

ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑ

(KINGDOM)

On the Island of Androck

By

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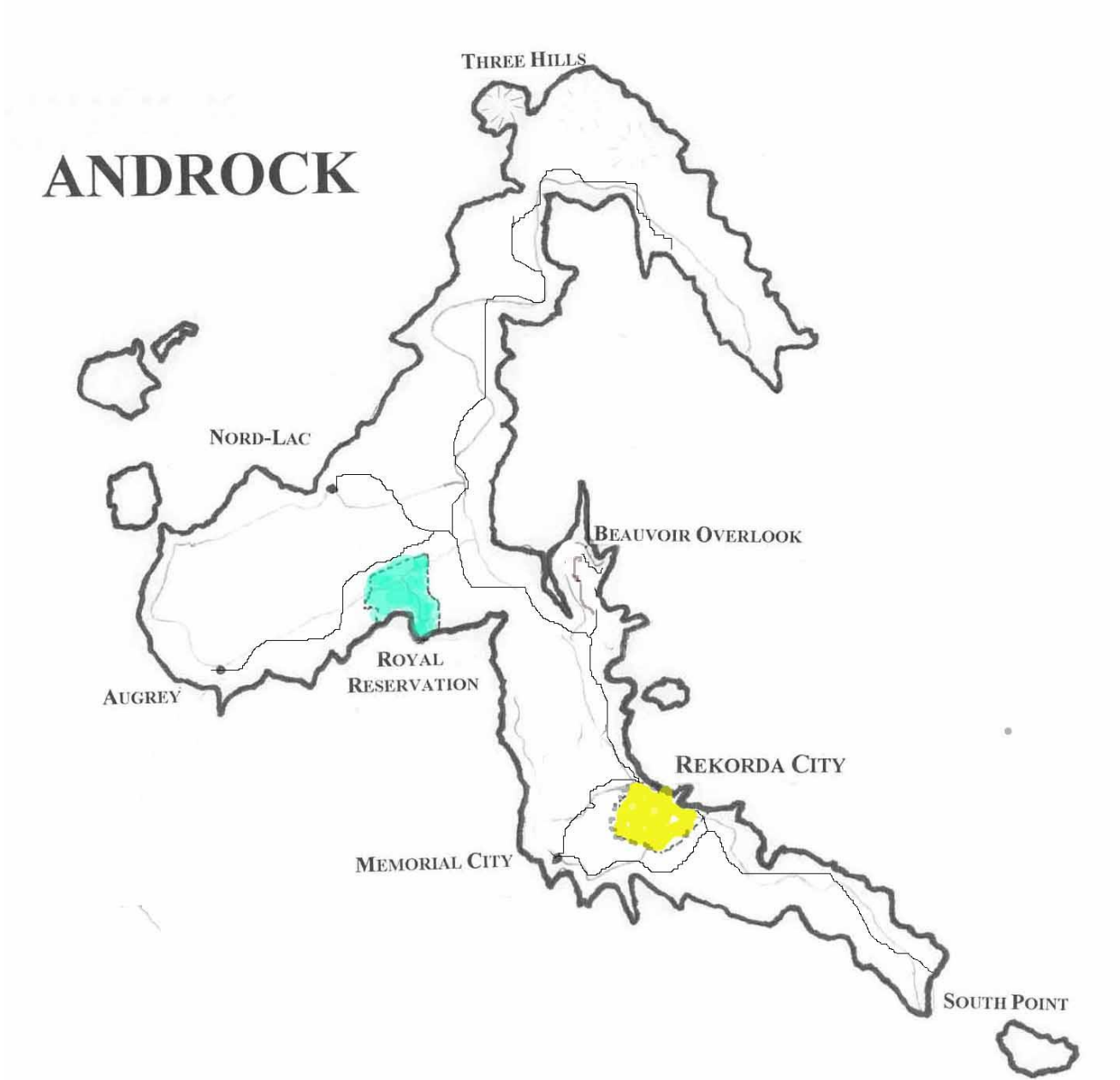
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ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑ

* * * * * BASILEIA * * * * *



CHAPTER 1 - THE ISLE OF ANDROCK

Jeff Richards looked up from his magazine to glance at his watch. Today promises to be a busy day for him once his flight arrives at its tropical destination. His company's multinational business is thriving and much of the credit belongs to Jeff who is both knowledgeable in his field and passably fluent in the language of his overseas contacts.

This is one of Jeff's many trips to the tropics. There have been so many he has lost count of their number. In the past he often used his airborne hours to keep up with the many details of his business. Fortunately, he enjoys flying. It is relaxing to him. He had been a pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force and counts that experience as one of his most memorable. Through his cabin window he can see the blue ocean thousands of feet below and a hazy horizon somewhere in the distance. Most of his business flights had been made in good weather. Today seemed to be no exception, but as he pressed his face to the window in an effort to look in the direction the jetliner was headed he could see they were approaching a dark storm system. "I guess we're in for a few bumps," he thought to himself.

A few minutes later the huge airliner banked gently to the right and began a slow turn. Jeff had made this particular flight several times before, but past flights had always made a bee-line for their destination once they were en route. As the plane continued its turn and leveled out, the ominous storm could be plainly seen through the row of windows across the aisle. It was an awesome sight; a wide expanse of distant towering black clouds rising into the bright blue sky.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen," the Captain's voice began, in the comforting bedside manner which is a trademark of airline pilots. "In order to give you a smooth and flawless flight we have decided to go around a tropical disturbance about a hundred kilometers away, which translates to about 60 miles for our non-metric American friends traveling with us today. This little detour will take us a wee bit out of the way. The weather experts tell us this is quite a brisk little storm out there and making this maneuver will give all of us the dividend of a comfortable trip. By the way," the voice on the speakers continued, "although we will be going out of our way to avoid the storm we will only be a few minutes late when we arrive at our destination. We owe that to the very nice tail wind we have had during part of the journey to speed us to our destination."

Jeff looked again at the towering storm system. Remembering some stormy flights he had experienced in the past he was quite happy to avoid a repeat performance.

"It looks like a very bad storm," remarked a young gentleman who occupied the seat beside Jeff.

Jeff noticed that his traveling companion spoke with a rather strange, yet not

unpleasant accent. "It surely does," he replied. "I've flown in plenty of bad weather and am quite satisfied to avoid this one."

Jeff looked down again at his magazine and began thumbing through it in an attempt to find something of interest to pass the time. From time to time he looked up from the periodical to glance out of his window at the azure scene to his right. At one point he again pressed his cheek to the window to see what might be ahead. Seeing an island far ahead in the haze he decided to pass the time watching it as the jetliner slowly approached.

After a few minutes the odd-shaped landmass came into clear view looking like a brilliant jewel mounted in a setting of deep blue, and framed by the borders of his cabin window. The gentleman with the accent stretched his neck to get a better look at the island. As he viewed the sight he appeared to be in deep concentration, straining to absorb every possible detail. Jeff also watched the island as it proudly displayed itself. "A refreshing sight," he thought to himself, "especially after the hours of monotonous blue sky and sea, and that tropical storm."

The more Jeff gazed at the island the more intrigued he became. He was struck with its beauty. It could almost be described as enchanting. The somewhat boot-shaped island displayed a lush multi-shaded green patchwork interior with a snow-white border around its entire perimeter, like a bright fringe on a garment of green and yellow. A foolish thought crossed his mind as he suddenly found himself wishing to leave the hustle and bustle of his hectic life and relax in the isolation, warmth, and beauty he imagined must exist on that island. "What a beautiful island," he heard himself say aloud.

The young gentleman next to him continued to focus unblinkingly on the view. Then he began to softly recite the words:

**Oh Androck! Androck, isle of beauty,
isle of paradise.
Thy streams and rivers go forth to nourish thy loveliness;
And to sustain those who dwell amongst thy gardens.**

Jeff was uncertain how to take the young gentleman's recital. He sensed his companion's eyes were moist with emotion. When he finished speaking Jeff asked uneasily, "That is a beautiful poem. What does it mean?"

"That is the island of Androck," the young man began, still looking at the sight as it slowly receded from view. "Those words are part of an ancient poem which depicted the hopes of the original settlers of the island. It is probably as familiar to everyone on the island as the 'O Canada' is to you, or 'The Star Spangled Banner' to an American."

"I take it you know quite a bit about that little island?" Jeff queried.

"I have lived there all my life, except for time I spent overseas at the university. You are quite correct, it is indeed a beautiful island, a very beautiful one. That green patchwork is its rich farmland, and the border is the wide white-coral sand beach surrounding the entire island. On the north fork, which we first passed, are the Three Hills as they are called. They are very scenic from the ground, not because they are particularly large, but because they contrast sharply with the surrounding terrain."

