip, but you remain in league with all of the enemies of Aztlan. For this, you are bound to see your wife and children perish—unless you are willing to give up your fruitless war, and surrender yourself (and all of your men) to the proper authorities. Your lives in exchange for those of your family, Phillip, those are your choices.

A day's hard ride could free your loved ones, if only you will surrender.

We look forward to your positive response, and to seeing this rebellion come to an end. Enough blood has been shed on both sides. Your own sacrifice could bring the peace for which all good men pray.

Sincerely,

Duke Carlos Emmanuel, Lord Provider of the Duchy of Texas, by the hand of His Royal Secretary.

Phillip read the letter through aloud so that the leaders among his men could hear it. Then he smiled faintly, almost imperceptibly.

"Why the smile, maestro?" It was only Rollo, the huge, muscular man that most of the militiamen called *the mountain*, who had noticed it. "Your wife and children are in danger of being killed, and they've been taken to New Rome! Even we, as good as we are, can't invade New Rome to save them."

"They haven't been taken to New Rome, gentlemen." He looked at the outrider. "You and your men were right, they've been taken North—60 miles away. 20 leagues."

"How can you know?" asked Rollo. "How can you possibly be so certain?"

He looked up and the smile faded from his face. "It's a code. The Duke's secretary is an old, old friend of mine. We even survived the collapse together 20 years ago. He's ex-British SAS and he's been helping us from inside for a very long time. Now, he's told me where to find my wife and daughters and he's risked his life to do it."

Gareth whistled. "Oh, what a web we weave!"

He looked at Gareth, "Deception goes both ways, Assassin. So maybe you thought yours was the only side with spies?"

"I thought no such thing, Ghost man. I know for certain that that is not the case," Gareth responded, "I know Sir Nigel Kerr very well too. English and I go back quite a long way; not so long as you, but I've known him for almost all of my life."

“You’ll have to fill me in on that later. I’m interested to find out how else you and I might be connected.” Phillip looked to the outrider, “Is there anything else?”

“The guests you are expecting have been spotted approaching from San Angelo way. They are alone. We’ve sent a guide to bring them to you. They should be here momentarily.”

“Ahh,” Phillip noted, “more friends from Aztlan.” He turned to Gareth and pointed, “You should be starting to feel at home.”

“I’m not sure that is exactly how I feel, Ghost, but I do have the feeling that things are just starting to get interesting in our friendship.”

Gareth, Phillip, the Mountain, and a few other militiamen sipped mesquite coffee and discussed the plan to free Phillip’s wife and daughters. It wasn’t going to be easy, they all freely admitted. First, there would be the hard ride North in this heat. Phillip had assumed from the letter that they needed to move quickly... *A day’s hard ride could free your loved ones.*

As the group made their plans, the guide returned with the two men riding in from Aztlan. Again, the ballet of men went in to action to obscure events for those who might be watching from afar. As the choreographed scramble of men continued wordlessly, Phillip scanned the horizon in every direction. They were miles and miles away from anyone. He wondered if the protective machinations even mattered, and if anyone would even be watching. *No*, he thought, shaking his head. *Diligence and obedience are ours; results belong to God.* Our decisions do not depend on the enemy. We do our duty and do things right regardless of how safe we may or may not be.

Phillip ducked down into the small group that now surrounded him, and greeted the militia guide—Tyrell of Terrell the men called him—and the two men who had just ridden from Aztlan.

Like Gareth, the men had been given ‘uniforms’ that approximated the dress of the Ghost militia—black cotton pants girded with heavy leather in the knees and backside. The high

leather boots were strapped up the leg, to guard the rider against mesquite thorns, cactus, and rattlesnake bites. A long leather coat was worn over a tan cotton shirt while riding, even in the summer. It was only partially as bad as it sounded. "Leather breathes; that's why cows wear it," Phillip liked to say. The coats had pockets throughout in which pounded steel or aluminum plates could be placed as makeshift armor, but these were kept in a secure location, and were only very rarely worn. Only when the militia intended to fight in traditional battle array - which was almost never - would they wear any armor.

Likewise, the militiamen very rarely carried guns, although they had access to them. Guns were heavy, ammunition was rare, and the Ghost militia survived and thrived by moving quickly and silently as an invisible recon force. Only a few times in the past ten years had the militia ever used guns in a battle.

Phillip embraced Rob Fosse, who was his best friend and often operated as a spy in New Rome, and greeted Sir Gerold Holcutt of Riverdell, Rob's traveling companion and a supporter of the insurrection against Aztlan. Rob looked over the militia contingent and beamed.

"Well, isn't this a strange court? And me so underdressed for such esteemed company!"

Phillip could not help but laugh at his old friend Rob Fosse. Rob was the funniest man he had ever met. *This ought to be interesting*, he thought.

"Greetings in the name of The Most High God," Phillip announced formally. We humble servants of Jesus and lowly militiamen of Texas do kneel before Your Graces.

"Stand up, man!" Rob said, laughing. "We are the ones who ought to be bowing." He and Sir Gerold bowed down on one knee and dropped their heads.

Robb looked up with a grin on his face, "I didn't know that you kept company with royalty, Phillip, but you cannot have friends much higher than the Crown Prince and future King of Aztlan himself!" He turned his attention to Gareth. "Our surprised but heartfelt greetings to you O' great Prince Gareth and peace be unto you."

Phillip's eyes went from Rob Fosse and Sir Gerold to Gareth as they bowed to the Crown Prince, and his hand instinctively went to his sword.

For only a split second, confusion set in on the faces of Phillip's men; but instantly that confusion cleared and the men set into motion. The sound of swords being drawn all over the camp was both awesome and terrifying. Robb and Sir Gerold staggered backwards at the frightening sound, as blades appeared from everywhere, pointed at Gareth. "He's a traitor and a spy!" someone shouted.

Phillip's sword was drawn, but his was soon intersecting those of his men. "Easy boys!" he said with a smile on his face, "I know what you're thinking, but the Crown Prince is with us."

## Chapter 7 - Jonathan

**R**uth smiled as she struggled to lift the stringer of twelve largemouth bass to show her father. Jonathan estimated them all to be at least 14 to 16 inches long and meaty too. He smiled back at her, clapped her on her shoulder and helped her carry them to the concrete worktable behind the springhouse. Although Wally would cook them, both knew that he wouldn't clean them. Over the years, the old cook had made sure everyone understood that. Jonathan and Ruth got to work with their fillet knives while Ruth chatted excitedly about the day's events, minutely dissecting the finer points of her fishing success.

Fishing had recently become a very popular pastime at the ranch, but it seemed that now folks were fishing more for sport rather than mainly for food. Jonathan could remember back when Ruth was too young to go fishing alone. Back then, he had to assign fishing duty. Almost no one wanted to fish, especially in the hot dog days of summer. Now, Ruth's excitement and energy about anything to do with fishing, hunting, or trapping had started to rub off on everyone else.

Sometimes, when he walked past the lower tank on his way to the woodlot, or to check on the cattle in the bottom forty, he would see four or five people fishing with Ruth. Very few days passed without there being fish on the menu in some form or fashion, or, at the very least, bass fillets hanging in the smokehouse for long-term preservation.

The tanks on the Wall ranch were man-made ponds that had been originally designed to provide water for the cattle. Tanks were usually built on the lowest parts of a piece of land, where there was evidence of regular run-off from rains.

Only a few years prior to the collapse, several of the small cattle tanks along or beside the creek had been expanded to increase the total amount of water catchment, and to enable fish farming as an additional source of protein. The lower tank

had been steadily expanded until now it encompassed about four acres. It was a pond, even if everyone still called it the lower tank.

In order to maintain a good population of fish in the tanks on the ranch, Jonathan had finally been forced to adopt both a flexible fishing season, and a quota. Every time a fish was caught out of any tank on the property, it had to be logged into the ledger hanging by the cleaning table behind the springhouse. Jonathan kept a close eye on how many fish were being taken from the tanks on the ranch, and would put an end to fishing season if too many were being caught. In addition, any employees who took fish from the tanks had to return a specific amount of food for the fish in the tank. Fish feed could be anything from old eggs past their prime that were scrambled up for fish food, to small pieces of meat, bits of rattlesnake or possum, or, preferably, buckets of grasshoppers caught in grasshopper traps.

Jonathan had been so excited when he discovered plans for the grasshopper traps in an old, antique book that included plans for hundreds of old-timey farming devices.

The large grasshopper traps were screened boxes, some as wide as twelve feet across, with partial openings on their bottoms. The traps could be dragged through the fields and grass behind a horse or mule. The grasshoppers would jump and get trapped in the boxes. When the boxes were full, they were left out in the fields until the hoppers dried up; then they could be bagged and stored as chicken or fish food. Dried grasshoppers were one of the primary forms of chicken feed on the ranch, and provided most of the protein that would one day become eggs for the inhabitants of the ranch. Excess eggs (and there were a lot of those) were usually cooked up and fed to the pigs, but would sometimes also become fish food. The guts and heads of Ruth's fish, when cleaned, went into the bucket of stuff to be fed to the chickens; and any unproductive or culled chickens would be fed to the pigs. It was quite a system! Because of it, and with the regular hunting, the Walls and their ranch staff had quite a variety of meat regularly appearing on the menu.

After he finished helping Ruth clean all the fish, Jonathan washed his hands in cool water that was pumped up from the cistern. He used a bar of homemade lye soap to make sure he got rid of the stench and the stickiness from his hands.

Every time he washed his hands here, he thought of the 'grey-water' system they had installed on this sink. The used water swirled down the drain, into a pipe that ran eighteen inches below the ground. As the pipe ran past three large pecan trees that shaded the tannery and the root cellars, the water seeped out through tiny holes that had been drilled in the pipe several feet from the trees. The pipe with the holes drilled in it passed through a bed of coarse gravel so that the mud and dirt wouldn't compact around the holes and plug them up. Owing to this method, these productive trees regularly received some watering, even between rains and during droughts.

He and his wife planted these three pecan trees 25 years ago, not long before she gave birth to David, their first child. Now, a quarter of a century later, the trees were fully-grown and in full production. The lifespan of these trees was not usually expected to be much longer than that, though some pecan trees in this area had been known to live and produce for many, many decades. There were pecan trees in the Wall's orchard and along the creek and down by the lower tank that were already 30 years old, planted there when the Vallenses first came to this land. Although they were still healthy and strong, the Vallenses planted more nut and fruit trees every year, planning for the future.

When he looked at the towering trees heavy with green pecans, he remembered the day they had planted them. He could recall Elizabeth—pregnant with David—watching and laughing at him. It was spring, and back then, Jonathan had thought it was the spring of their lives together. But God had seen fit to take her, and it was not up to him to question the wisdom, goodness, and severity of a Sovereign God.

He still had David, and his two daughters Elizabeth (who had been named after his wife), and Ruth. Betsy had been married to Paul Miller for five years now, and had given him his two grandchildren—Jon and Thomas.

David was his friend, his partner, and his constant worry. His son knew perfectly well the reasons and the apologetics for the pacifism of the Vallenses. Still, in the past few years, as the attacks on the peaceful communities of believers had increased and had become more heinous and violent, David had become more militant. He still obeyed the wishes of his father, and submitted to the commands of the Church, but he was constantly—albeit within the bounds of what would be allowed—agitating for war with Aztlan.

He was still too young by five years to be an Elder in the Vallensian Church, but a year ago, David had asked to speak in front of a meeting of all of the Elders, even those from distant communities, and he had made a heartfelt plea and argument for active Vallensian material assistance to the militias. His argument had been so good that it had split the community—a split that remained to this day. Though both sides had agreed to listen to and to tolerate one another, and though the Vallenses' official position on violence had not changed, Jonathan knew that a significant number of God's people in the Vallensian Church were now in support of active participation in the war.

He also suspected that many of the Vallenses, although maybe not in Bethany or in this region, were surreptitiously giving direct aid to the militia. If discovered by Aztlan, this behavior would be considered an act of war.

*An act of war*, Jonathan mused. *Aztlan commits acts of war against us on a regular basis.* But he still believed that pacifism was both the wise path, and the path of Christ. In this way of thinking, he had always been almost Tolstoyan. Leo Tolstoy—the famed author of *War and Peace*—had also been an extreme pacifist, and Jonathan had studied his arguments against violence for many years. In other ways, Tolstoy was unorthodox, and probably even a heretic, but his arguments against the use of violence were solid and well grounded. Where he disagreed with Tolstoy was in his belief that the civil magistrate – the King, or government – did hold the “sword of just defense” and was authorized to use violence when necessary. He just didn't believe that Christians ought to participate in government... or in the militia for these very reasons.