"Do you have to import any food?" Jeff asked.

"Not really, except for things like apples and a few delicacies which don't seem to thrive in the tropics. Agriculturally, however, Androck is more than self-sufficient. Farmers grow an astonishing variety of crops on the rich soil. Very little meat is grown locally, so our diets consist mainly of fruits, nuts and vegetables. Industrially the island would be considered underdeveloped. A garment mill, a specialty furniture factory and various other types of light industry make up the economy. Some speculative oil exploration companies are also at work in the hilly region east of the Three Hills, but I don't think they have announced any strikes."

"I feel funny admitting it," Jeff observed, "but I had a most peculiar feeling as we passed beside the island. It was almost magnetic, almost enchanting. I actually wanted to be there. Down there! On that island! A place I had never heard of, let alone been to. It was almost as if the thing was somehow beckoning me to visit it, calling me to come down. I find myself actually feeling a bit sad as the island disappears from view. I really feel quite foolish saying this."

"It is not foolish at all," the young man replied without hesitation. "Although you did not experience an 'enchantment' in the mystical sense, this magnetism has happened to many many people I am told."

"By the way, forgive me for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Jeff McCoy."

"And mine is Ronic Patterson," the young man returned. "I spent a few weeks of the summer in your country with some friends, and plan to return to Androck on a connecting flight this afternoon. It's not every airliner that flies directly to little Androck, as you can well imagine."

"Ronic, we have a few minutes before we land, please tell me more about Androck," Jeff asked. "I am curious as to what it is about that little green island that made me feel so relaxed, so at-home, when we passed over it?"

"Well Jeff," Ronic began, "probably what made that relaxed feeling come over you is you are overworked and could use a vacation."

"I can't deny that," Jeff chuckled.

"But in spite of the fact the island is rather small," Ronic continued, "there is really quite a lot to tell about it, meaning, its history, its problems, its attraction, its magnetism. Since you felt drawn to the island, perhaps you would not think it childish to do a little pretending?" Ronic said as he studied Jeff's expressions. Sensing a positive response he continued. "Let's pretend we are once again passing over the island. We look out of the window and there it is once again. You see its magnificent beauty. You imagine that you hear, -- no, you can really hear Androck herself call to you:"

**'I am Androck,
The beautiful isle of paradise.
Yes, I am Androck,
The terrible island of evil.
Hear my tale, dear friend,
And pray for a happy end.'**

"Island of evil?" Jeff seemed shocked at these unexpected words.

"Jeff, thus far you have seen Androck from just one vantage point, from several thousand feet in the air. Let's continue to pretend."

"You listen closely. You think you hear the little island call to you as you see her from afar, as you pass over her insignificance. You leave her behind as you continue to journey to more important destinations. She can almost be heard once again beckoning to you, imploring you not to fly past her, or to treat her as a forgotten jewel amongst thousands. **'Come down to me'** she calls, **'to my true self, to my true heart.'** You heed the call. Your plane lands on the island. You see the rare beauty all about you. A magnetism of stunning scenery begins to cast its spell."

"On the ground the lush semitropical foliage which creates the peaceful captivating atmosphere envelopes you everywhere you go, throughout the island, and even in parts of the city. But soon you are conscious that something is wrong. There is something that is decidedly not beautiful. You begin to fear. An intruder lurks. An ugly shadow is cast. The tentacles of evil reach out to grip you. Terror suddenly fills your heart. The beauty that previously occupied you has all but disappeared as your mind is jarred by a stark reality. The reality of survival in a jungle of anarchy."

"You begin to see that life on the island is anything but relaxing. In this small country imprisoned by the sea, murder, theft, and every conceivable type of crime and vice occur all too frequently, and without regard to human dignity. A few families who feel particularly at high risk are known to sleep in shifts. One sleeps while another keeps watch for an intruder. You learn that one family, a few evenings ago, had its house burned to the ground. Fortunately, all escaped with only the bedclothes they were

wearing at the time. No apparent reason has yet been determined for the arson, for that is what it was, although it is known that the people who suffered the loss had openly criticized a certain newspaper publisher. This publisher had been suspected by some of having many types of illegal connections, including a lucrative narcotics business. One out of forty island families have first hand knowledge of the grief of murder. An alarming percentage of the population has become drug addicts, slaves to the crimes bred by addiction. Statistically, nearly everyone can plan on being mugged every one-point-three years by some armed rogue. Children have commonly been struck down unmercifully for the few coins which they might, or might not, clasp in their tiny hands. With all the disruption, crime, lawlessness and anarchy, it is a miracle the population has survived at all. Such is this island of contrasts. And now you know what I meant by 'evil', and why the poem says to pray for a happy end:"

**'I am Androck,
The beautiful isle of paradise.
Yes, I am Androck,
The terrible island of evil.
Hear my tale, dear friend,
And pray for a happy end.'**

"Intriguing!" Jeff observed. "You have wetted my appetite just when our plane is making its final approach. I would really like to know more about that place, and what makes it tick."

"Tell you what," Ronic responded. "Back in Androck I own a Christian bookstore. One of the volumes I sell is a short history of the island. Unfortunately, it is written in our local language Androckie, but I would be happy to translate a few highlights from it if you would be interested."

"I would really love that," Jeff replied as the plane touched down on the runway.

"Just be aware," Ronic warned good-naturedly, "after you read the history, maybe Androck will actually call you the next time you fly near us. Call you so strongly that you will be compelled to come down to us, as have so many before you."

CHAPTER 2 - LETTER TO JEFF

To my new acquaintance Jeff:

It was my distinct pleasure to make your acquaintance on our recent airplane trip. Here is some further information about my homeland which, I trust, may be of interest to you.

Regards, Ronic

On the eastern coast of Androck, on the lower third of the island, is the capital city Recorda. Just a few short blocks from Gouvernave, the square containing the array of government buildings, is my little Christian bookstore. I am twenty-four and live with my parents in a small cottage in the southeastern side of the city. In the bookstore is a volume entitled "Basileia", which is the Greek word for "Kingdom." This book contains the official history of Androck. I will make an attempt to substantially condense this history for you and translate it into English:

"Late in the sixteenth century the island of 'Peaceful Dreams,' which is the meaning of the name 'Androck,' was discovered by a ship which had sustained severe damage in a storm. This ship had a multinational crew that had been gathered from several European nations. Forced to lay in port for extensive repairs that took over a year to complete they became captivated by the beauty of the island. As time went on they became less and less motivated to complete their repairs. By the time repairs were finally completed and the ship was provisioned for its homeward journey, some of the crew had developed a powerful desire to settle on the island. However, they eventually did sail with the repaired ship to avoid being charged with insubordination. The Island had captivated the hearts of many, and their goal was to journey back to their individual lands of birth, fetch their families, and return to the island paradise. Once home, however, some of the greedier members of the crew cooked up a scam designed to enrich themselves. They began selling to their countrymen some of the Androckian land, sight unseen, and with absolutely no titles or other legal claims to that land. Some of the purchasers of that stolen land had been out of work for some time and pooled what little they had to go to the unknown land of beauty. Several others were fleeing justice and would go anywhere to avoid being caught and languish in a filthy jail.

"When the new so-called 'landowners' finally arrived on the island all were quite impressed with the land and with the livelihood which could obviously be supported by it. They had made an excellent decision to come here. A few, unfortunately, saw an opportunity to become wealthy selling the land to others back home using a 'pyramid' like scheme. Some of these returned to their homelands and told exaggerated stories to individuals who had money, persuading some to emigrate. Eventually, a small flood of foreigners surged in to possess the land which they thought they had 'bought.'

"It turned out that only about a quarter of the land sales were legitimate. Most of the sellers didn't own the land they offered for sale, so when the scammed buyers arrived at

Androck they discovered they could not obtain clear titles to their purchases according to the procedure used by the natives in those days. Frankly speaking, the land had been stolen from, and sold out from under the feet of the few thousand native Androckians who had lived there from time immemorial.

"A large number of island natives were thrown off their own land by the foreigners. Resenting this, the natives organized a firm, but peaceful, resistance against those who had displaced them. This led to an open war between the natives and those few land grabbers who were of a violent sort, and who had brought their weapons of destruction to Androck to satisfy that violence. Given the disparity between the two sides, those skilled in criminal ruthlessness pitted against an unarmed and unorganized peace-loving group of families, it was inevitable that the war would be short and decisive.