Jonathan had heard all of the arguments in favor of violence, and he understood his opponents on the subject very well. But history had shown that the pacifistic plain people had been preserved for over 700 years, while any militaristic group formed during that same period, including the empires of England, France, Japan, and the United States, had ceased to exist. Who knows, maybe the Swiss, up in their Alpine chalets, were still safe and sound with their guns and ammo; but if they were, they were the exception that proved the rule.

Defensive violence was a valid philosophy in the short term, but in terms of long-term survival, eventually all violent nations or groups ceased to be. The Amish and the Vallenses still existed in what used to be America. In contrast, The Hell's Angels and the U.S. Army no longer did—at least as far as he knew. Knowledge of the true nature of the outside world didn't extend very far.

Before he knew it, lost in his own thoughts, Jonathan found himself strolling in the orchard. The air was markedly cooler there—sometimes by as much as 20 degrees—than elsewhere on the ranch. Jonathan plucked a peach from one of the trees and examined it. Not quite fully ripe, but getting close. The Walls and all of their people would be swarming over the orchard soon, bringing in the harvest of peaches.

He sat down in the shade of the trees, to enjoy the sweet fruit. His wife Elizabeth would have scolded him for that, but Winnie, his laundry maid, never said anything. Elizabeth hated to have to scrub the juice out of his shirts in summer.

Jonathan's thoughts rolled back through the years and he saw Elizabeth as a young woman, before they were married, hefting spade and pick and post-hole digger as dutifully as any man as they dug the holes for some of these very trees. Phillip had been there too, but that was before they had quarreled over her, and over Phillip's mercenary activities, and over just about everything else that you can possibly imagine.

Now Elizabeth was dead, but Phillip was back. However, he knew that war was looming on the horizon, and everything he and Elizabeth had built was now in jeopardy.

Phillip's own family was now kidnapped. Their lives were in peril, and the Ghost had ridden off with most of the militia to try to find them and rescue them.

God's ways are mysterious, mused Jonathan. Still, we know that He is perfect and good, and that we can trust Him.

In the distance, he could see Timothy riding towards the orchard at great speed. He stood up and strode out to meet him.

Upon arrival, Timothy quickly dismounted. The young militia soldier was strong and handsome, as well as humble and intelligent, Jonathan observed. He wondered what had happened to the boy's parents and to the rest of his family. The pastor made a mental note to ask him sometime.

In the weeks Timothy had been at the ranch, Jonathan had not learned much about him, except that he was diligent in his duty, and committed to keeping the Wall family safe.

Under normal circumstances, Jonathan would not have allowed their guards to watch over his family. However, Phillip had not only insisted on providing protection, but had made it known that the Walls were going to be guarded whether they liked it or not. At least, this way, Phillip reasoned, Jonathan and his family could have some communication and relationship with the men who guarded them. He had reluctantly agreed, so long as no Vallenses were to engage in violence. The young man had shown himself to be extraordinarily committed to the safety of the Wall family, Ruth in particular.

Timothy and David had also grown close, which greatly troubled him. David already had the propensity to be inclined towards violence as a means, and he was worried that his son would now grow even more 'militia minded' than was good for any Vallensian. The two young men, along with another young ghost militiaman named Robin, who they all called 'the Hood', had been spending an inordinate amount of time together.

He often wondered what it would be like to have been born and raised after the collapse, and to have never known hearth or kin. In many ways, even literally in most cases, the young men of the militia were orphans. They were a band of brothers, sworn to one another and to their cause. They were

modern Cossacks or Spartans. They had no homes, no real property, and very little likelihood of ever finding love or marriage. He admired them, even as he pitied them. His son just simply admired them. Jonathan longed for a day when there would be no need for the militia; yet, he knew that that day wouldn't come until the Lord returned.

Tim interrupted this solemn train of thought, "The Elders of your people have requested that Your Honor gather with them for a meeting in Bethany. We've just heard news via post rider from there."

"Stop calling me Your Honor, Timothy"

"I'm sorry Your Honor, but we have to obey our code and rules, as created by Phillip. Hence, a request for you not be addressed formally would have to come directly from Phillip."

"What if I were to fight you over it?"

"Some folks might find that rather refreshing."

"I understand," Jonathan said, knowing he would get nowhere in arguing with Ghost militia reasoning. "What news from the post rider? What is this all about?"

"Well, Your Honor, that was the complete substance of the message to you. However, in questioning the rider, I learned that the Duke's attack force is a day's ride from San Angelo, and will be here in less than three. Their numbers are estimated at about five-hundred men."

"Five hundred men!" These days, forces that large were almost unheard of. Once upon a time, armies of thousands and tens of thousands had marched through Texas and the South; post-collapse, a force of even a few hundred men was difficult to mobilize and command.

"Will you let them take and burn San Angelo? What is the militia going to do? We have to evacuate the frontier... but there isn't time. Five hundred men? For what?" He was exasperated and angry, "Five hundred men to kill pacifists, farmers, and traders?"

"The situation is not good. Phillip is out with a sizable force, attempting to rescue his wife and daughters. We were not expecting the Duke's army for another couple of weeks or so..." Tim rubbed his youthful beard and began to fiddle with the grip

of his sword. To Jonathan, he seemed almost ashamed that the Ghost militia was caught unprepared.

“They must have marched by night or traveled on some course we did not expect them to take. Though even those options seem unlikely,” he paused for a moment. “In fact, Your Honor, I cannot say how the Duke’s army got here this fast without being noticed. Still, that is all beside the point. I am confident that militia outriders and recon units will be sent along the path of the Aztlan army. They will harass them and thin their numbers some, but as things are now, no attempt will be made to defend San Angelo... it’s always been considered indefensible. Every trader and merchant there knows it.”

Jonathan stared southward, pondering on the implications of these words. When he finally spoke, his voice was distant and cold, despite the heat of the day. “It’s the Winter Massacre all over again.”

In his mind, he was back on the frozen rolling hills East of San Angelo, loading bodies of his own people—mostly women, children, and the elderly—onto a haycart, to take them to Bethany for burial.

At that moment, his son David and two other militia riders approached in haste.

“We have to ride, Father. The Elders are gathering and there is no time to waste,” David urged.

Timothy interjected, “Perhaps we can bring the Elders of the Vallenses here to the ranch? We have two small units in and around Bethany, and a more sizeable unit here. It’s likely that the Vallenses can pull back from the frontier in time, if we send word now. The Aztlan goal is to raze Bethany, and they will do it, without a doubt. This place, however, is defensible. It is built on high ground. Any way they try to approach this ranch, they must come uphill.”

“This isn’t the Alamo, Timothy. It’s a farm.”

As they spoke, Ruth rode up on Jonathan’s horse Laredo. Louise trotted along behind her obediently. Ruth had a large leather satchel that riders called a ‘wallet’, and after dismounting, she stowed it in the saddlebag. “There’s food and supplies here for several men for a few days.”

Jonathan thanked Ruth, and kissed her on her forehead. “You take care of everyone here. I’ll be back sometime tomorrow... if the Lord wills.” Ruth just nodded.

“Please listen, Your Honor,” Tim spoke with a growing sense of urgency, “we can ride hard to Bethany and bring the Elders here. Our orders are to keep you and your family safe.”

Jonathan shook his head. “According to Gareth, the Aztlanis have no desire or plans to harm me or my family.”

“We still don’t know if Gareth is an Aztlani spy or not, but that is all the more reason for you and the Elders to meet here and not in Bethany.”

“It’s out of the question,” Jonathan replied softly, “our colonies between here and San Angelo would be cut off; and, if we do not ride now, we’ll lose a whole day that might be used to get some of our people to safety.”

“Father’s right, Tim, we have to ride to Bethany now,” David agreed.

“Besides, this isn’t about me,” Jonathan added.

“I’m sorry to disagree with you, Your Honor,” Tim said with his eyes down, “This has always been about you.”

## Chapter 8 - David

The heat was oppressive again, but David could see that the white cumulonimbus clouds off to the South and West were beginning to conglomerate and build skyward, looking like a giant volcanic eruption towering to perhaps 40,000 feet—an ominous portent of possible severe weather. The clouds were forming a squall line, probably still several hours away off to the South and East towards San Angelo. *Maybe those Aztlaní soldiers will get an appropriate welcome to the tornado belt*, he thought. David hoped some rain would cool things down, and maybe hinder the Aztlaní advance. Weather in Texas is notoriously unpredictable, and quite often such storms just blow by without dropping any rain at all, or they simply disappear.

His father had sent messengers to gather at Bethany as many Elders and members of the council as could be reached on short notice. Jonathan Wall was trusted to act on behalf of the community in case of emergency, but he felt strongly that the situation required some unanimity in opinion among the leadership. That would be hard, considering the current differences of opinion on the defense issue.

As the Pastor's party rode South, the dust from the road was so heavy and thick that everyone had bandanas or balaclavas pulled over their mouths and noses.

They negotiated the county road at a pretty fast pace, considering the heat and season. Still, on occasion, they would have to detour, following wagon-rutted tracks behind cattle barns, around catchment tanks, or through fields of golden wheat. The locals knew where the county road had been blocked, cut, or otherwise made to be impassible. None of the old paved roads between the ranch and Bethany existed any longer.

Almost immediately after the collapse, the paved roads had been blocked by trees and boulders, mostly by locals seeking to stem, or at least slow, any bandit traffic. Later, the pavement

itself had been ripped up and used in dams and other infrastructure projects. The plain people had no use for paved roads, and saw them as a tangible evil—both a symptom and cause of everything that had gone wrong with the old society.

“Paved roads allow you move faster,” Father had said. “Moving faster leads to the sins of covetousness, impatience, over-specialization, and inevitably produces the idolatry of efficiency and utilitarianism. Eventually, these sins lead to the death of faith, family, and just about everything else. Paved roads shrink the world, but increase the real distance between parents and children, friends, and brethren. Everything you should hate is brought near, but everything you should love and cherish moves far away from you.” His father repeated this message many times, and the current state of the world after the collapse bore witness to his beliefs. “Everything man-made,” his father would say, “that shrinks the world is, at some level, an assault on God who made the world.”

Great minds must think alike, because he couldn't remember a paved road around here that was still intact. Many years ago, when he was still a boy, his father had taken him, and many of the men from the ranch, to the old city of Penateka, two long days by wagon eastward from Bethany. Penateka used to be the largest city in the area, and was a regular shopping destination of most of the Vallenses prior to the collapse.

There was no city of Penateka, Texas any more. David had seen pictures of the city in old newspapers that his father kept, but within ten years of the collapse, the city was gone. It hadn't been destroyed by bombs or fire. No one would have ever wasted an atomic bomb on the town. Nevertheless, in a decade, the city had been disassembled by hand. Penateka was destroyed as a result of covetousness and greed, but it had disappeared out of *necessity*. Piece by piece, the city, which had once been home to almost 30,000 souls, had been torn down and hauled off in wagons and carts by people who needed the materials for homes, barns, caskets or fires, or... whatever.

A decade ago, there were still some passable roads in Penateka. There were no street signs or telephone poles, or abandoned buildings. There were many abandoned cars, or

rather, frames of abandoned cars, but there were no houses, fences or gates. In many places, even the sewer and water pipes had been ripped out of the ground.

David vividly remembered seeing a chunk of concrete jutting out of the ground, where someone had tried to drag it off by chaining it to horses or a team of oxen to it, but they obviously had given up. The chunk was probably too large or maybe the chain had broken. Father had said that it was a chunk of street curbing, but that it represented the old world. Around seven billion people had tried to drag it someplace God didn't want it to go... so the chain broke. *And the meek had inherited the earth.* Well, the meek, along with a whole lot of covetous, militaristic scumbags like the King of Aztlan—who wanted to destroy the meek and steal the earth. Still, David resolutely believed that God had a plan for everyone, and that included the King of Aztlan and those like him.

In every era of time, he thought, God had raised up a champion to defend His people and destroy His foes. Now, the Vallenses had a champion in Phillip and the Ghost militia, even if Father couldn't see it.

The group stopped from time to time and he and his father would ride up to houses, barns or fields to inform the local Vallenses what was happening. Father told them to pack up whatever food and supplies they could muster into wagons and head up to the Wall ranch. Many wouldn't leave immediately because they were concerned about their animals, but they dutifully promised their pastor that they would get prepared and would come quickly whenever they determined that trouble was near. Some of the more creative ones had already devised a system in the construction and arrangement of their farms whereby they could leave their animals unattended for days, even weeks, and the animals could feed and water themselves.

David knew that an exodus would soon begin and the road the men had just traveled would be jammed with horses, buggies and wagons heading northward. It was very likely that some of these people might never see their farms again. Father

would say, “Fields can be replanted. Farms can be rebuilt. We have resources and man-power, but we cannot replace our lives.”

David honored and respected his father, but he could not see how teaching his own people not to defend themselves, especially in such an extreme situation, could in any way be protecting their lives. He had concluded that inordinate pacifism—pacifism in the face of inescapable aggression and annihilation—actually bred violence. All that he could think of was—*we need to fight!*

The road began to rise as they approached the Bethany pass. The town was now situated only on this side of the pass, but before the collapse, another, smaller town had existed on the South side of the ‘mountains’ (as the locals insisted on called them). The mountains were actually twin mesas that rose up about 300 feet above Bethany. The pass between the mesas was 100 yards wide but was made narrower by thickly growing mesquite and brush, along with large piles of rubble and boulders on both sides of the road.

At one time, just after the Civil War, the southward path through the mesas had been a military road along which the Apache and Comanche tribes had been driven northward out of Texas. Before the collapse, the road had become a small and lightly traveled state highway. Now, the pass was a narrow wagon path between the twin mesas of Bethany.

After the collapse, wiser minds among the Vallenses had determined to build a new trading village north of the mesas. In this way, in case of an attack, the pass could be shut down or blocked in order to give the town folk time to evacuate the city.

The town could still, albeit with much difficulty, be approached from the West, but one had to cross Jeffords Creek. However, that route would have been easier if the creek was actually still a creek—as the name suggested.

Jeffords Creek had once, indeed, been a creek, rather than the river it was now. Father told him that it had been dammed up by the WPA back in what they called ‘The Great Depression’, and that Jeffords Creek Reservoir 30 miles to the West was once the water supply for most of the towns in the area. Once the dam was completed in the early 1940s, the creek had

become nothing more than a seasonal overflow from the reservoir. Thus, back then, it was only fed by the draws, run-offs, and creeks from there to here. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was at best a wide creek, but sometimes it was just a trickling stream.

The reservoir had been gone now for almost twenty years, and there weren't many people diverting water for agriculture anymore. For all intents and purposes, Jeffords Creek had become a river again as it had been throughout most of history. From just West of Bethany, the river flowed through the lowlands and valleys for awhile northward before making a giant bend only a few miles North and East of the Wall Ranch. From there, it flowed into Lake Penateka, a day's ride to the East-Northeast. Lake Penateka was one of the only man-made reservoirs in the area that still held water.

From the East, Bethany was virtually inapproachable North of the twin mesas. The mesquite brush, juniper bushes, and sharply undulating terrain made it almost impossible to traverse on horseback, or en masse, especially by anyone who didn't know the area. The militiamen knew of paths and switchbacks, and they could, and did, successfully send outriders and recon units through the brush they referred to as 'The Big Thicket'. Given that for any army, that approach was not practicable, the Aztlan troops—if they planned to destroy Bethany, which undoubtedly they did—would have to come through the narrow Bethany pass. Five hundred men was a formidable force, but David was of the opinion that Bethany could and should be defended.

If Phillip were here, he thought, there would certainly be a fight, and perhaps, with God's help, the resistance could even ruin the Duke's plans. However, with the heart and soul of the Ghost militia away—and likely ignorant of the pending attack—and only a handful of the militia present, it was very unlikely that any attempt would be made to defend and protect Bethany. It would all burn.

There was going to be a debate in the council. That much was sure. A relatively large number of the Vallenses believed that the time to fight had arrived. If only David would

be allowed to speak, maybe he could convince his father and the Elders to let each man act according to their consciences.

If he would be allowed to speak.

That was in no wise a certain thing. He was not old enough to speak freely during a debate because you had to be 30 years old to serve as an elder; besides, his feelings were well known among the Vallenses. The division and disagreement that had come from his last speech in front of the Elders and the council had still not been resolved. The issue was boiling just under the surface. Now, it seemed to be coming to a head.

As they approached Bethany, David looked up and saw his father's eyes intently peering at him over a green-dyed cotton bandana. The eyes were the softest brown, flecked with gold, platinum and bronze; they had always struck him as being almost uniquely alive.

As a boy, he had heard his father preach about the deadness of the world and of the carnal man, speaking of deadness in the eyes of 'worldlings'. He used to say, "Those who are fully given over to the world and to their love of it have the eyes of the shark. They have doll's eyes. There is a deep and pervading deadness in them like inky pools of hopelessness." His father was not talking about any particular eye color. He was talking about a lack of life behind those eyes. In contrast, David had always—from his earliest memories—noted a particular and sparkling glow of life in the eyes of his father; and it was this life that was looking at him now. He could not see if his father was smiling or frowning, but he knew that he was studying him. His father's lively eyes missed nothing.

The group rode into the town and agreed to meet at the Public House in half an hour. His father sent messengers throughout the village, alerting the inhabitants of the imminent danger, urging them to pack up and head northward as soon as possible. Two militia men were sent to find and alert the Ghost units that were supposed to be in the area.

David dismounted in front of the Cobbler Shop and unlashed a large Longhorn hide from behind his saddle. Ana the

Tanner had asked him to deliver the hide to Mr. Byler the Cobbler in exchange for some boots for herself and the Wall family. If things were coming down for good in Bethany, the Walls would need those extra boots.

The first cool breeze flowing from the distant squall line pushed through town, as David removed his straw hat and entered the cobbler shop. The old cobbler stood up slowly from his work and approached the large oak counter to meet him.

Mr. Byler was probably only in his 70s, but as an *oldling* he was quite rare. To the ‘younglings’—those who had been born just before or immediately after the crash—anyone who had been a full adult at the time of the collapse was called an ‘oldling’.

Because of the nature of the crash, there were a few peculiar demographical anomalies in the world, or at least in the world that David knew. Human society was now stratified very clearly between oldlings and younglings, even if only the young folk used those terms. There was a noticeable lack of any substantial intermediate generation (the *middlings*), as well as an absence of many people who were very old. Basically, there was a *stratum* or age group which was mostly missing.

The missing generation consisted of those aged 18 to 35. Very few people in that age group had survived—David himself was one of them, and so was his sister Betsy—maybe only a few hundred of them existed among all of the Vallenses.

Many of those who were small children or babies at the time of the crash had died not too long after. It was a tough time, and high infant and youth mortality rates arrived with the perils of the times. Among the Vallenses, this loss was stayed within a few years, as relative stability returned to the Vallensian region, but the noticeable lack of many twenty-somethings was a reality of David’s world.

Likewise, it was pretty rare to find oldlings who were much more than about 65 years of age, as so many of what were then known as ‘senior citizens’ had also died. Thus, Mr. Byler was quite a rarity. He was one of the oldest of the Vallenses living in the area. He had served his time as an elder, and though he still offered his council and advice freely, he no longer attended council meetings. He found them to be tiring affairs.

“I hear in the winds that we are to have some excitement, and I’m not talking about some little rainstorms,” Mr. Byler said in a serious tone.

“Yes sir,” David replied, “things are looking a bit scary at the moment. We really need you and everyone else to evacuate Bethany as soon as possible. As early as tonight, if the weather allows. You’ll find camps being set up near our ranch, but we might have to keep moving North and East until we find out what is going to happen.”

“I was just closing up. I’ve got your boots ready and I’ll pack them up on your horse for you,” He paused for a moment, looking down. “I hope there will be a Bethany here when we return.”

“God will provide, Mr. Byler,” David said, maybe a bit unconvincingly. “We’ve made it through hard times before.”

“Some folks are saying that there’ll be a fight,” he lowered his voice to almost a whisper, “are you going to fight, young David?”

“I don’t know, sir. I just don’t know.”

The Public House was mostly quiet as everyone filed in. David was not on the council, and was not an Elder; still, as a part of Jonathan’s party and as one of the most notable members of the group who wanted to fight, he was confident that no one would object to his attendance. The mood of the room was restrained and the hustle and bustle of evacuees, carts, and buggies out in the street—as people prepared to make their way north—further solemnized the atmosphere in the pub.

His father approached him as he entered and, leading him by the elbow, guided him over to the counter.

“Several members of the council have asked that you speak on their behalf.” His father looked him in his eye. His manner was respectful, but David could tell that he was still concerned. There was an unspoken declaration in his father’s look that told him that though they were to be opponents on this issue, it did not affect his father’s affection for him.

“Thank you, Father. I will not speak without your permission.”

“You have my permission, David. I am not surprised to see that so many in the council have respect for you and your opinions. It is gratifying to an old man to see his son so honored.” His father smiled at him, “I have an important announcement to make, after which you may speak. Please, keep it short because we all have work to do.”

“Yes sir,” was all he could manage.

His father brought the meeting to order, and introduced the Elders who were present.

There was old Arness Barron, the man who had organized the Vallenses to help the Walls after his mother died. Standing almost at attention in the corner was Jeremy Saldano, whose family built nearly all of the Vallenses’ carts, wagons, and buggies. Seated by the window was Maurice Stannis, accompanied by his older sons Lance and Walter.

Many of the men present had, years ago, taken the family name of their trade. There was Grayson Smith - usually called ‘Smithy’. There was Davidson Cooper who ran the Cooper shop and made barrels. Standing by the door was Nicholas Brewer, who not only was a brewer, but he owned and operated the Public House; and standing next to him was Sheldon Wright, the wheelwright in Bethany.

There were about 30 men present at the council meeting, including the Elders, the four members of the Ghost Militia, and David himself.

After introductions all around, his father began.

“I want to thank everyone for being here. We have urgent news from San Angelo, but before we start, we need to pray, and then we’ll sing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Psalm.”

With eyes closed, the gathered Vallenses and the militiamen joined together in solemn and heartfelt prayer. Throughout the singing of the psalm, David could sense the passion and sincerity in the voices of the men surrounding him. He was moved as never before. Trying times have a way of focusing the mind and the heart. How many times in history had the psalms been sung by groups like this who were suffering tribulation?

As the last note of the Psalm faded, David's father raised his hand, as did the men of old when indicating that they would speak.

"When we arrived in Bethany not long ago, we received word from a militia outrider concerning the situation in San Angelo." Looking around, David could see the tension in men's solemn faces, as young and old alike awaited their pastor's words with anticipation.

"The people of San Angelo, and many Vallenses among them, took it upon themselves to burn the city as the Aztlaní host approached. The city is in flames. Several smaller frontier towns were burned and pillaged by the heathen army as they marched towards San Angelo. Thus, the people there decided to leave nothing for the enemy, but scorched earth. A mass evacuation is taking place, and most of those folks are heading here, burning their own fields and any other structures or supplies on their way. They hope to make it through the pass in front of the army.

"However painful, it is a wise plan. The Aztlaní army is, no doubt, forced to carry their material supplies with them. No supply lines or resupply bases are available to them as they move across the badlands and militia territory. They have undoubtedly counted on pillaging and stealing what they need as they travel. Resupply in a large frontier town like San Angelo would have been a critical element in their plans. Like the Russians before Napoleon, our brethren to the South are leaving the invader with nothing to scavenge."

David grinned for a moment before he fully grasped the implications of such plan. Thousands of refugees would be heading northward through the pass in the next twenty-four hours.

"Maybe we should burn Bethany before Aztlaní does!" shouted Grayson the Smithy.

"We will be discussing our options in time," his father replied softly. The pastor of the Vallenses dropped his head and stroked his beard for a moment. "We certainly have to consider every option."

There was a stony silence as each man in the room considered what was coming. They pondered on the fact that

life—as they had known it up until now—had fundamentally changed.

Whether they chose to fight or not, the peaceful Vallenses of Central Texas were now at war.

## Chapter 9 - Timothy

**R**efugees had been arriving for over eight hours,—some joining the pilgrim tent camps that were rising spontaneously throughout the area around the Wall ranch, others stopping for water and a short break before continuing on to the North and East. Those who continued on, generally the more pessimistic ones, hoped to cross Jeffords Creek at Blackmun's Crossing before either one or the other of the armies chose, for strategic purposes, to destroy the bridge.

From horseback, Timothy, Ruth, and Jack Johnson were supervising the arrival, giving instructions, and watching diligently for Aztlan spies, or any unknown or unusual people moving among the Vallenses.

The three were blessed that the moon was out and that the storm had only lightly clipped them as it made its way East. The ground was barely damp, and there was enough light to be able to see what had once seemed to be an almost endless flow of refugees coming up the road. Finally, in the last hour or so, the flow had started to abate.