"The natives tried to reason with the land-grabbers but all their pleas were in vain. The barbaric foreigners, fueled with alcohol, felt it necessary not only to win their unjust cause, but to completely eradicate all present and future opposition to their presence. Thus, they surrounded a large meeting of native males who had gathered to discuss the problem, and slaughtered each and every one of them. But not satisfied with that, like the tom cats and male lions who kill unprotected cubs of other blood lines simply for the pleasure of it, these drunken murderers systematically went through the villages seeking the wives and children of the men, to add these victims to the terrible toll. Thus, the entire native population was eradicated in a sudden slaughter too horrible to relate.

"In truth, the brutal annihilation of the defenseless natives was actually the work of only a few of the most recent immigrants who had arrived on the island to claim their so-called possessions. The mass murders enraged the original European settlers, particularly those who had been part of the crew of the distressed vessel. These settlers had gotten along well with the natives, and had made many good friends among them during the period of ship repair. And now these friends had been wantonly struck down for protesting the seizure of their own land. Even the second wave of arrivals who had not committed the atrocities were stunned by this wanton violence, particularly when the facts were rehearsed to reveal the truth regarding the ownership of the land which they had 'bought.'

"The charter settlers immediately formed a committee to rule the island. This committee evolved into a royal commission, and resulted in the establishment of a monarchy patterned closely after the native system. One of the first acts of that monarchy was to round up the murderers and put them to death for their crimes by whatever convenient means prevailed in those days. (Jeff, I will spare you the details of that retribution). The charter settlers and the new monarchy also realized, to their shame, that the despicable fraud of selling the native's land from under their feet had really been a wonton scheme that had originated with some of themselves. To appease their guilty consciences, and as an act of contrition and show of honor toward the deceased natives the monarchy established strict language laws which established "Androckie", the native island tongue, as the official language of the people.

"To implement the adoption of Androckie a school system was established to teach the language to the children. Subjects other than language courses were taught of course, but everything was taught in the language called Androckie. This language, though imperfectly understood by many of the charter settlers, was strongly promulgated, and, when judiciously mixed with words and expressions from several lands abroad, eventually became thoroughly understood by all. To be sure, the unfortunate native victims of the slaughter would have had great difficulty understanding the evolved dialect. As the older settlers died, Androckie, or rather, the version of it that presently bears that name, became the primary language understood by the masses.

"Several kings have come and gone since the original monarch was appointed by the royal commission. The procedure for royal succession was copied from what was known of the native practice. It specified that the title would go to the elder son, never the daughter, of the king, upon his death or incapacitation. After the manner of the native royal practice whenever no direct descendant existed, the king in his old age, or a standing royal commission after his demise, would appoint a relative, friend, or some outstanding citizen, who, it was hoped, would be capable of governing the people. The title was passed by an official document of transfer, and by the physical receipt of the royal seal by the new king. This very same seal had been used by the native Androckian monarchy and was recovered from the burned out rubble of the royal palace occupied by the slain native king.

"According to the manner of the native Androckian monarchy no particular celebration accompanied the transfer of power and no Bishops or other church dignitaries have ever been thought necessary because there was no anointing ceremony to require their presence. The time of a king's death, rather than his crowning, was the event considered worthy of celebration. A king's death was celebrated by considerable pageantry and respectful mourning, and it was considered inappropriate or even disrespectful to detract from that honor and respect by any installation ceremony for the fallen king's successor. By exercising his abilities the new king would, in time, gain his own reputation, for better or for worse. One day, when his life's journey would be over, he too would be honored after the manner of his predecessors, and according to the measure of his esteem by the people during his life."

That, my friend Jeff, is about as far as the official history takes us, but I will try to summarize a few of the major happenings that take us to the present day.

About 20 years ago Androck had a king by the name of Ampli III. This king was never very capable of ruling his subjects and eventually lost his remaining ability to govern because he had become a captive of the finest imported whiskey. His interest in life centered in the bottle and he came to have practically no care for the people of Androck. Because of his debility, the power and authority of the monarchy slipped away to his cabinet, the standing royal commission. In recent times this cabinet consisted of elected representatives of the people who gave advice and council to the

king, but who had in themselves no constitutional authority to rule, as such. As the king withdrew more and more from his royal responsibilities, the cabinet tried to fill in for him. But without having any true day-to-day governing authority those attempts of the royal commission were doomed to failure from the onset. It all became an abortive attempt to rule by committee, a committee largely composed of inept individuals who had no legal power, and who wanted even less responsibility.

The time did come, however, that some faint ray of leadership arose among the cabinet. This occurred because the cabinet had reached the belated conclusion that the country would surely perish unless they themselves ran the government, 'illegally', without the king. But that flash of leadership was short-lived. The criminal element had intimidated the cabinet causing them to suddenly change their minds about exercising power. As a matter of fact, the cabinet dissolved completely and its members dispersed amid the populace after the president of the cabinet was murdered while working at his desk one afternoon. No real investigation of that homicide was ever conducted.

When King Ampli III finally perished from shoeleather liver his son Ampli IV became king. Although Ampli IV was keenly aware of the growing anarchy many feel he was afraid of his life and that he had struck a deal with the underworld -- what we call the 'element.' They would rule and Ampli would be a mere figurehead. Like his father before him Ampli IV was content to live the luxurious life of a king isolated from the real world of crime and poverty which had come to characterize Androck. In this manner the criminal element took over the police force. The primary function of the security police became the protection of the criminal organization and their rackets, rather than the maintenance of law and order for the benefit of the people.

In addition to the police force, the criminal element took over the other governmental functions, especially the cherished function of collecting taxes, (payable to the criminal leaders and the various corrupt government department chiefs). These chiefs, or 'principals', took the corrupt money in exchange for support from the growing criminal element.

Such was the state of despair and ugly corruption which quickly developed during the early reign of Ampli IV and which continues to exist to the present day. When I was a teenager I wrote the following in my diary about King Ampli IV:

"While I have no real way of knowing for certain, it is my impression that the present 'king' might possibly be a sincere man. Given a different set of circumstances, he might even have been a good ruler. Bravery, however, does not appear to be one of Ampli's virtues and he abdicated his opportunity to rule in a genuine manner, believing it would be futile to attempt to change things."

These impressions were, of course, pure speculation on my part. King Ampli lives a life of isolation in luxury and no real information on his thoughts or opinions ever

comes to the people. The king's appearances are confined to three holidays per year, Easter, Massacre Day, and Christmas. On these occasions he delivers a short speech, void of substance, from the balcony at Number One Gouvernave and he is then whisked away to his royal estate in the countryside. Perhaps my impression about him was created on the one and only occasion on which I saw the king at close range.

Shortly after becoming king, Ampli IV, decked in colorful traditional robes and escorted by smartly uniformed bodyguards, made a brief visit to the beach to view the rolling surf. It was one of several such visits, I am told. As a young boy I had been sitting on the overturned hulk of a wrecked schooner, making believe I was sailing the ocean waves in a large vessel, watching the gulls glide over the sandy shore. Suddenly I looked around and there he was, staring out toward the breaking waves. How long he had been there I do not know.

As I observed the king from my position a few feet away my eyes became transfixed upon his beautiful impressive uniform. But when I finally looked at his face the king's sad expression made an even more indelible impression on my youthful mind.

I often wondered what made King Ampli look so sad those many years ago, and, I wonder if he still looks as sad today. Again, it is pure speculation on my part, but perhaps the king looked so sad that day because of his failure and lack of courage to take up the challenge of the hour. Or, perhaps because of his guilt over his moral inability to take the necessary risks to reestablish law and order in Androck. Perhaps that expression, as the king stood at the water's edge staring into the blue horizon, was his unconscious way of telling the people of Androck that he himself was no longer his own man, no longer free, but was entrapped in an evil system of corruption, violence and crime. Immersed in a system from which even he was powerless to escape.

And that, my friend Jeff, is a thumbnail history of my homeland, the beautiful island of Androck. As you can see, it is an island of contrasts -- utter corruption in the midst of sheer beauty. If you still respond to the beckoning of my little island jewel you are welcome to visit awhile. My friends and I will be happy to let you observe portions of our lives, our loves, our hopes and our dreams, particularly our fond dreams for a better Androck. Maybe, just maybe, if you stay long enough, you might even get to like the little island, as did the charter settlers. Perhaps, just perhaps, if you stay on long enough you might, as did they, stay forever.

Regards from your friend, Ronic Patterson

CHAPTER 3 - THE BOOKSTORE

There is an old Androckian saying: "If you don't like the rainy weather, close your eyes, count to one hundred, open them again and the sun will appear." Today had been both rainy and windy. Today, however, the sun was reluctant to yield to such ancient tales, and a very slow mental count to one hundred would have been required to achieve the desired result. Eventually the sun did begin to peak through the clouds and it became a beautiful, but still windy, day. Ronic lamented the fact that the necessities of business kept him inside the store. Once business hours were finally over he would spend a few minutes to tally the daily records before heading for home on his motor scooter.

The day had been fair business wise, as had the whole month, in spite of a minor burglary and a smashed store window which narrowed the profit margin considerably. Fortunately, the bookstore did not have a large expensive display window, but only two small two-over-two windows on either side of the entrance door.

Ronic's store had originally been a railroad flat type of house. He had converted the large front living room into a store. Behind the section occupied by the bookstore itself was a large room to the right, and a bedroom and kitchen in the rear. To the left was another small bedroom, a bath, and a stairway leading to a basement and side entrance. The side entrance was kept barricaded because of the state of affairs on Androck. The basement of the house had been finished by a previous owner into an additional bedroom and a large family room which Ronic used as an office. The office area was dry, comfortably equipped, and contained Ronic's personal library as well as a typewriter and filing cabinet. He made use of this office for tending to his financial obligations, for his personal quiet time and for his work translating certain worthwhile foreign books into Androckie. His translations included short works of Christian fiction and some devotional works.

One event which had helped profitability this month was his just released translation of a portion of L. J. Westfield's pocket commentary. News of the book had spread like wild fire among local Christian churches. Even some individuals from the more formal churches had purchased them, as did some who never darkened the door of any church. Ronic wished that more time could be devoted to the translation work because there were very few books printed in the Androckian language.

As he went over the day sheet Ronic eventually became aware of certain signals his stomach had begun to send. Glancing at the clock he decided it was time to spend the rest of the day at home. Ronic locked the door, removed his moped from a little locked shed attached to the side of the store and was soon speeding toward home. Most stores had closed about a half hour before the 6 PM sunset and the air was alive with the buzz of bicycles and mopeds finding their way to their respective homes. Some trucks and private automobiles, belonging mostly to the wealthy criminal element, passed the slower vehicles.

In a few minutes Ronic pulled the bike into his driveway and carefully secured it behind closed doors. The aroma of a freshly baked cake found its way through the open kitchen window.

"Hello Mom, Dad. My nose tells me someone has been hard at work in the Patterson kitchen again."

Ronic's dad looked over the top of his Rekorda Times and answered, "Hello son. Yes, your Mother has certainly been slaving away at the stove."

"How was your day Dad?"

"I seem to be doing a lot better now that my foot is mending itself." Putting his newspaper on the table he added, "It takes only one accident to change one's life considerably."

"Has the company put a safety guard on that sanding machine yet Dad?"

"Not yet, but I understand they have started things rolling. I think they are waiting for some sheet steel to come in from overseas so they can make the guard. Mr. Del Bene is very good to his employees when it comes to safety."

After a few minutes of conversation the dinner call finally came and Ronic filled his growling stomach with another of his Mom's good meals. The cake also tasted every bit as good as it smelled.

After the chores were done mom and dad went into the living room to relax. Ronic got the chess set out of the closet because his good friends Leonardo and his worthy wife Jannie were due to visit. For several years, ever since high school days, Leonardo and Ronic had regularly played chess or some other game, mingling the game with timely conversations. Sometimes the imported board games were the main attraction of the evening. At other times politics held the spotlight. Sometimes a question of theology caused both of them to pour through their Bibles and study helps for a rewarding evening. At any rate, Ronic looked forward to the visits and the warm fellowship which the five of them always enjoyed together.

Leonardo and Jannie were in the Christian fellowship at Eastside Chapel, the same chapel Ronic and his parents attended. Eastside was one of eight Christian gatherings on the island that attempted to hold to sound biblical principles. The charter settlers had convinced missionary clergymen from two religious bodies to set up churches on the island. Those churches were of a very formal type and provided little spiritual food for their members. Eventually a few churchgoers decided to form a small home Bible study class. This class was almost like an oasis in the midst of the desert, because there was so little of the scriptures taught in the formal churches themselves.

Word of the class spread and the little group of students grew by leaps and bounds. Word also spread to the church officials. They were not as enthusiastic about the Bible studies as were the members of the class. In fact, when the officials discovered that a growing number of people were attending them they tried to close them down, fearing that their own influence and authority would suffer. But the message of the scriptures and the movement of the Spirit had already left its mark on too many hearts. When the ultimatums were read to them by the churchmen, most of the simple Christians found themselves unwilling to close their Bibles and return to the dark lifeless systems from which they had come. In fact, it became clear to them by prayer, spiritual exercise and "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), that they should separate themselves from the vessels of dishonor in order to be separated unto the Lord (2 Timothy 2:19-21). They, as individual Christians, wanted to go unto Him, outside the camp, because it was becoming increasingly evident that the Lord was not 'within' the religious camp here on Androck.

Many in the new Bible study group wanted to elect a minister to get 'the new church' started properly, but when they went to the scriptures for instruction on how to set things up in a scriptural manner they discovered some unanticipated problems. Search as they might, nowhere could they find anything in the scriptures about a 'clerical system' in which one individual with the title of 'Reverend' runs the church, does all or most of the preaching, etc. Instead they discovered that each believer in the Christian meeting has his or her own special gift from God.

"God has dealt to each a measure of faith. For, as in one body we have many members, but all the members have not the same office; thus we, [being] many, are one body in Christ, and each one members one of the other. But having different gifts, according to the grace which has been given to us, whether [it be] prophecy, [let us prophesy] according to the proportion of faith; or service, [let us occupy ourselves] in service; or he that teaches, in teaching; or he that exhorts, in exhortation; he that gives, in simplicity; he that leads, with diligence; he that shews mercy, with cheerfulness" Romans 12:3-8.

They discovered that the church is not a building and not even a religious denomination. Instead, all Christians collectively are the Church, the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:27). They found that each member of that body has functions just as the human body has, and these functions are not meant to be passively stifled by a one-man ministry, but to be actively used, just as the human body actively uses all its members.

"For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them..." (Romans 12:4-6).

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.... For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them as he chose...." (1 Corinthians 12:12-18).

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:27).

They discovered that evangelists, shepherds and teachers are 'gifts' of Christ to His church (Ephesians 4:7-13), not 'positions' to be filled by seminary graduates. And finally, because the church is God's flock, not man's (1 Peter 5:2), the whole notion of 'clergy' seemed to be a man-made substitution for the work of the Holy Spirit.

The little meetings grew in numbers and in spiritual maturity, much to the chagrin of certain official church organizations. The officials tried to make the new meetings feel inferior, saying, "You don't even belong to a historical denomination." To this the little groups replied, "You are quite right. We don't belong to an official denomination. We do, however, belong to Christ, and He is more than enough. He is infinitely more important than any man-made organization. You admit you belong to a human system, but the important question is 'do you belong to Him?' And if you did belong to Him, can you not see that also belonging to an inferior system would be superfluous? Is there something lacking in Christ? Does any man-made system offer something Christ cannot provide?

Eventually the little movement numbered eight good-sized Christian meetings scattered throughout various parts of the island. Each of the little groups enjoyed frequent inter-meeting fellowship and ministerial exchange. There was no membership roll as such and the right hand of fellowship was extended to anyone who professed faith in the Lord Jesus as Savior, provided they were not involved with crime, or some immoral practice which would discredit the testimony of the congregation, or some serious doctrinal error which would compromise the person and work of the Godhead. The lack of a local membership roll encouraged frequent visiting between such meetings throughout the island. Letters of commendation signed by responsible saints in the home congregations served to introduce unknown individuals who visited from other gatherings.

The ministers of the local meetings came from the congregations themselves rather than from a theological seminary. Although there was no clerical system, as such, there was no lack of ministry. In the meetings approximately 80 to 90 percent of the

men formally ministered the word from time to time, and virtually all of them contributed their scriptural knowledge during the weekly Bible reading, study and discussion meetings.

As the little meetings grew in devotion to the Lord and in the knowledge of His word, they began to meet weekly for a gathering devoted entirely to the praise and worship of God and of His Son Jesus Christ. This meeting was open ended, and participation was by godly brothers who felt led to pray, give out a hymn of worship, read a scripture or say a word of praise in remembrance of the wonderful redemptive work of the Savior on the cross. Following the precepts of scripture (1 Corinthians 14:34) the women did not minister before the congregation in a public manner, although the little groups genuinely encouraged their valuable counseling and teaching work in Sunday school and non-public situations.

The fact that there were several ministers in each local meeting added welcome variety. Some ministers were deeply studious, gifted teachers of doctrine. Others had the ability to apply scripture in a devotional sense, to encourage everyday godliness in the congregation. Some were eloquent in their own way, while others were simple and down to earth. This variety of ministry genuinely profited the people.