Tim handed Jack a metal cup, then poured in some hot mesquite coffee from the insulated leather bag Ruth had brought over from one of the camps. Jack Johnson was a close neighbor to the Walls, and the two young men had become friends over the past few weeks.

Jack, who was about his own age of 18 years, had the given name of Andrei Nikolayevich Bolkonsky. Tim had learned Jack's real name and its spelling during all the hours spent with him and Ruth in the past several weeks. Andrei and his father Nikolai, like many immigrants, used more Americanized names, but strangely enough, neither had chosen the English language equivalent of their Russian names. For some reason, unknown to anyone but himself, the father had taken the name John. The son took the name Jack, which—to

make the issue even more confusing—actually used to be a nickname for the name John. Since Jack was John’s son, soon enough the Vallenses began to call the young Bolkonsky by the name Jack Johns-son. From that, and somewhat illogically, the father had come to be known as John Johnson, even though Nikolai Bolkonsky’s own father had been named Pyotr. Still, to all of the Vallenses, the Russians were known as the Johnsons.

Tim was learning that naming conventions that had become so staid and stiff prior to the collapse, had, in many cases, reverted to the more flexible form of earlier centuries. Without computers, tracking IDs, microchips and passports, people could pretty much be called whatever they liked.

Identification was now solely based on who knew you and for how long. Trust was not easily won, but meant everything, and neither did a sordid past, long repented of, haunt those who now chose to live rightly. The Vallenses never did trust many words; thus, a person’s character, honor, integrity, and faith was their only identification. Strangers realized that it was what you did, and how you lived over a long period of time that would make you accepted as part of the community, not paperwork, government papers, empty words, or mere intentions.

According to many of the *oldlings* and Elders that Tim had spoken to, it was actually harder to spy or get away with a con or cheat today than it had been before the collapse. People were more wary; thus strangers were watched more closely. People were also more reliant on their intuition and relied more on their intuitive senses. Nobody relied on inanimate objects, or data divorced from context, to make decisions. It had taken the spy Ronald Getz and others like him many, many years to infiltrate the Vallenses to the point that one of them had an opportunity to kill Gareth the assassin while in militia custody.

He was beginning to see the multiple threads of love, care, humanity, and community that bound the Vallenses together like a tapestry—threads that, in the old world, had been replaced by electronics, numbers, and a virtual life. In the times before the collapse, people’s lives were governed by distant

strangers and tyrants no one knew—those with no accountability or loyalty to the family of faith.

Ruth had told him that the Johnson family (the wife had kept her Russian given name - Natasha), had been the Wall's neighbors to the South for almost 25 years. John Johnson and Jonathan Wall had been close friends for all of those years, and Jack and his father were the first ones to arrive to help organize and situate the refugees arriving from Bethany, as well as from South and West.

Sipping his coffee, Tim watched as the refugees passed the Walls' main gate. Some turned in to join others at the camp, whilst others continued their perilous journey into the darkness.

Some families, Tim had heard, had already crossed Jeffords Creek and were heading for the intersection with the Old Comanche Road as it moved northeastward. By continuing to move northward and eastward, they hoped to find a place to wait out the attack. It was generally accepted by the Vallenses that Aztlan would be satisfied with burning and destroying Bethany. No one believed that they would continue to follow the Vallenses further North, as—by doing so—they would be moving farther away from their own homes, with no bases and no means of re-supply. History told them that even the greatest of armies had their limits—even Napoleon had stopped at Moscow.

The general opinion of those Vallenses who stopped near the Walls' ranch was that the Aztlani army would return home after burning Bethany. The destruction of San Angelo before they could pillage it had likely robbed the foreign army of their will-power and their desire to chase a rabbit they could not hope to catch.

Sometime around midnight, Tim and Jack rode over to a militia unit that was just arriving—it was one of the units that had been stationed in the Thicket, East of Bethany. Ruth, who had gone to get more coffee, caught up with them just as the Ghost militia rider began to give his report to Timothy.

The debate was over... the Vallenses were not going to fight. *I already knew that*, Tim thought. *Why did anyone think that they would?* Both militia units that had been stationed near Bethany, as well as the outriders that had been tasked with

pestering the invaders all along their advance from San Angelo, were returning to the Wall ranch to protect the family. Their only hope now was to guard as many of the Vallenses as possible during their retreat, and to consider a possible defense of the Wall ranch if the invaders decided to keep moving northward.

There had been no way to plan a full-fledged defense of the village. Phillip and the bulk of the Ghost militia were still gone, and were probably unaware of what was going on in Bethany. If, vastly outmanned and outgunned, the remaining units had tried to mount a defense, and if they were defeated—which was very likely—there would be no hope for the fleeing Vallenses. The war would have been over before it started.

“So we are just going to give them Bethany?” he asked. “Why didn’t the Vallenses just burn it down, like they did San Angelo?”

The spokesman for this militia unit was an impressive rider they all called Piggy. Tim had given him the name a few years ago for his excellent and unique ability to take down a wild boar by throwing a knife from horseback—a feat no one else would even attempt, much less accomplish.

“It’s a very complicated situation,” Piggy responded, leaning forward in his saddle, “I think everyone agreed that Bethany should be burned before the Aztlanis could loot it. But, no one wanted to burn it if there was still the slightest possibility that the Aztlani army might give up on it.”

Tim pondered the likelihood of such an outcome for a moment. He couldn’t imagine the enemy retreating without destroying the town. “What makes anyone think that they will leave Bethany intact? Why ride all this way and then quit?”

“Ok, I know that this sounds confusing, but it’s actually not when you consider it carefully, and when you have all of the information. After the council meeting, a handful of militiamen, along with David Wall, decided to stay and fight when Aztlan tries to come through the Bethany Pass. They are hoping to slow them down long enough to allow for a defense to be planned and executed here on the high ground of the ranch,” Piggy explained, almost sheepishly, shrugging to indicate that it had not been his idea.

“David Wall?” Tim almost hollered the name, “David Wall decided to fight? What the hell is going on? He’s a Vallensian! Fight? How many is a handful?! I need to know the details of all that is going on Piggy, right now!”

“Ok, ok!” Piggy tried to placate him, putting up his hand to slow the conversation down. “Let me run through it quickly.” He took a deep breath, “After the council meeting, Jonathan announced that any man who felt strongly compelled to fight had to make a decision if they were going to be Vallenses or Militia, given that the Vallenses are not permitted to fight. He said that he would understand it if anyone wanted to join the militia. However, if they chose that part, they would henceforth be considered militiamen and not Vallenses, and though they could continue to live and work among the Vallenses and attend some Vallensian functions, they would no longer be permitted to participate in the communion or close fellowship of the Church.

“Regardless, David Wall announced that he would fight with the militia. The only other Vallensian who crossed over was Grayson Smith, the blacksmith. No one else was willing to forego the communion in order to fight what they considered to be a losing battle.”

“So what is this about fighting? I still don’t get it. What is happening now?”

“Easy, Tim, give me a moment to lay it all out” Piggy said softly. “When David and Grayson crossed over, we had already decided that the fight could not be won there without risking everything. We were all pulling out. However, a few of our men decided to stay and help David in slowing down Aztlan. As far as I know, there are maybe five men, counting Wall and Smith, left to defend Bethany.”

“*Maybe* five men?” he asked.

Piggy began counting on his fingers, “Ok, there is David Wall and the Smithy, and among the militia there is The Hood, Enos Flynn, and Pachuco Reyes. When we left, Hood was preparing the town so he could ride through and burn it in a moment’s notice. The rest were rolling boulders down off the sides of the twin mesas and doing whatever else they could to block the pass.”

“So five men are going to fight five-hundred trained Aztlani soldiers?” Tim asked, clearly bewildered at such notion. “This is their plan? It’s a suicide.”

“Actually it’s only four,” Piggy added, “Hood can’t be risked, because if they all die early in the battle, no one will be able to fire the town.”

“Ridiculous!”

“It’s a sacrifice, Tim.”

“It’s a useless slaughter!”

“They didn’t see it that way.”

“They should have just burned the town!”

“They needed to slow them down. Listen, you weren’t there, Tim; you can’t know how it went down.”

Tim sighed deeply, rose up on his saddle before settling back down into it. After a moment of thought, he looked at Piggy. “I’ve been charged with protecting the Wall family by Phillip himself. I have my orders. There are enough of you here to start preparing the defense of this place. I’m riding South. What are the plans there?”

As he spoke these words, he heard a slight, almost imperceptible gasp escape from Ruth. When he looked at her, she had her hand over her mouth. When she saw him looking at her, she dropped her hand and averted her gaze.

“*All* of your family is my responsibility, Ruth,” he said gently.

“I understand,” she replied, “and I would ride with you, if I thought you’d let me get away with it. But you won’t.”

“No, I won’t.”

Piggy interrupted, “They are expecting the Aztlanis to arrive at sunrise. The storm and the burning of San Angelo slowed them down, but not for long.”

“I’ve got to go then.”

“I’ll be going with you,” shouted Jack, who had remained silent through the whole exchange.

“If you do...,” Tim cautioned, leaning forward.

“I will be kicked out of the fellowship, I know. But my family is indebted to the Walls for their friendship and help

when my parents first came to this country. David is my friend... I've known him all my life. I will go and fight."

"I can't stop you," Tim replied. "Jonathan said that each man had to decide for himself. Go quickly and say goodbye to your parents, and get what weapons you have. If we ride through the night as fast as we can, and barring any unexpected delays, we can be there an hour or so before sunrise. The road isn't as jammed with refugees as it was an hour ago, and the northbound traffic will grow lighter. I know a few shortcuts too. I'll meet you here and be ready to ride in thirty minutes."

Jack rode off into the shadows, and the rest of the militia began to ride into the camp. Piggy stopped his horse next to Tim's and the two shook hands.

"Thank you for your report, Piggy."

"I'm just doing my job. I know that you are too. May God keep you and protect you."

"Thanks, man. You keep all of these folks safe—especially my best friend Ruth here, ok?"

"Will do, Tim," Piggy replied, as he followed the last of his unit through the gate.

Tim turned to Ruth, who was sitting stoically on her horse, absentmindedly clutching the coffee bag. The two looked at one another for a few moments in silence that spoke volumes. Tim reached into the pocket on his leather coat, pulled out an old arrowhead and handed it to her.

"I found this by the creek the day you took down that pig with one shot. Why don't you hold it for me until I get back?"

Ruth rubbed the arrowhead in her hand, but looking at him searchingly. "I'll do that, Timothy."

After another moment of silence, Tim pulled the reins, spurred the horse and headed for his tent.

As he passed by the pilgrim camp and the people moving about setting up tents and preparing fires, he wondered if the Vallensians knew what the militia was doing, and why they found it necessary to fight. He figured that they did know. They must know. Somehow, he knew that they were grateful. He also knew that most of the members of the Ghost militia were also

grateful for the Vallenses, and for all they had done to stabilize their world after the collapse, providing some light to the world cloaked in deathly darkness. *What a weird sight we must all be to the world.*

His thoughts strayed to the issues that divided, and those that united these two unlikely allies. Maybe, deep down, he wanted—maybe even more than he was willing to admit—to be a Vallensian, and to have a family. Kin was something he had never had in his short life. Yet, he knew that for a soldier home life and family were not an option. Phillip himself had tried to keep a wife and now the Ghost's own family was held by Aztlan.

He had been raised in the militia. He didn't even remember having a family, nor could he know what that meant outside the family he had among his Ghost brethren. His duty and honor were the only two things of consequence that he owned.

He had only faint memories of being an orphan, running with a pack of what could only be called feral orphan boys out West and South of what had once been Wichita Falls. How old was he when the militia found him? Seven? Six? Probably seven—it was hard to tell, with no one to remember his birthday or any remaining records.

The militia outriders picked up the eight homeless orphans and offered them real food and a place to sleep. And then they had trained. For the next seven years, they had trained almost every day. They didn't just learn to fight and ride. They learned to read and spell. They learned history and philosophy. Phillip did not believe that a warrior could remain on the side of right if he was uneducated and if he was ignorant of history, philosophy, and religion. The Ghost militia was not made up of coarse and vulgar killers. They were killers, without a doubt, but they were educated and noble in their pursuit of justice.

Phillip had called them his Spartans, and had taught them what that moniker meant. He told them that many years ago, three hundred Spartans had faced off against between half a million and a million Persians at Thermopylae, and had fought there to their death. It was an honor to be called Spartans.

Phillip had also taught them the militia honor code and they had all learned the art and business of guerilla war. At eighteen years of age, Timothy was one of the brightest and bravest of Phillip's own troops; and now, he was heading towards his Thermopylae.

Reaching his tent, he grabbed another quiver of arrows that had been fitted with a leather cover and a shoulder strap and threw it over his shoulder. Then he loaded his satchel with dried meat, extra containers of water, and a few extra flints. If they were to fight with guns, which they did on occasion, someone else would have had to have gotten them. Phillip did not usually allow them to keep guns with them. They were too heavy, and too easily relied upon. The militia stash of arms was hidden and only accessed when the whole militia would be engaged in an action. Most likely, the Ghost units would be using arrows, swords and knives against Aztlan guns and maybe even cannon.

After he was certain that he had everything that he needed, he sat down with a quill pen, dipped the tip in a small bottle of ink he had bought the last time he was in Bethany, and wrote a note to Ruth on a piece of cotton paper.

He wrote that the time he had spent guarding the Walls had been the best time of his life, and that he had really enjoyed knowing her. He told her that he admired her more than he did anyone else in the world—other than, maybe, her father and Phillip. She'd understand that. He reminded her to keep her faith, and be a good help to her father, and that he hoped that someday she'd marry and raise a good Vallensian family.

He placed the note on his cot, knowing that Ruth would find it if something happened to him. Then he mounted his horse, looked back one more time over his humble home, and rode back towards the gate.

As he approached the main entrance, he met up with Jack who had evidently informed his family of his plans. The Russian just smiled a crooked smile, indicating that it had probably not gone too well. Tim didn't ask and Jack didn't volunteer.

As they rode in silence through the gate and turned towards the road to Bethany, Tim slowed down and pulled his horse up. He looked back, and in the moonlight, he could just make out the outline of Ruth, seated on her horse, silhouetted by Vallensian fires.

He didn't wave goodbye.

# Chapter 10 - Ruth

**I**t wasn't much different from hunting. Her horse Peloncio stood patiently and without fidgeting as they waited in the dark shadows of the copse. A warm breeze swirled lazily through the trees, and she kept her breath steady and regular as she sat motionless in the dark.

Traffic on the Bethany road had thinned to the point that only an occasional straggler passed by; either families to the north of the town who took a longer time to get ready to leave, or those who had made it through the pass just before it was closed down.

Every part of her had wanted to rush down to Bethany. She knew shortcuts that no one else even knew existed, and she could have probably arrived long before Tim and Jack got even close. She had waited a good thirty minutes before starting to follow them southward. Now, she waited patiently in the dark.

Her conscience would not allow her to do what she so much wanted to do, which was to disobey Timothy, her father, and the *ordnung* of the community, and go fight those who would attack and kill her people and destroy their property. Still, her inner voice urged her to, at the very least, make sure that Tim and David were safe, even if she had to die doing so. But the obedience she had learned all of her life, and her love and respect for her father, would not allow her to rush south to Bethany without his permission. So she waited.

Her father would have left Bethany only after the last of the stragglers had gotten out of the town; thus, she expected him to pass by here at any time.

She was not surprised that a few minutes later her father and a group of friends and Elders appeared, riding up the road in the moonlight. She rode out where she could be seen, and sat waiting for them as they approached.

"Ruth?" her father asked. "Is that you, dear?"

“Yes, Father.”

“What are you doing here, Ruth?”

“I was waiting for you. I need to ask your permission to ride scout to Bethany. I know that you won’t think that it’s wise, but please let me do it, Father. Somebody needs to be able to warn the camp—someone who knows all of the shortcuts and the hiding places also needs to be able to ride back and warn everyone if the Aztlani soldiers keep coming north. I’ll stay hidden, and away from the battle... I promise.”

“Ruth...” her father sighed. “Ruth, you’re still a young girl, and you know nothing of war. Scouting is a grown man’s job. We’ll send someone to do this.”

“Father, hear me out.” She paused and concentrated on not being emotional, and on not sounding scared or childish. “Father, no one knows the area like I do. No one can ride as fast, hide as well, or get in and out as I can. Even Tim says that only Phillip himself rides like me. I promise you, I will stay safe, Father.”

She raised her eyes, sat up in the saddle, and looked her father in the eye.

“When I left home, I had every intention of riding all the way to Bethany, of disobeying you, and of joining in the battle... but I know that such an emotional and rushed decision was wrong. I did as you said, Father, and I listened to my conscience. You know I will do as you say, but you also know that I can do this. Please let me go, Father.”

Her father shifted around in his saddle and looked back down the road as if he were waiting for some kind of sign. Then he turned back towards Ruth. “Stay off of the roads once the battle starts. Keep your eyes open, and your back to the sun when it comes up in the East. Don’t allow yourself to be silhouetted against the sky. The Aztlani army has been hesitant to send out scouts because the militia kills them all, but that doesn’t mean that they won’t do it. Keep an eye on your surroundings, and don’t let anyone get behind you. Pick a point far enough away from Bethany to watch without being seen, and stay out of shooting range. Do not get involved! If things go bad,

head east into the Thicket; you know your way around there, and no Aztlani unit will be able to follow you.”

“Yes, Father.” She stifled her desire to shout with joy.

“Your job is to watch from afar, and get word to us if the army moves northward from the town. That is it, do you understand me?”

“Yes Father. Thank you.”

He rode up to her and embraced her, patting her on the shoulder. “Be safe, little girl.”

“Yes sir.”

As her father rode away, he looked back over his shoulder and smiled at her. She knew that he did not want her to go, and that others would likely second-guess him for doing so. Still, he was responsible for thousands of people, and he knew that she was the best at what needed to be done.

She pulled Peloncio around, and headed through the oaks heading south.

Ruth arrived outside of Bethany at almost the same time as Tim and Jack entered the town. She turned eastward and rode until she was into the Thicket, just east of the easternmost mesa. She tied Peloncio to a low mesquite branch and then hiked back a quarter of a mile to the west, where she scrambled silently up a low hill until she commanded a good view of Bethany and the twin mesas. It was still quite dark, but light was just starting to spread across the sky to the east. She stayed lower on the hill and beneath a salt cedar bush, so that she would not be silhouetted against the sky, as her father instructed.

As the early light began to spread across the land, she could make out a few of the men as they made final preparations for the assault.

She didn't like this spot. While it gave her a good view of Bethany and of most of the pass, she was still too low to be able to see if the Aztlani army had arrived. From her vantage point, the view to the south was blocked by the twin mesas. She needed to get closer... and higher.

Everything her father had told her replayed repeatedly in her mind. She did intend to stay safe, and she wanted to obey

her father, but she knew that she needed to get up on the east end of the easternmost mesa in order to be able to command a good view of the battle.

The militia would have at least two and maybe three men on each of the mesas looking down into the pass. However, the other end of the east mesa—the end she was near—was slightly more elevated and would allow her to see everything clearly.

She started moving before she could have time to talk herself out of it.

*It's just like hunting*, she told herself, as she moved stealthily through the brush and mesquite that dotted the foothills of the mesa. From where she was, only a few hundred yards to the east, was the Thicket where Peloncio waited patiently. The Thicket curved around from northeast to southwest and ended at the easternmost tip of the east mesa. If she was forced to run, she was confident that could be back in the Thicket in minutes.

When she reached the base of the mesa, she concealed herself in another cedar bush and sat perfectly still for another ten minutes. If some Aztlani scout was trying to come around the mesas, or was intending to get up to the top of the mesa, she wanted to know about it before she began her climb.

When nothing moved, she began her ascent. It took her 20 minutes to scramble to the top, and when she did, the gray light of morning had chased away the darkness of the long night. She crouched low and moved forward, keeping her eyes trained to the surroundings, looking for danger. There were several large boulders on top of the mesa, and she used them for cover as she crawled forward quietly.

Near the south edge of the mesa, she found the perfect vantage point. Crouching behind some very large boulders, she could now command a view of the entire area. She could see Bethany, and most of the Bethany road that came down from the north. There were no militiamen on the top of the mesa, but she figured they were just below the peak, making sure that they could not be seen from the south. Stretched out below her to the south, she could see for miles and miles, and she caught her breath when she saw that the Aztlani army had arrived. With

banners flying, they were forming up, a half-mile south of the pass.

She could also see Aztlani scouts, two of them, sneaking up towards the south entrance of the pass, staying low, and creeping from cover to cover. She wanted to scream out a warning to the militia, but she knew that it would not help. She reached for an arrow from her quiver, but stopped herself when she remembered her father's command. *Do not get involved!* The men were too far away anyway. It would be a miracle if her arrow reached them.

She was just starting to notice the warmth of the new day, and the light changing from gray to more orange-yellow, when she saw one of the Aztlani scouts pitch backward, an arrow sticking out from his throat! *Yes!* The other barely had time to register the fact that his partner had been killed, when another arrow entered his chest and he too flopped into the dirt.

Ruth could not tell from whence the arrows came, but she was ecstatic and felt the adrenaline pump through her, knowing that the scouts had been spotted.

It seemed like forever, but it was probably only another 15 minutes, before the Aztlanis tried again. This time, there were ten men, all approaching from the West. They were close to the westernmost mesa, and hoped to use the mountain as a shield to get close to the pass. Again, she felt the scream rise up in her throat as she strived with every thread of her being not to do something to warn militiamen guarding the pass.

Death, in this instance, did not come by arrow, at least not at first. As the advance unit came close to the entrance to the pass, each man clinging as closely as possible to the face of the mountain, they did not see until it was too late as five or six huge boulders came crashing down the mesa on top of them. This time, she saw the militiamen moving quickly back away from the edge of the mesa, and she saw a single arrow strike the back of the only Aztlani soldier with the ability to crawl away from the pile of rocks. Then all became still again, except for the moans and cries of broken men, crushed from above by rocks not much smaller than horses.

As she wiped away a bead of sweat, and tried her best to calm herself, she heard her brother David's voice as he shouted to the men guarding the pass.

"They'll come heavy this time boys! Shoot and move. No more than two to three shots from one place then move! Keep under cover! Remember... Shoot for the officers! Shoot anyone giving orders first! Then anyone on a horse! If they are wearing armor, the throat and under the arm are the weakest spots! Shoot and move! Don't let yourself get trapped! Keep a way out behind you! Make them panic! Make them crawl over their own dead bodies to kill you!"

She had to steady herself from the effects of fear and excitement. Timothy had told her that the body goes into shock at the beginning of a battle, and that there can be an intense fog and confusion. It happened to everyone, but the men who could remain calm and let it pass were the ones who survived. She forced herself to concentrate on her breathing and used every method she knew from hunting to remain calm.

Off to the south, she could see that the army was preparing a full-out assault on the pass. A hundred men and twenty horses stepped out from the mass of men, and began to advance; slowly at first, and then faster as they got nearer the pass. When they were 50 yards from the south entrance of the pass, they were moving as fast as they could go.

Arrows rained down from both sides of the pass, and it wasn't long before all 20 of the cavalymen were unhorsed and lying wounded on the ground. The infantry hesitated, as they realized that they were going to have to climb over the rubble to advance. For many of them, their hesitation was their last cogent thought, as arrows pierced their bodies. A young officer tried to rally the men by brandishing his sword and pulling out a pistol, but his cry was cut short by an arrow that passed cleanly through his head.

The Aztlani assault faltered as man after man went down. Within seconds, those who were not wounded or dead were retreating as fast as they could run.

Ruth was so focused on the assault, that she had neglected her duty to stay aware. The thought of that error

occurred to her in a flash when something moving off to her left caught her eye. She swung around the boulder she was lying against just in time to see an assault force of 20 men moving in towards the East. *They are trying to flank the militia by coming around the mountain!*

She knew that she was not supposed to get involved, but before she could stop herself, she let go a flurry of arrows, five in all, in a long arc in front of the flanking force. Her intention was not to hit and kill anyone; she wanted it to seem like there were many men guarding the easternmost edge of the mesa.

Her ploy worked, as the men, who had just seen the slaughter of 100 men trying to take the pass, thought better of their orders and fled back to the main body of the army.

There was obvious confusion among the ranks of the Aztlani army. Many of the highest-ranking officers had been killed already, and most of the 350 men remaining really wanted nothing to do with trying to force the pass. Someone finally took charge, assembled the rabble back into ranks and ordered a full out charge on the pass. This time, they were all coming.

Terror filled Ruth's heart as she saw the army approach. She had never seen, or even imagined, such a terrifying sight. One hundred men on horseback and twice that number on foot. Panic was evident on the soldier's faces, most of them screaming as they ran. These men were 600 miles away from home, away from any base of resupply.

No doubt, the officer that had rallied the troops told them that they were all going to be killed if they did not take the pass. Each man had rape and pillage before him if the pass could be taken, and almost certain death waiting for him, if he retreated and returned home beaten.