When Leonardo ministered at the gatherings he frequently brought out the meaning of the scriptural message directly, powerfully and with dignity. He seemed to have a rare kind of eloquence and simplicity to present his message to the heart with effectiveness, without the need for flowing oratory or flowery words. Those who knew Leonardo most intimately were those most affected by his preaching, because they knew there was nothing phony or pharisaical about him. He was just a simple honest 'what-you-see-is-what-you-get' type of man used by the Holy Spirit to minister to the people.

Jannie and Leonardo had arrived at the house. Ronic's Mom had become involved with Jannie in their own little conversation. Leonardo and Ronic had become engrossed in a game of chess. As the game evolved a fortunate move by Leonardo placed him in the lead, and presently gave him the game. Dad, though not much of a chess player himself, had become interested in this game and in the strategy Leonardo used to accomplish his win.

At length, after Dad, Leonardo and Ronic had discussed several topics, Leonardo brought up the subject of the translations.

"I don't know if you are aware, Ronic, but that latest translation you published has really been appreciated in all eight of the meetings, and by many who attend the denominational churches too."

"I know sales have been excellent," Ronic replied.

"Apparently people have not just been buying and putting it on a shelf to gather dust. They have actually been reading and enjoying it too," Dad added. "By the way, son, where is a copy for your Mother and me?"

"Oh, my, I'll just have to put my thinking cap on when I leave the store tomorrow and bring you one. Sorry about that Dad. Guess it's a case of the shoemaker's kids, (or parents), going without shoes."

"Have you been all that busy at the store Ronic?"

"Yes, I sure have. So busy that I just don't have time for a lot of the translation work I would like to accomplish. It's not that the store does a booming business, it's just that there seems to be so much paperwork and day-to-day routine work. I could really use some help over there. Do any of you know of someone who might be interested in sales work?"

"I don't think of anyone off hand, but I'll keep it in mind."

"Me either," Leonardo added. "As far as translating some of the English books into Androckie is concerned, if I knew English a bit better I might volunteer to do a little translating now and then, but I'm afraid I would just have to guess my way through too much to make that a worthwhile endeavor. Say Jan, honey, do you know of anyone who would be interested in helping Ronic at his store? His business is booming so much he wants to create a real fortune 1000 sales organization."

"Hey, wait, I only need one helper, thank you," Ronic interrupted. "Your husband seems given to much exaggeration tonight."

Jannie smiled from her arm chair, then said, "Come to think of it Ronic, Sarah Verngladt has been looking for something ever since her husband died of a heart attack last April."

"She is in Southside Chapel isn't she Jannie?"

"Yes, and if she is interested, the bus goes right by her place. It would be easy for her to get to work. She lives in that old blue cottage by the 'Y' in the road that goes to the old dock."

"Very good. I do know Mrs. Sarah, and I might just run down to see her tomorrow afternoon. I close an hour early on Saturdays anyway."

With that Dad went over to talk with the women and the conversation between Leonardo and Ronic eventually drifted to politics.

"Did you hear about the robbery on the bus yesterday Ronic?"

"Robbery? I didn't see anything in the paper about any robbery." Ronic had pretended to answer seriously so he could enjoy Leonardo's reply.

Leonardo took the bait. Laughing derisively he said, "Do you really expect to read of such things in the paper? That is, unless Hugh Trumbore's newspaper is robbed, or maybe his mansion sacked by a rival gangster. Then you would hear of such things.

Ronic put his finger to his lips as a reminder to Leonardo to keep his voice down in case someone might be within hearing distance outside the open windows. He then added in a hushed voice, "It almost seems a crime in itself that Trumbore can be involved with so many illegalities and nothing can be done about it."

"It seems a crime? That, my dear friend, is the understatement of the year. It is a crime, brother. It is common knowledge that he is either the family head of the crime syndicate here on Androck, or at least next to the top. But he is so powerful, and he has the authorities under his control so nobody can challenge him."

Ronic then replied wishfully, "What this island paradise needs is for someone to swoop down on Trumbore and his underling crime bosses, put them in the old musty jail and throw away the key."

"I agree he and his crime family are *the* major problem here. Decent people would certainly not miss him if he were to suddenly get lost in prison. With him and his organization out of the way the less professional unorganized criminals just might acquire a bit more respect for the law."

"But, Leonardo," Ronic interjected with a studied confidence, "only if the law were to be changed, and enforced, to make it very inconvenient for people to live by their criminal acts. The total depravity of the human heart openly manifests itself on Androck, and 'reform' just wouldn't work. The only possibility of addressing the problem in a nominal Christian society such as ours, meaning one which is 'Christian' in name but not in deed, lies in forcing them to obey just and right laws, even if their natures lead them to do the opposite."

"Great, Ronic, but how do you do that when the police are also part of the Trumbore empire, making it a totally integrated package of corruption?"

"Well, as long as we are putting away Trumbore and his crew, and are changing all the laws, we might as well clean out the police department and all the other branches of government as well!"

At that bit of humor on Ronic's part Leonardo smiled. Nevertheless, the conversation went on for nearly an hour regarding the ills of the island, and the armchair cures for those ills. At one point Ronic commented on the prison system: "Even if the authorities did get strict with crime at some future time there wouldn't be enough jails

in the whole island to hold the criminals."

Leonardo had a ready answer. "I think the biblical idea of restoration would be an excellent deterrent. It would do away with the need for hundreds of jails housing, say, a quarter of the population."

At that point the two of them looked up the passage setting out the Mosaic law of restoration.

"...if the thief be found, let him restore double" (Exodus 22:8).

And, regarding fraud:

"For every kind of misconduct, whether it concerns an ox, a donkey, a sheep or clothing or anything lost, about which someone says, 'This is mine,' the case of both parties shall come before the judges. Whom the judges pronounce guilty, he shall repay his neighbor double" (Exodus 22:9).

"I see what you mean," Ronic answered. "Having to pay back double would put a slight pinch in the profitability of crime and take away some of the incentive to continue doing it! But one thing must be done, namely, to make every citizen fully aware of the consequence and punishment for each crime. Only when a person knows when he does such and so, then a known punishment will surely follow. If you do 'A' then you get 'B'."

"So you would think a lot of publicity ought to be given whenever criminals are caught," Leonardo observed.

"Precisely so, as well as the particular punishment each criminal should expect. In this way people would learn that criminals are being caught and are being punished, and that the punishment given is definitely not a picnic. In some countries people commit crimes purposely in order to get into jail, where they are clothed, fed, entertained, pampered, given medical attention that even law abiding citizens could not obtain, and, of course, they are 'rehabilitated' ha-ha-ha! I think, only when criminals understand that real punishment awaits them in jail will the back of the crime problem be broken here in Androck."

"I guess that brings us back to the newspaper doesn't it Ronic? That would be the ideal vehicle for publicizing things, but you know that problem. The Rekorda Times would be the last to do its civic duty..." Leonardo's voice trailed off in mild despair.

"The newspaper certainly would be the ideal vehicle to inform the people. I place advertisements and short gospel articles in it myself whenever I can afford to. But publicity could take other forms." Ronic waited for Leonardo's response.

"What other forms to you mean?"

Ronic continued, "What about public whipping, the stocks, public disgrace, having bells chained around the neck to warn others that this person is a criminal? Whipping, of course, is another feature of the Mosaic law. Ronic then read the passage:

"When a dispute arises between men and they take their case to court to obtain judicial decision, the judge may acquit the innocent and condemn the guilty. If the judge finds the guilty one deserving of stripes, he shall order him to lie down in his presence to receive the number of stripes he deserves...." (Deuteronomy 25:1,2).

"Ronic! In most countries crime is not as bad as it is here in Androck. Foreigners don't understand the seriousness of our problem and they would say it is barbaric to publicly whip someone or put them in the stocks for the day. But I do agree with the idea. It worked in Old Testament days and it would work today. As a matter of fact, I think authorities who do nothing to protect decent people are the barbaric ones. They force decent people to suffer robbery, beatings, break-ins, slashing and murder by doing nothing about the criminals. We are just too politically correct towards them."

"That's right. Furthermore, even the economy is greatly stifled by the intensity of crime. As a result there are multitudes who suffer poverty simply because of crime. It has killed not only people, but businesses, and with the businesses, the hope of employment. The result is hunger, disease and the various types of crime that poverty breeds, making it one vicious circle; crime breeding crime. I am certainly thankful my own business has, at least until now, escaped the worst and has enabled me to help Dad put bread on the table."

The conversation continued after this general manner for a short time. But with each passing minute each became more and more aware that their discussion was entirely theoretical. Little or nothing practical could ever be done by either of them to change the situation. Realistically, there was virtually no chance of reform taking place in their lifetime, and so the earlier seriousness of the discussion vanished, and the remainder of the evening was occupied with all five talking about less significant matters. Finally, as was the tradition with them, the two families sang an Androckian hymn from the hymnbook used at the fellowship, after which Jannie and Leonardo left for home.

That night as Ronic waited for sleep to overtake him, some of the elements of his discussion with Leonardo continued to pop into his mind. Eventually he drifted into a restless sleep where he became the prisoner of a colorful reconstruction which his subconscious mind assembled from the topics of the evening.

After a few fleeting dreams he saw a chessboard of brown and white, having the

various chessmen scattered upon it in a manner one might expect to see after a few minutes of play. Then the board expanded greatly in size, and the number of chessmen multiplied into the thousands as they began to move to-and-fro on the huge board. Suddenly, before his very eyes, some of the pieces threatened and killed some of the other pieces, and one violent action became the signal for another to commit his particular crime. All this grew like a chain reaction. Suddenly one of the kings on the chess board said in a loud voice, "**Enough.**" At that, many of the pieces laughed scornfully, while others lay down on the board weeping. The scorners then gathered as a group to move toward the king to eliminate him. As they approached, the king held his face and both hands out toward heaven. Immediately, a group of knights began jumping and capturing the scorners, and each, in turn, was removed from the board. Then the king organized his men and the other king was checked and defeated. Presently, the board began to shrink to a normal size, and the chess pieces once again assumed their normal appearance.

Ronic awoke abruptly from this dream. Laughing it off he went to the kitchen and made himself a cup of hot tea. Very much relaxed he retired again and slept soundly till the morning.

After work the following day Ronic closed the shop and traveled on his motor bike to see Sarah Verngladt. Sarah was ecstatic at the chance to get some work even though it was understood that the position was to be on an as-needed basis. Ronic asked her to come in twice a week to start, having in mind that if she worked out well, and if he could afford it, he might eventually ask her to work full time.

CHAPTER 4 - A NEW INTEREST

A few weeks later, when the trade winds were transforming what would have been a stiflingly hot day into a warm but comfortable one, Gimi Velter, Pastor of the large denominational church near Sur Lac, came into the store. Sur Lac is in the Southeastern region of Androck about 8 kilometers (5 miles) from the capital city Rekorda, not far from Sarah Verngladt's cottage. With Pastor Velter was a strikingly attractive young lady Ronic had not seen before.

Ronic knew Pastor Velter as a fairly regular customer. He had been educated in France and had received his theological training in Holland in a somewhat liberal seminary (or, "cemetery," as Ronic would quip privately). In spite of his theological training many suspect the Pastor managed to retain some of the basic Christian teachings of his childhood, although newspaper announcements of his sermon topics leave him sitting on the fence with regard to his real spiritual position on basic fundamentals of the faith.

After browsing a bit the Pastor chose a book on the sanctity of marriage. Although he did not usually purchase books from the theological and spiritual section of the store, especially any which would be considered "strong meat" (Hebrews 5:12-14), after spotting the prominently displayed translation of the commentary which had just been published, he also added it to his purchases. Perhaps he selected it because it was a foreign book appearing in the local dialect. It was considered prestigious for the clergy to own books written by foreign authors.

The young lady who was with the Pastor had found a work of fiction Ronic had translated into the local tongue about a year ago, and a travel book on Mexico and Central America. The Pastor paid for the books and introduced the young lady to Ronic. Her name was Leona, the Pastor's only child.

Ronic observed that Leona was stunningly beautiful. Someone seeing her in public might guess she was a model or a movie star. His heart skipped a beat when she smiled as she was introduced to him. He thought to himself, "She is almost too beautiful for words to express."

The three of them talked for some time. Reluctantly Ronic recorded the purchase of another customer who had come into the store. He just felt he wanted to know more about the Pastor's daughter Leona. Ronic's interest in Leona did not go unnoticed by Pastor Velter either, and as they finally made ready to leave, the Pastor said to him, "Say, I've been meaning to invite you over to our parsonage for dinner some time. How about it? Tomorrow night all right with you?"

Ronic was delighted and accepted the invitation, knowing it would be an opportunity to see and get to know Leona.

The result of the dinner invitation was that Ronic and Leona became warm friends, which was Pastor Velter's intent in the first place.

During the conversation which followed dinner Ronic had the opportunity to privately ask Leona for a restaurant dinner date the following week, a date she readily accepted. Thus, the Pastor's dinner invitation initiated a number of dinner dates between his daughter and Ronic. The Pastor had hoped his daughter would find a worthwhile man such as Ronic, and that he might eventually have the honor of performing a marriage ceremony.

After Leona and Ronic had been seeing one another for a few weeks, Ronic went to the house of his friends Leonardo and Jannie for one of his usual get-togethers. While Jannie was putting the children to bed Leonardo looked directly at Ronic and said softly, "I hope you don't take offence at something I have on my mind. I'll have to admit it is really meddling in your affairs, but as a Christian brother there are a couple of things which concern me, things which I have been praying about and can no longer keep to myself."

"Say on brother," Ronic replied, and then continued with a note of humor as a distraction, "Maybe I'll get up and go home in the middle of your exhortation, but do say on, nevertheless."

Leonardo smiled warmly, but continued seriously. "It concerns your new acquaintance, the girl you have been seeing."

"Leona Velter," Ronic interjected. "I can see that jealousy motivateth thee, for never so fair a maiden hath afore graced the sight of this poor vendor of printed scrolls."

Leonardo smiled again out of courtesy, but ignored the temptation to answer in a humorous vein. "Ronic, she is beautiful, but is she a believer?"

Ronic's dear friend Leonardo had come directly to the point, as usual, and as a result his seriousness returned as he answered, "Yes, she professes to have faith in Christ, and I don't have any reason to doubt her profession." He hoped the questioning would end there, but he knew his friend well enough to know that there was more to come, more that he would probably not like.

"Is she subject to the Lord, Ronic? In other words, is she a disciple, a follower of the Lord? Is she spiritually minded? Is the number one desire of her heart to please God, or is God simply a desirable, but incidental, thing in her life?"

Ronic hesitated, trying hard not to show he was a bit perturbed by Leonardo's to-the-point questions. He tried to keep his agitation concealed all the more because he knew that Leonardo, as a brother in Christ, had every right to ask about these things. In the Christian meeting which they attended it was not at all considered an invasion

of privacy to ask this type of question. If one member of the body suffers all suffer with him. He knew the question was asked in a sincere desire to help, and not to stir up enmity.

"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:1-2).

Furthermore, Ronic had dreaded the time when questions such as these might arise, precisely because he also had found himself wondering about Leona's spirituality. During several dinner dates shared by the two of them Ronic had brought up spiritual topics of conversation. Invariably, these spiritual topics had been quickly and unceremoniously dispatched by Leona in favor of more acceptable subjects.

Leonardo continued to wait for an answer while Ronic squirmed trying to think of a way to avoid having Leonardo probe more deeply. If only Jannie would walk into the room serving a snack or something to drink. But Leonardo just waited patiently for Ronic's answer. Finally, Ronic decided there was no use trying to put him off. The questions posed by Leonardo were real problems which for some time had sharply plagued Ronic, and he actually did want to hear Leonardo's opinion on this important matter, in spite of the considerable embarrassment of being on the receiving end. With all these thoughts churning through his mind Ronic finally answered bluntly, "Leonardo, I frankly do not know how important spiritual matters are to her."

Leonardo took note of Ronic's honesty and suggested, "Then why don't you invite her to one of the meetings? I think you know this will tell her a lot about you, about your friends, your interests, your manner of life. And, her reaction to the meetings will tell you a lot about her."

Ronic nodded silently, knowing, or rather dreading, that what Leonardo implied would be true. What would Leona think about these things? Judging from her past lack of interest in spiritual topics of conversation, she might well dislike the meetings, dislike his friends, and all the things which motivated him and made him function.

"You know as well as I do," Leonardo continued, "that the time to find out about what makes one another tick is now, before infatuation blinds your intellectual perception, and your ability to make rational decisions."

Ronic continued to listen silently to his good friend, not enjoying it at all, yet knowing that he spoke the truth. Yet, as Leonardo continued to talk Ronic vacillated between coming to grips with the situation or imagining that things were really better than they really were.