Many of the men pulled out pistols as they rushed forward and began firing wildly into the rocks and boulders, hoping to frighten the men waiting there. The men in front were slowed again as they had to traverse the last 50 yards over the bodies of their fallen countrymen. Several horsemen had their horses killed beneath them, and the panic-stricken animals often trampled living infantrymen who got in their way. All the while,

the steady stream of arrows flowed forth from the defenders stationed in the gap.

As the Aztlani army surged forward, they were so intent on a last, desperate attempt on the pass, that they did not see the huge force of militiamen sweeping up behind them on horseback. Ruth saw them, and she did scream this time. It was Phillip and the main Ghost militia force!

Ruth cheered aloud as she saw Phillip, who rode standing up in his stirrups, his sword gripped tightly in his hand. Alongside him were Gareth and the man they called The Mountain, leading the charge.

It was too late when the Duke of El Paso's army discovered what was happening to them. Some of them may have heard hoof beats coming from behind, but most of them did not. The front echelons fell from arrows fired by the men in the pass and, as the assault slowed, as it crashed into the boulders, Phillip and the militia cut the army to shreds from the rear. The entire action lasted less than five minutes, but the five minutes of battle resulted in a bloody slaughter.

None of the enemy force was left alive, and no one was allowed to surrender.

Later, as they gathered themselves and tended the wounded militiamen that were brought into Bethany, Phillip explained that the men were free to surrender before the battle had begun. "Once the battle begins," he said, "the time for surrender is over. We do not have the time, the manpower, or the inclination to babysit Aztlani prisoners. The whole nation of Aztlan may surrender right now, if they like. But if they come here to take the spoils, we will water the ground with their blood."

She found Timothy and David tending to the wounded in the makeshift hospital that had been set up in the Public House. It seemed to her that not many had been wounded at all. When she walked in, both Tim and David greeted her with a scowl of contempt and confusion, but after she explained that she had received permission from her father to scout the battle, they relented. She gave them a quick report about where she had

been throughout the battle, and what she had seen. She carefully omitted the part about the five arrows she had shot.

Tim, seeing that she was still overwhelmed with what she had seen, came over to her and pulled her aside.

“I can’t imagine how you must be feeling, Ruth.”

“I’m doing fine. I was just so worried about you and David... and all the men. I was so scared.” She looked at him, checking him up and down for any signs of harm. “Are you injured?”

“No. Just a few scrapes and bruises from scrambling up and down the mesa. Shockingly, of the six men who had held the pass, five of us are alive and unhurt.”

“Five?”

Timothy looked down, and then took her by her shoulders. “Ruth... Jack Johnson was killed by a stray bullet... a ricochet.”

“Oh, my,” she let out a sigh, feeling a little weak in her knees. He guided her to a chair that was not occupied by the wounded. She looked out of the window, and could see that high in the air, the vultures had already begun to circle for the feast.

“I know that you’ve known Jack for your whole life, Ruth, and that he was very close with your family. I’m sorry. Maybe I could have talked him out of coming... I don’t know.”

“He came because he wanted to come, and because he wanted to protect David. You couldn’t have stopped him. Besides, my father said that any man who wanted to fight, could fight.” She looked at him again, “No... you couldn’t have stopped him. This is God’s will.”

“I don’t know about that, or if I even understand what you mean by that, Ruth. I do know that I’ve been in quite a few battles, and it is never easy to lose someone you care about. This will affect your family and the entire Vallensian community. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Then let’s just do what we can to help these men,” she said, standing up and smoothing her dark headcovering. She walked past Tim to see what she could do to help. As she started to move away, Tim stopped her.

“Don’t think that I don’t know what you did up there,” he said, smiling.

“What do you mean?” she replied.

“We saw that flanking force move out to the east. David had already started moving with two other men to try to meet them on the backside. Then we saw the men stop, turn around, and flee. We couldn’t figure out why they retreated. Now I know.”

“How could you know?” Ruth said, acting as innocently as she could.

He pointed at the quiver on her back. “You’re a little light there. I’d say, maybe five or six arrows light, but who’s counting?”

She looked down, then back up at him, “I must have dropped them on the ride down.”

“Sure you did,” he said, smiling warmly.

Ruth blushed, and as she walked by him, she found silently found his hand and placed into it the arrowhead he had given her when he left the ranch.

# Chapter 11 - Gareth

**T**here is a terror that surpasses the carnal fear a warrior feels when going into battle. That ultimate terror is not the fear of death, but the knowledge that he might live, while his loved ones die. Gareth did not know this terror firsthand, but he could see it on the face of Phillip as they inventoried the weapons and material gained in the battle at Bethany.

The urgent message that San Angelo had been burned by the retreating Vallenses, and that Bethany was soon to fall, had come just as the Ghost militia was planning their attempt to rescue Phillip's wife Juliet and the girls. The Ghost had to make a decision, and he had to make it fast. Thus, the militia leader sent Rob Fosse and Sir Gerold the rebel Aztlani knight, along with 20 militia soldiers northward to attempt the rescue of his wife and children.

Gareth, Phillip, the Mountain, and almost 200 Ghost militia warriors immediately rode south at full speed to try to flank and overwhelm the Aztlani army attacking Bethany.

It would be days and maybe even longer—depending on the outcome—before Phillip would find out whether his wife and daughters were safe; but the Ghost leader never said a word about his concerns. Gareth was impressed that Phillip always maintained a professional demeanor, and that he focused on keeping up the moral of his troops, especially after the lightning victory at Bethany.

Arriving at the twin mesas, the militia force almost instantly overwhelmed the struggling Aztlani attackers, but most of the credit for the stunning victory went to David and that handful of brave warriors standing in the gap at the twin mesas.

As a Prince, he had learned the art of war at the hand and feet of the greatest military minds of Aztlán; and his father, the King, made sure that he received the best military education

that could be procured. Still, he had never seen such acts of heroism and bravery as the defenders at Bethany had displayed.

The hardest, and most important, work in a battle of this sort is that warfare that takes place in the minds of men. The Aztlani forces had been defeated in their minds long before they died on the field. A handful of men with arrows had made Bethany seem impregnable in the opinion of the average Aztlani soldier, and this reality made Bethany impregnable to him in real life. The invaders knew they were going to die... they just chose to die moving forward, rather than retreating.

He could only assume that the Aztlani force must have concluded that they were outmanned and outgunned. In their minds, they had already succumbed to mental state that means the death knell in any engagement... they had succumbed to panic and fear.

Fear, in and of itself, can be a great motivator in battle, but when that fear becomes irrational and is coupled with the type of panic that silences the better voices of wisdom and circumspection, the battle is all but over. There is nothing left for that army to do but die.

For Gareth, this had been his first engagement in war. He had practiced and drilled since he was a boy; still, until Bethany, his steel had never been forged in battle.

Silently flanking the Aztlani army, the militia force had double advantage—the elements of surprise and position. Entering the fray, he felt the thrill and terror of battle and, for the first time, had experienced a phenomenon about which his trainers had taught him. When in battle, fear and terror, as well as the resulting adrenaline surge, must be recognized, and then controlled and channeled productively. He felt the fog of war and the numbing dullness of uncertainty and confusion when he first drew his sword in battle, but as the killing progressed, the fear and panic had transformed into concentration and purpose.

A part of him knew that he was traitorously killing his own men—men who had sworn themselves to his father, the King, and to himself as Crown Prince and heir to the throne. Still, he had to rest on the knowledge that in order for his vision for a greater and more peaceful Aztlan to prevail, for a time,

Aztlan had to be the enemy. The lowly soldier could not know what private forces had driven him to abandon his father and side with his father's enemies.

Prince Gareth of Aztlan did not believe that he had rebelled against, or abandoned, his country. He might be a traitor to his father, but not to his country. All of the actions he was engaged in were *for* his country, for he could not let his father destroy everything because of his greed and covetousness.

As a young prince, he spent many years with English at New Rome, and his father's adjutant had taught him that in order for there to be peace in any Kingdom, there must be freedom—typically purchased at a heavy price.

It was the King's job, English taught him, to punish evildoers, whilst rewarding and defending the righteous. Any Kingdom that has a tyrant as a sovereign will eventually fall; and any nation built on endless consumption, the drive for empire, and the oppression of its own people, would inevitably consume itself and perish in a storm of violence and death.

History is the long tale of empires rising to power founded on vision, hard work, and productive capability. Still, they were all eventually morally poisoned, due to the insatiable drive for conquest and domination. Thus, all had perished foully when that need for conquest turned the world, and even their own people, against them. If anything could be learned from the collapse of America, it was that consumption as a creed, and comfort as a maxim, would lead any nation to ruin.

Aztlan, under the reign of his father, had followed the beaten path that leads to destruction, and would certainly fall if something radical were not done to stop it.

Posing as an assassin and a spy, joining forces with the rebel army, and actively supporting his father's greatest enemy would be considered an act of treason—that much he knew. Yet, it would have been a greater treason to allow Aztlan to continue on its way to destruction.

As a prince, he proposed to follow the path of freedom and peace, but, if his father could not see his own folly, the kingdom would not survive long enough for him to be crowned.

There were good people in Aztlan—people who wanted peace; yet, for it to be restored, first the better angels of their nature would need to prevail by removing the foul and wicked rulers. Although Aztlan had been born an outlaw nation, there was no reason that she must remain so. Gareth firmly believed that, if his father could be overthrown, there would be hope for Aztlan and her people. If not, then he would rather die having stood against the evil empire—even if it was ruled over by his own father.

Here at Bethany, though the battle had lasted only minutes, there were moments that, for him, seemed to last an eternity. Plunging into the tumultuous and surging mass of men, some on horseback and some on foot, all fighting to the death, was one of those times.

The militia troops had long been at war with Aztlan, and were adept at such skirmishes. Most of the Duke's men, to the contrary, had merely been involved in destroying peaceful villages, riding down unarmed citizens, or fighting small groups of relatively untrained men trying to defend their towns or lands. Even with the numerical odds in favor of Aztlan, this was a slaughter, rather than a battle.

In the assault, as he had engaged his first enemy soldier on horseback, there was a moment when the man recognized him. In the heat of battle, with death dancing on every side, the man had looked up to see Gareth of Aztlan, the Crown Prince of the realm and heir to the throne, advancing on him with sword drawn. Their eyes met for what seemed like eternity, but could only have been seconds.

The man was instantly overcome with a wave of confusion, lowering his sword to his side, as he tried in vain to process the reality of what was happening.

When Gareth swung his sword, the shocked man was barely able to parry the strike. More instinctively than willingly, he had raised his weapon just in time to intercept the first blow, the reality of being attacked by his own Prince still not completely understandable to him.

Just as Gareth raised his sword to strike again, another militia fighter riding by plunged his sword into the hapless man's neck, instantly ending the Aztlanian soldier's battle for clarity in his thoughts and worldview.

Looking down as the soldier bled out into the Vallensian soil, Gareth faltered for just a moment, as he realized that the man had died because he could not assimilate the sometimes incomprehensible and contradictory winds of life, politics and battle.

Slowly, clarity returned. Some men had to die in order for the dream of peace and stability to reign in this world.

Spurring his horse, he returned to the business of bringing that dream to fruition. These Aztlanian men, at the command of his father and the Duke of El Paso, had chosen to wage a war against a peaceful people. In his mind, death was the wages of that sin.

After the battle, he looked out over the field of dead and dying men, his own sword stained with the blood of his countrymen, and he shook his head at the irony of it all. In order for life to come, there needed to be death. By the same accord, for peace to reign between Aztlan and the Vallenses, the peaceful Vallenses would need to be brought into the war against Aztlan. This was his mission. Like war, irony is a fickle business.

He now stood with Phillip, David Wall, and several of Phillip's soldiers, and watched as the spoils of war were loaded into a wagon.

"Over 250 pistols, 100 rifles, somewhere north of 400 battle swords, not to mention ammunition, some armor, boots, a ton of other standard issue soldiering goodies and supplies," reported Rollo, the man they called *The Mountain*. "The men have also rounded up around 50 horses, all of which are now expertly trained and experienced in not getting killed in a battle."

"We have dead on the field, Mountain, so let's keep the humor and japes to a minimum, shall we?" replied Phillip.

"Of course, sir. My apologies. Apparently Jonathan Wall is on his way here to retrieve the body of the Vallensian man who was killed in the gap."

David looked up at Phillip and nodded, "My father will want to take Jack back to his parents as soon as possible, but I assume he will also want to meet with you so he can be apprised as to the situation here in Bethany. There are thousands of refugees encamped within a mile of our ranch, and thousands more who have fled north and east of Lake Penateka. Father will want to know if it is safe for the people to return here."