Again Leonardo continued, as Ronic occasionally nodded his agreement, or, at least

his understanding. "Believe me, when you marry you will have enough problems even if you select the most compatible, the most spiritually minded, even-tempered saint from the very heart of the best of Christian meetings. But if you were to choose someone not compatible with you it would surely lead you to serious problems, to compromise situations, and to greater and greater unhappiness. Be aware that, **'He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord' (Proverbs 18:22)**. If you are patient and wait on the Lord you will find that **'the Lord God is a sun and shield; He bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly' (Psalms 84:11)**.

Ronic listened as objectively as he could to Leonardo. Though he was more than a bit uneasy during the exhortation, he knew the words were not just a bunch of cheap shots. Yes, the words stung, but they were not meant to hurt. They were laden with truth and would not simply vanish away. Leonardo's admonition had been carefully thought out and prayed about before he delivered it, and its words had found their mark. He hated it now, but his own doubts caused him to suspect he might, in due time, even appreciate this.

CHAPTER 5 - THE STRANGE OLD MAN

After only a short time Sarah Verngladt learned her job at the bookstore well enough to permit Ronic to spend a substantial amount of time alone at the translation work in the quiet and cool of his basement office. Ronic had installed a buzzer between the store and the basement office so Sarah could summon him if the need should arise.

One day, while Sarah was minding the store Ronic sat down at his desk and began translation work on the second volume of L. J. Westfield's Commentary. The original work had been issued in six volumes but he had planned to split it up onto about 12 parts so the translations could be issued on a more frequent basis.

Deeply engrossed in his work Ronic made good progress and before the day was over there was a good stack of papers ready for final editing. He had worked extra hard that day knowing he would have to mind the store himself the following day when Sarah would be off.

The next day turned out to be rather slow, especially in the afternoon. Ronic thought he might be making better use of his time working on the translation in his basement office. A few customers had made small purchases to be used as gifts, but because business was down that day he decided it would be a good time for the dusting chore.

A middle aged lady came into the store while he was dusting the books with a colorful feather duster, and, a few minutes later an old man with a five inch goatee. Both were content to browse by themselves while Ronic went about the task of dusting the children's fiction section. At length, the middle aged lady made her purchase and left Ronic and the bearded old man alone.

Ronic glanced again at the distinguished old gentleman clad in patchwork trousers and a torn shirt. Something about him looked familiar, but only vaguely so, and he once again concentrated on his chores. As he was dusting he became aware that the supply of several titles was low and that he must be sure to have them in stock for the Christmas season a few months from now when demand would be high. As he moved to the counter to make a note of that fact the old man with the beard approached.

"Young man," he said, placing three selections on the counter, "I like your little bookstore."

"Thank you very much for the complement," Ronic answered politely.

The old man's face showed his advanced age, and Ronic guessed it might possibly also reflect some intemperate habit. The slight hint of alcohol on his breath certainly conveyed that bit of information. Nevertheless, the old man seemed to be kindly, and although he was clad in tattered clothing his diction definitely rose significantly above

the traditional street dialect which characterized poor beggars often seen in similar clothing in Rekorda City's market place.

Ronic wondered whether this might be an educated man who became a victim of crime and was reduced to his present condition. Yet, in spite of his clean, but worn, apparel he seemed to have ample money to pay for his purchases.

"Is this your first time in the store sir?" he asked.

"Yes it is," the old man answered in what Ronic detected was a somewhat dejected tone of voice. "I don't get out very much, I'm afraid."

"Is it the crime?" Ronic asked politely.

"Precisely so, young man. I don't usually go anywhere, and then never by myself."

Ronic wondered what he meant by that remark because nobody had accompanied him into the store. Ronic supposed someone might be waiting for the gentleman outside the store.

"It's too bad something couldn't be done about the crime," the old man continued. This island would be an entirely different place to reside in except for it."

The old man's remark reminded Ronic of some of the discussions he and Leonardo had engaged in. "Well sir," Ronic found himself saying carelessly, "I think something **COULD** be done about it if only they **WOULD** do something about it."

The old man appeared to be momentarily taken back by Ronic's remark, but then instantaneously regained his composure. "If you had your say so, what would **YOU** do about it?" he asked, with ever so slight a hint of annoyance marking the tone of his voice.

"Well, first of all," Ronic started slowly, "I think the average person is sick and tired of crime. He is tired of living in constant fear and would support a crash program to get rid of the problem. If I were the king," Ronic continued with increasing boldness, "I would make, publish and strictly enforce a set of codes against crime, against criminals, and a set of laws that would encourage honesty and honest people."

Ronic went on to give the old gentleman a number of examples of some of the 'should-be' laws which he and Leonardo had discussed among themselves.

"And how long do you think your life would last before they got you?" the old man asked, with his beard wiggling in a somewhat amusing fashion.

After a pause, Ronic answered with the first thought which happened to cross his

mind. "If one could somehow last a year or so, perhaps two years, the worst of the problem might be taken care of. You are certainly right in your question though. Staying alive during that time would be pretty difficult for the king.

Realizing the near impossibility of surviving as a would-be reformer king, Ronic smiled and continued only half seriously, "I think if I were suddenly to become the king I would become a faceless king. Nobody except two or three trusted aids would know my identity. That way I would survive until the hard core were eliminated. I would also make plans far in advance to make a quick clean sweep to remove the most important members of the element from circulation before they knew what had happened."

With that Ronic dismissed the subject with another smile and a motion of his head.

The old man brought out money to pay for his selections, and as he slowly walked to the door Ronic thought he heard him mumble to Ronic, or perhaps to himself, "The young man's idea may sound daffy, but, then again, nothing else has worked."

Ronic stood behind the counter puzzled and at the same time amused by the encounter with this bearded old gentleman. His mind began to wonder what kind of life he was living behind the four walls of his abode, if indeed he had one. "Too bad I did not ask his name, or where he lived," he thought to himself. But suddenly a sickening thought went through Ronic's mind. "What if he was one of 'them'?" Ronic's indiscretion with his loose tongue troubled him as he continued to think of the strange old man with the beard, but eventually the press of a fresh round of activity at the store pushed the incident into the background.

CHAPTER 6 - THE CARE MEETING

Every Wednesday Ronic closed the bookstore a couple of hours earlier than during the week to give him the opportunity to pay accumulated bills, arrange for newspaper advertising and do some shopping. But with Sarah on the payroll he enjoyed a bit more flexibility than in the past. Saturday he planned to dine with Leona at a restaurant so he wanted to get several errands out of the way before then.

When Saturday arrived he decided to be home in plenty of time to allow for the sometimes slow and always unpredictable island taxi service. With the prospect of an enjoyable evening ahead of him he was in a particularly good mood. He also hoped for an opportunity in the conversation to invite her to one of the meetings, probably the weekly Bible reading and study session, in response to Leonardo's exhortation a few weeks ago. Ronic had prayed about this and had become more optimistic about her possible reaction.

When he arrived home later that afternoon, however, his parents informed him of a special meeting for the spiritual 'care' of the saints scheduled on short notice for later in the evening. Word of the special meeting had arrived just about the time Ronic had closed the store so he could not be reached there with the news. It was not usual for a meeting to be called on such short notice, but apparently one of the brothers from the meeting had reportedly visited a bar, became drunk and was arrested after he picked a fight with an on-duty policeman who was also quenching his thirst. The policeman managed to administer his own partial justice by landing a punch squarely in the brother's face just before arresting him. Since tomorrow was Domineek, or Sunday, the day of the much valued worship meeting, it was necessary for the Christian meeting to question the brother and possibly administer some form of timely discipline prior to the morning service. As much as Ronic wanted to avoid risking offense to Leona at this time, the dinner engagement would clearly have to be postponed.

Ronic was closely involved in all the activities of Eastside Chapel, so it was quite natural for him to fit his personal plans around the activities and responsibilities of the meeting. Many of the most joyous hours of his life had been spent in the company of the saints of God. So he telephoned Leona, and after the normal friendly greetings were passed he got to the reason for the call.

"Leona," he began, "I'm afraid I will have to disappoint you. I need to attend a special care meeting at the chapel tonight."

There was a short pause, then Leona answered, "That's too bad, Ronic. When did you hear about the, er, what did you call that meeting?"

Ronic answered, "We call it a care meeting. It is a meeting where, among other things, the spiritual and financial needs of the meeting and of various people are

discussed and cared for. This particular meeting was called at the last minute because it will apparently have to do with examining and possibly disciplining a brother in fellowship who may no longer be a good testimony to the world."

"That doesn't sound very important to me Ronic," Leona quipped. "Do you really think your care meeting is more important than our dinner date?"

"It is very important that I be there, Leona."

At this Leona began to show some degree of irritation. "But Ronic, we made plans for tonight more than a week ago, yet on a moment's notice you want to change our plans. I guess that tells me where I stand, that you consider one little church business meeting to be more important than our dinner date. More important than me!"