Gareth helped Phillip latch the back of the wagon, and then the men all stepped out of the road into the shade of a towering pecan tree that loomed over the south side of Main Street in front of Grayson's smith shop.

Looking eastward down the street he could see men with wagons and oxen moving up the Bethany road, as crews continued work pulling Aztiani dead from among the boulders near the base of the mesas in the gap.

When he looked back at Phillip, he said, "I can't imagine that it is safe for anyone to return. We don't even know if this was the main Aztiani force. We don't know how they got here as fast as they did, although I suspect your outriders will learn that they used trucks to get across the badlands, at least as far as San Angelo."

Phillip shook his head, "Since the crash, no army I know of has used trucks or burned precious fuel to get to the battlefield. It doesn't make sense." He rubbed his beard and then scratched his head, "Our men are searching south and west of there. We suspect that you are probably right, though I don't understand why they wouldn't have come all the way to Bethany if that were the case. I know the roads are bad, but they are worse from El Paso to the frontier."

Gareth tried to put himself in the mind of the Duke of El Paso, who would have planned the assault himself. "I suppose," he said, scanning the street as the work there progressed, "that fuel was the final arbiter of how far they could go. It would determine how much they could carry, and how much they would need for the return trip. When your men find the trucks... *if* they find the trucks... we'll know more. There should be a fuel truck with them with enough fuel to get at least half of the trucks back to El Paso. If there is no fuel truck, and if there is clearly

not enough fuel on board for the trucks to return home, then all bets are off.”

David spoke up. “That would mean that it was a suicide mission?”

“Could be,” he said, “or a test. Possibly even a diversion. Perhaps it could mean that the Duke felt that the initial force might be sufficient to take and burn the town, but if that attack failed, we’d think that the war is over, when it is not.”

“So there could be another assault coming?” David asked.

“Oh, I can assure you that another assault is coming. The question is whether this first battle was a colossal failure on their part, or the first move in a broader campaign.”

“I don’t know,” Phillip said, sighing demonstrably, “Aztlán has proven to be just arrogant enough to believe that this assault would accomplish their designs. I guess, I really don’t know what to think yet. When the outriders get word to us from San Angelo, we’ll know more. Until then, we’ll need to prepare for another... another larger battle.”

“We’ve work to do, then,” Gareth said, looking from Phillip to David.

“We do,” Phillip replied as he put his hand on David’s shoulder, pausing for a moment before continuing. “You’ve done a phenomenal job David. Every man and woman in the area now owes you a debt of gratitude. I know that this action has cost you a lot personally, and might have a... negative impact... on your relationship with your father. But had you not acted when you did, and in the way that you did, Bethany would have been lost, and we would have been fighting uphill to try to stop Aztlán from destroying all of the Vallenses.”

“I, like you, must obey my conscience.” David said.

“Well, unhappily, you must now obey your conscience *and me*—since you are now a militia soldier. I’m going to ask you to handle the arrangements and the meeting with your father. You know everything I know. I’d be glad to meet with him if it is necessary, but there is nothing that I can tell him that you cannot convey yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” David replied.

Gareth and Phillip began strolling back down Main Street, walking slowly and silently for some time, as they each considered what the future might hold.

At the Livery, horses moved about and whinnied as men treated wounds on the battle-wearied mounts. Between the Livery and the General Store, there was a small park with wooden tables and some red mesquite chairs shaded by massive pecan and oak trees.

"I continue to pray that your wife and children are safe, Phillip," he said as they sat down on two chairs, on either side of a mesquite table.

"It won't help to send anyone northward for word of them," Phillip replied almost, but not quite, unemotionally. "We cannot make the messengers arrive any faster by wasting more men to ride out to meet them. We'll just have to wait."

"I'll wait with you until we hear."

"Thank you, Prince."

"No more 'Assassin'?"

"No more, Prince Gareth."

He pointed at Phillip, "I've been meaning to ask you. When did you figure out that I was the Prince? Thinking back, it seems you had known for awhile."

"I suspected it almost immediately from conversations and letters I have received from English over the years. Sir Nigel Kerr is very fond of you, and often spoke highly of you. However, I did not know for certain until the other night when we were talking in the darkness at camp up north, just before Rob Fosse and Sir Gerold showed up to confirm my suspicions. You said something that was curious to me. You said, '*God sees through barn roofs just as well as castles*', and I think it was at that moment that I absolutely knew that I was speaking to the Crown Prince of Aztlan."

Gareth laughed. "Yes, I suspected as much. Not a minute later you said, '*Monarchs rule by right of blood—each son ruling in the place of his dead father*'. I think that was when I realized that you knew. I'm just grateful that you figured it out. Your men would have killed me right then."

“Yes,” Phillip said, smiling, “they would have. In fact some of them still would like to go ahead and kill you just to be safe.”

“Perhaps, in time, they will grow to like me.”

“Fat chance! Still, I do think that they respect you for your integrity, and for your courage and bravery in the battle.”

“I don’t think I was very Princely.”

“Probably not, but it was your first engagement. You did well enough.”

They were silent for a moment as they reflected back on the battle.

“We’ve lost twelve men,” he said, as he scanned Phillip’s countenance for some clue as to what that meant to him.

Phillip nodded. “Twelve good men. Twelve friends. I have known, trained and fought with most of them since they were just boys.”

“Do you ever grieve?”

“I never stop grieving,” Phillip replied as he looked to the top of the mesa. His eyes were clear and blue. The afternoon had grown hot, and the mesas blocked the southerly wind, which was one negative in the placement of the town of Bethany.

“Will you stop riding... stop fighting, if there is peace with Aztlan?”

“There will never be peace with Aztlan until they are defeated.”

“What then? When they are defeated; when Aztlan is humbled; what becomes of the Ghost?”

A wagon piled high with corpses to be buried rumbled by. “I suppose that I’ll end my days like those men, but if I don’t... If I don’t... I’d like to stand on the top of that mesa with my wife and look out over a free and independent Texas. Maybe that vision is God’s will, or perhaps it is just what my flesh wants. All I can do is fight until I know the difference.”

“Do you fear God’s wrath, Phillip?”

“I know that, if we let these people be slaughtered by Aztlan, I’d have every reason to fear it.”

“Will the Vallenses fight now?”

Phillip shook his head. “No.”

As they sat in silence pondering the wrath of God, an outrider came riding hard from the direction of the thicket. Phillip jumped up from his chair, and met the rider in the street.

“Is it my wife and children? Are they safe?”

The rider dismounted, nodding a salute to Phillip. “I come from the south, sir. We’ve found the trucks. There are ten of them, hidden in a caliche pit about ten miles northeast of San Angelo.”

“Was there a fuel truck? Or any means of refueling for the trip home?”

“Not that we found, sir. The trucks were disabled and burned. A complete loss, sir. They were just blackened shells. It seems the Aztlani men were never intended to make it back home.”

## Chapter 12 - Ana

**H**er hands moved swiftly and expertly as she gathered the wheat into her left hand and cleanly cut the stalks off near the ground with her sickle. When the sheaf in her hand became difficult to carry easily, she tied it off with a strand of wheat straw and then stacked it, grain heads up, with the other sheaves on the ground, creating a pile known as a 'shock' or a 'stook' of wheat.

In a few days, provided it did not rain and the wheat had dried sufficiently, other workers would come by with a large flatbed wagon pulled by two large draft horses and they would grab the dried stooks with large hayforks and bring in the sheaves to the threshing barn to be threshed and winnowed.

War had come to Central Texas and to the Vallenses and now there were thousands of mouths to feed in and around the Wall family ranch. Thus, every hand was needed to help bring in the harvest. Each family that needed help with sustenance would be getting a weekly ration of wheat, so long as they were unable to return to their homes. The harvest teams were also traveling to nearby farms to harvest those crops, knowing that every kernel would be precious if the war was to last very long.

Ana didn't mind helping with the harvest; in fact, even if the war had not come, she would have been out here anyway. She always pitched in during the wheat harvest, even if her position did not mandate it. She liked it, even on the hottest days. Harvesting reminded her of all the parables of the Bible regarding wheat, threshing, and winnowing. Seeing the grain processed from the beginning to the final product as bread or cereal grains impressed and amazed her.

Almost automatically, her hands worked the wheat and she continued rhythmically up the row. Her thoughts detoured from the parables of God, and retreated to the path of her old

life and what it had been like once upon a time. She constantly told herself not to dwell on the past, but the flesh is weak—especially when you are alone with your thoughts.

Before he died, her husband wanted to avoid - at all costs - the agrarian life she now prized. Five years before the crash, she was compelled to start studying and looking into a simpler and more sustainable way of life. The world had become a frightening place to her, and the trite answers of the mainstream religious authorities, as well as the prophetic inferences that once had enamored her, had become wholly insufficient to offer her any comfort at all.

Her studies led her to Jonathan Wall's books on Biblical worldviews, simple living, and Agrarianism. Her husband Hamish vehemently rejected everything she had started to believe was the truth. He told her that God had given men advanced and curious minds. Hence, using their minds to make their own lives easier and more comfortable was the fulfillment of God's wishes.

His utilitarian religion wholly embraced and encouraged his utilitarian thinking. In fact, she had learned that utilitarianism had become the religion of the entire world, no matter what name or title was put on it. There were many religions and denominations, but almost all had joined the one-world cult of *efficiency*, which did not allow for any doubting or questioning of technology, modernity, or the ways of the world. The cult of modern religion promoted the view that whatever coddled the flesh or made life easier and more comfortable, was a blessing from God and ought to be wholeheartedly received - no matter what the real effects were to the individual, the society, or the culture.

She tried gently and lovingly to help her husband understand that the Bible taught otherwise, and that the immoderate creature comforts of modern life were actually what had caused modern religion to apostatize, but he would have nothing of it.

Her husband had received the seed of his faith among the thorns. He heard the word, but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches had choked it out. Consequently, he

banned her from reading anything Jonathan Wall wrote and forced her to continue in, and increase her dependence on, a modern world rocketing towards collapse. The more the world stumbled and reeled from gluttony, greed, and consumption, the more Hamish insisted that everything was just fine; and the angrier he became with anyone who even hinted at abandoning the sinking ship.

When the crash came, Ana and Hamish were two of the very, very few people who made it out of Fort Worth. They just happened to have a half-tank of gas; and they just happened to choose a route out of town that hadn't already been closed off by the police, burning cars, rioters, or looters, or all of the above. They managed to make it two hours west of the city before the worst of the violence and mayhem consumed most of those who were left behind.

They ran out of gas outside of the small town of Albany, Texas. As they walked on the service road, terrified at everything that was happening around them, her silent prayers were answered when they were picked up and taken in by an older retired couple, the Haltoms.

Ana paused for a moment in her harvesting and took a whetstone out of the horn sheath that she kept tied around her waist with a section of rope. As she reflected on the aftermath of the collapse, she drew the whetstone along the edge of the blade. *It is amazing, sometimes, to consider what events are necessary to sharpen us and to hone us to make us of any use*, she thought.

The Haltoms were a very nice couple, and she really liked them a lot, but they were hopeless and helpless against the mind siege that accompanied the collapse. The day after they arrived at the Haltom's home, Hamish offered them money to take him to town, but Doc Haltom wouldn't take any money. He said that he was just being neighborly, adding that things were going to "get back to normal soon," and that he was only doing what he hoped someone would do for them under the same circumstances.

The four of them piled into the Haltom's car and drove into Albany to buy supplies and groceries and maybe fill some gas cans so they could retrieve the car from the highway. She had

always been told that there was at least a three-day's supply of food at any grocery store, but that lie was exposed pretty quickly. Now, she knew that the supply would last for three days *so long as nothing was wrong*. If things got bad, the supply was only good for a couple of hours... maybe. The store had been cleaned out, as had the feed store and the hardware/sporting goods store. The commercial part of town had, for the most part, been abandoned.

Doc's wife May pronounced firmly that everything would be ok, and that things would come around soon enough, so they all went back to the house to wait for the return to normalcy that had been always been promised to them. At that time, they hadn't considered that the promise had been made by everyone with a vested interest in the status quo.

The promise of 'normalcy' was a mantra and maxim of that unholy trinity of bad ideas and ungodly living—the world, the government, and the church.

For a few days, things went as well as could be hoped under the extreme situation, as they all waited anxiously for things to "return to normal." They paced the house and talked a lot, making rather superficial preparedness and survival plans. Hamish and Doc Haltom inventoried what food and supplies were left in the house, and made lists of what might be needed if they could find someone with whom to barter, or if they could somehow get to Abilene.

The news on television waxed worse and worse; and eventually there was no news, because even the reporters, cameramen, producers and directors had to start fighting for their own lives.

When the reports of riots, fires and death in American cities and around the world stopped repeating incessantly on the flat-screen television and were replaced with an emergency broadcast scroll asking people to 'stay tuned', there was a moment when a palpable sense of panic crossed the faces of everyone in the room. Still, old Doc Haltom actually seemed cheerful when he announced that, "nothing really bad can happen here. After all, we're Americans!"

They were all wrong. The Haltoms and Hamish were gunned down in the Haltom's living room as they stared at the TV vainly hoping that something, anything, would come on to replace the scrolling 'stay tuned' that had been their only message for two days.

She had walked down the alley behind the Haltoms' small house in order to see if she could get a sense of what was happening outside. She needed a walk and being cooped up in the house for days had done nothing to ease her anxiety and fear. *Jonathan Wall talked about this*, she had thought then. *He said that all of this was inevitable.*

She knew that the Vallensian community was only a few hours south of Albany, and she wondered if Hamish would now consider listening to what Jonathan had to say.

Maybe there was enough gas left in the Haltom's car to make it south to the Vallenses. Maybe. Then she wondered how many thousands of people might be flooding into Central Texas hoping that the Vallenses—the same plain people who they had all once considered cute, quaint, or even crazy—would provide for them. Why would the Vallenses help any of these people? After all, they had willfully chosen not to heed the warnings that were all around them and had failed to provide for themselves. The least she could do was talk to Hamish and Doc Haltom about it, she concluded. She had just committed to that plan when she heard the gunshots.

Shocked and frightened, she ran back towards the house, but before she could even make it into the backyard, she saw what seemed to her like twenty gunmen ransacking the house. She crouched behind a dumpster until the men left.

She paused from sharpening the stone, and despite the heat of the summer day, a chill went down her spine. Even after 20 years, the image of the scene she encountered in the house was still vivid in her mind.

Hamish and the Haltoms had each been shot in the head, their blood mingling together and soaking into the

upholstery. Almost everything in the house of any value had been stolen, and she could hear gunshots as the gang moved down the street

In movies, things are explained and the viewer usually gets to grasp the ‘why’ behind the plot. The script usually answers your questions and the ending always makes sense. In real life, when the invisible and often imaginary threads that hold a society together are violently ripped apart, there are no pat answers. When the superficial veil of order gives way to the real chaos that reigns underneath it all, sometimes murderers just disappear down the street and you never know their back story or when or if they ever met with some kind of cosmic justice. Either way, Hamish was dead and she was alone.

Everything in her being told her to just run and try to get away, but panic, confusion and grief had washed over her to the point that she couldn’t move at all. The only thought that made sense to her was that the gang who had killed her husband and the Haltoms wasn’t likely to return. So she stayed in the house, hiding in the Haltoms’ bedroom for two days. Finally, the stench of death got to be too much for her and she decided to walk southward under the cover of darkness. The entirety of her plan could be distilled down to one word—*south*. With that in mind, she had walked.

Ana looked up and she found that in her reverie she had walked to the threshing barn and the sun was starting to dip lower into the western sky.

In just a few days, if the Lord willed it, this barn would be a beehive of activity, as men and women carried in the sheaves and the business of threshing and winnowing would begin. Long flails—sticks with thin boards lashed to the end of them using leather straps she—would be used to beat the sheaves placed on the threshing floor. When the sheaves were sufficiently beaten, the straw would be removed, and the doors on the opposite sides of the barn would be opened to allow a breeze to pass through the barn. The mass would be thrown into the air, the wind separating the wheat from the chaff.

She was convinced now that God knows just how much of a beating it takes to get rid of the chaff. She nodded her head at that thought. The world was God's field. First, the tares were ripped up from the field, and burned. Then the wheat was beaten to remove the chaff. From all of this, God brought forth the crop that he intended. Ana laughed. How different the reality was from the religious prophetic fantasies that had overflowed the world in the decades prior to the collapse!

Ruth walked up as Ana was in the doorway of the threshing barn, looking down at the six-inch board that had to be stepped over to get in or out of the door.

"That's a threshold, Ruth."

"I know that Mrs McLennon! I've lived here all of my life!"

"Did you know that in the world the people call the entranceway to any door a 'threshold', even though they have no idea what that means?"

"No. I didn't know that."

"A threshold keeps the wheat in so when the wind blows the lighter chaff away, the heavier wheat falls to the floor and is kept in the barn by the threshold board." Ana looked at Ruth and smiled. "Both the wheat and the chaff are blown by the wind, but since the wheat kernel has the weight of God's goodness in it, it drops and is separated from the lighter and worthless chaff. It is kept safe by the threshold."

"I never thought of it that way, Mrs McLennon. I just always thought it kind of made sense not to let the wheat blow out through the door."

"Everything around us is there to teach us how God deals with us, Ruth. I never knew or cared for such matters back when I lived in the world—back before the crash. The modern religious world wasn't in the business of teaching us such things. We were taught that all of the good people were going beamed off to heaven without having to suffer or go through any tribulation and that only the wicked would be left on the Earth when things got tough. Oh, how foolish we were to believe those fairy tales!"

“So, how are you doing... I mean, since the battle, and Jack’s funeral and everything else going on. How are you holding up, young Miss Wall?”

“I’m doing fine, thanks. Father told us that it is very likely there will be another Aztiani attack soon. But I don’t think we know much yet about when or where or what to expect.”

“Although there is no doubt that your father is a good man, he doesn’t tell you everything, Ruth. He protects us women from the very imminent and real danger of us knowing too much and thus worrying.”

The brightness of the summer day had given way to the softer light and longer shadows of evening. Dozens of Vallenses were departing the fields and heading back to their camps, some talking quietly and others laughing at some quip or a joke.

“We must head home now, dear Ruth,” she said wiping dust from her apron, “Wally will have supper ready soon.”

As the two walked, they talked about Ruth’s day. Ruth told her that three large pigs had been caught in the traps, and that there had been a frightening event near the camps when some of the Vallensian women had seen a mountain lion cross the road only a half mile from the front gate.

“It seems that the predators are getting an upper hand for the time being,” she told Ruth.

“Father says that the system of predator and prey eventually balances itself out, but I can tell you this... we have never seen so many wild pigs. We may get fat... *if* we aren’t killed by them while walking to the outhouse at night!” Ruth exclaimed.

“A mountain lion brave enough to come so close to people frightens me more than some silly old pigs,” she said, laughing.

“That’s because you’ve never been face to face with a charging wild boar!”

“That is true, dear. That is true,” she admitted.

As they drew near the gate, they heard the sound of horses behind them and turned to see a militia contingent approaching. Timothy was in the front, riding abreast of Piggy.

Behind them was Tim's best friend The Hood, along with Enos Flynn, and Pachuco Reyes.

"It seems that your father has invited the heroes of the Battle of Bethany Pass to his table to share in some wild boar roast this evening."

Ruth smiled in response, "This ought to be interesting."

There was muted joviality and much conversation over a supper of tender roasted pork, browned sweet potatoes drenched in butter, sautéed onions, slow-cooked black beans, and a delicious desert of peaches and heavy cream. Ruth and Timothy caught up on the day's happenings and Ana told them funny stories of her earliest failed attempts at processing deer hides.

After supper, in the pale moonlight, Ruth and Ana were accompanied by Tim, Hood, and Piggy, as they walked out among the campfires and tents of the refugees and visited old and new friends. The party arrived at the tent of Ruth's sister Betsy and her husband Paul, and Ruth began to chase and play with her nephews Jon and Thomas while Ana helped Betsy with the supper dishes.

Elizabeth Miller, who Ana had always known as Betsy Wall, had grown into a strong and capable woman. She had her mother's strawberry blonde hair, as well as her strong hands and will. She had developed into every bit the hearty, intelligent, and industrious Vallensian wife that her father had trained her to be. She was not the deadly hunter that Ruth was, nor was she as avid a reader, philosopher, and thinker as her brother David. In truth, Ana thought, she had become what every Vallensian woman wanted to be. She was a good woman, a good wife, and a good mother.

"You know that you are all welcome to come and eat at the house with your father, Betsy."

"Oh, we know, Ana," Betsy replied, smiling. "We just don't want to be an added burden, and we really feel that we belong out here in the camps, with our neighbors and friends. Father would take every one of the Vallenses into his home if he could, and we all love him for that. But he raised me to love and

care for our people as much as he does, and Paul and I really just want to do what we can out here to help those who need it.”

A gentle breeze was gently dispersing the heat of the day, and an occasional firefly would twinkle by in the night, catching their attention. As the two women dried the last of the wooden dishes, they could hear Hood, Tim and Piggy laughing over some joke with Paul, so they joined the men around the campfire.

Before long, Jonathan and Wally the cook came up, and joined the group. The moonlight had faded and in the darkness, the Milky Way came clearly into view. Ana never grew tired of Central Texas nights, and she stared up into the sky in awe and wonder at the beauty of it all.

Piggy and Tim were arguing about the name of some constellation or another, when it seemed that Phillip suddenly just appeared among them on horseback as he almost silently approached from the road.

The militiamen stood up, and everyone grew silent when they saw the serious look on the militia leader’s face.

Phillip bowed slightly in greeting, and looked from his men to Jonathan with a pained seriousness etched on his features.

“I apologize for disturbing your evening. Trust me, I would have not done so without a good reason.”

“Go ahead, Phillip,” Jonathan said, “Please tell us whatever it is that troubles you so.”

“We have received outriders with news, and I thought it would be prudent to share it with you. One rider arrived from the east, and one from north. Both, I am afraid, bear... difficult news.”

“What is it, sir?” asked Tim, unable to bear the tension silently.

“From the north we have heard word concerning the attempt to rescue my wife and daughters.” Involuntarily, Ana’s hand came up to her mouth, and her heart pounded in her chest. “The attempt was apparently betrayed... somehow... and the men rode into an ambush. Rob Fosse and two other men escaped. Sir Gerold and the rest of my men were killed. We suspect that

the Aztlanis have fled the area and there is no word concerning the whereabouts of my family.”

Betsy gasped, and Ana clasped her hand in order to silence her.

Jonathan approached Phillip, who still sat on his horse, and reached for the hand of his old friend. Neither man could find words, so they stood there for some time before Jonathan finally spoke. “Phillip, we are all with you in your sadness and grief, and we will remain with you in prayer until your family is returned to you.”

“Thank you,” Phillip responded gravely, straightening himself in the saddle and clearing his throat.

“From the outrider who rode east, we have heard that some of your people... a large number..., the refugees who fled before the Bethany battle—those who did not stop at the banks of Lake Penateka—were overrun by an Aztlani force of unknown size.”

“We don’t have any details, and I’m sorry to be the one to bring this news. We fear that there has been a great slaughter. We’ve sent outriders to try to gain news of what happened. Apparently, some of the Vallenses had stopped on this side of Comanche, and others had continued as far as Chalk Mountain. I don’t know when we’ll know the full details. I... I just thought that you would want to know as soon as possible.”

Ana watched Jonathan’s face, as the information Phillip shared washed over him and slowly became a part of his new reality. His eyes looked glassy and damp as he looked up and nodded to Phillip again, this time patting him on his thigh as a sign of thanks, appreciation and unity in their mutual suffering.

She knew that Phillip, by all measures, had led a rough life; but he did have the mannish outlet of war and violence. She wondered if he could ever know of the sufferings of the Vallensian pastor. When she looked back at Phillip’s face, and saw in it the stoic shield that guarded him from any outward display of his own grief, she knew that he did.

In the darkness, the fireflies carried on with their business, and the soft summer breeze continued to ruffle tent flaps and lift sparks from the fire high into the Vallensian night.

Ana followed the sparks with her eyes, just glad that her new world wasn't limited to a blackened screen with a scrolling message that said 'stay tuned'.

We thank you for reading this novella. This is only a portion of the forthcoming novel *The Last Pilgrims*, by Michael Bunker. Please do help us make the book a success!

If you have the access, would you consider writing a review or blog post about *The Last Pilgrims*? We would appreciate it!

**To keep up with *The Last Pilgrims*:**

[www.lastpilgrims.com](http://www.lastpilgrims.com)

**Please “Like” our Facebook Page:**

[www.facebook.com/thelastpilgrims](http://www.facebook.com/thelastpilgrims)

To contact Michael Bunker, please write to:

M. Bunker

1251 CR 132

Santa Anna, Texas 76878