Ronic had been unprepared for this type of reaction, even from Leona, whose spirituality he and others had begun to doubt. He replied, "Leona, please don't misunderstand me. I have enjoyed our dinner dates and would like to be with you again this evening, but I feel committed to attend the meeting tonight."

As soon as he had said this Ronic realized that he had made it wrongly sound as if he was forced to go to the meeting against his will, whereas, really, he wanted to be in the place where he had enjoyed the fellowship of others and the various spiritual responsibilities which he had often experienced there. But even in spite of his ill chosen words Leona was not appeased.

"Ronic," she continued, "I find it difficult to understand you. I'll just have to tell you that I am very disappointed. I had my hair done just for our dinner date and I really don't appreciate your lack of concern for me."

By this time Ronic realized that a serious disagreement was in the making and did not want to prolong it over the telephone, especially since Dad was sitting nearby, and had already looked up from his newspaper a couple of times during the conversation.

"I'm really sorry to disappoint you tonight but I hope you can understand that as much as I wish to be with you, sometimes a person just doesn't know what the day may bring forth to upset the most carefully laid plans."

As the telephone conversation ended Leona was not very happy, but Ronic was not dissuaded from his decision to cancel the dinner engagement. At the same time Ronic was forced to contemplate the selfish way she had acted.

"I guess she didn't take it well?" Dad questioned sympathetically.

"I'm afraid not," he replied gloomily. "Dad, tell me. People in some walks of life, doctors for example, tend to lead rather disorganized lives. Do physicians' wives get

upset when their husbands are called away to minister to the sick at inopportune times?"

"Some do and some don't, son. Those who are not bothered by it are the gainers. They benefit in a couple of ways."

Ronic's dad had left a pause to allow him to ask the obvious rhetorical question, "How is that?"

"Well, first of all, wives who are not bothered by their husbands' careers are those who have personalities which are naturally more peaceful than the wives who become easily peeved at their husband's devotion to the healing profession, which is, of course, a requirement of their jobs. Their marriages are happier because they are free from the tension that this necessarily repeated situation brings."

"I can see why that would be Dad, but what other benefit did you have in mind for those who don't greatly mind having their plans occasionally changed by their husbands at the last minute?"

"Well, you see, son, they get to spend and enjoy all of the devoted doctors' money."

They both chuckled, but then his dad spoke again. With a tone of seriousness and at the same time, compassion, in his voice he said, "Ronic, I've been meaning to ask you about Leona for a few weeks now. She is a really beautiful girl. If it is beauty you are looking for then you ought to stop window shopping right now. But I have known you since the day you were born. I know what you're made of. I think you want a lot more than outside beauty in the girl who might some day become your wife, and the mother of your children. I am concerned as to whether Leona is the person you are really seeking."

Ronic began to feel a bit uneasy, just as he had when Leonardo had spoken with him a few weeks ago. He could feel a rush of prideful adrenaline being released into his system, so he delayed his answer a few seconds until the respect for his dad which he had always felt began to return to his mind. Then he replied, "How so Dad? I, of course, value your opinions." Ronic realized he had begun to have his own inner concerns about Leona, particularly after her display of selfishness on the phone tonight, and he wanted to see if his dad would say the same as Leonardo.

"Well, son, you have never said much about Leona's personal spiritual position. My mother once told me "Birds of a feather flock together." You know your feelings, your beliefs, the things which are important to you. Is Leona one of the Lord's own? Is she of the same "feather" as you? What importance does she place on the spiritual life? And, then there is the fact that she does belong to a denominational church quite different from the simple Christian meeting you are used to, and that you believe is scriptural. It is well known that her affiliation does not have a clear cut testimony for

the word of God. Would you be happy in her church? Would she be happy in the little Christian group we enjoy fellowship with? How would you raise your children? I just want you to ponder the stark facts of reality, that there is a very very significant religious gap, if I may use that term, between the two of you. I think you should consider very seriously the fact that outward beauty will wear thin in the face of day to day problems, disagreements and trials of life, and that compromise of the truth is all too often the ill chosen solution to exercises of this type. Bad decisions of this kind so often lead to heartaches, sadness and unhappiness for both husband and wife, and frequently lead to bitterness and divorce."

"Ronic," his dad continued, "I am not trying to rule your personal life. You are a grown man, and judging by what you have said and done in the local church meetings for many years you are quite capable of making your own mature decisions, decisions which, with the Lord's help, fairly consider all sides of a question. All I am asking is that you not make an exception in the case of Leona, but that you make the same characteristically unbiased, unemotional, decision about her."

Ronic knew all that his dad had been going to say. He had heard it all in other forms from the days of his youth, not with lectures alone, but in the loving principles which his dad had applied to his own life and to the life of the entire family. And because there was a mutual respect between father and son, Ronic had always given his dad the honor of hearing him out. He knew from experience that his advice was worthwhile, and usually right, though not always entirely welcome, and sometimes downright unpalatable.

Later that evening as he and his parents were on their way to the care meeting Ronic reflected on the telephone conversation with Leona. He still found it difficult to understand why Leona would react the way she did when it was obvious that Ronic's commitment to the Lord and to the Christian brothers and sisters in the meeting automatically took first place. He then realized that it was entirely possible Leona could not understand the concept of putting the Lord first. After all, among the denominational churches God was often thought of as a very old man who slept six days and awakened only briefly on Sunday mornings. If Leona's philosophy of life was anything like this she might well reject such an ordering of spiritual priorities later on, after she was Ronic's wife. He determined then and there to find out exactly where she stood. He thought again about his dad's words of wisdom and thought to himself, "What if I were to eventually marry Leona? She is certainly a beautiful girl. She could have been a model or a star in the foreign entertainment business. But as a wife? Would she be a millstone around my neck? Do I have any reason to believe that she would act differently as a wife than she acted today as a friend?"

The following day, after the spiritually uplifting morning worship meeting, and after the family had finished their lunch, Ronic decided to pay an unannounced visit to Leona. Leona's house was 4 kilometers (2-1/2 miles) south of his own, a trip by moped of less than 10 minutes. As he climbed the stone steps of the Church parsonage he

hoped her mood would be as happy as the bright sunny day which had cast its radiance upon Androck.

When Leona answered the door it was, to be sure, as if no hard feelings had surfaced the evening before. She was as beautiful as ever and he found himself wanting to believe that the recent outcropping of her nature had never happened, or, if it had, that it was but a hormonal manifestation which could be forever forgotten. Nonetheless, what had happened had indeed happened. He recalled his serious doubts about Leona and was determined not to let her appealing outward appearance sway him from the pathway he knew to be right, the way of life he enjoyed.

"Leona, I'm really sorry that I couldn't be with you last evening." He was trying to convey the impression that while he was sorry he couldn't be with her, he was not sorry he had made the decision to attend the care meeting.

"What happened at the meeting," she asked in an obvious attempt to directly respond to his apology.

"It was a brother who had been having some problems with alcohol. The people in the meeting had been working with him for several months to help him overcome the problem, but we hadn't perceived a genuine desire on his part to be helped. Anyway, it seems that last week he had gone to a gin mill, had gotten drunk and had gotten into an argument and in a fight with a policeman who had been drinking on duty in the bar. The cop arrested him and put him in jail to sober up overnight.

"At the care meeting this brother admitted that he often got drunk, and there was testimony that he often got rowdy when intoxicated. The brethren felt he needed professional help and made arrangements for him. But because his present Christian testimony and habitual manner of life tarnished the testimony of the assembly, he was put out, until such time as he might demonstrate a changed behavior."

"Put out? Meaning excommunicated?" The matter of church discipline was all new to her. She didn't know if it was a good thing or bad. "How can you help the poor fellow if you put him out? Wouldn't it be better to keep him in where you could help him?"

Ronic found it difficult to explain the situation in a way she could understand. "Putting out doesn't mean he can't attend the meeting, but he is not allowed to participate in fellowship with the rest. He can't, for example, give in the offering plate, lead a meeting, or preach, or . . ."

"But," Leona interrupted, "don't you think by passing judgment on a fellow church member you are taking a 'holier than thou' attitude?" Leona was quickly forming her own contrary opinions on the subject.

Ronic replied, "You are quite correct in condemning a 'holier than thou' attitude,

because any one of us could have been in his situation, and might still be someday. But when a brother or sister falters it is our responsibility to hold out our hand to help them, lest they fall really seriously."

"To say this in a slightly different way, the people who make up a Christian meeting have two obligations when such a situation arises. First, they must make sure that any discipline does not take a 'holier than thou' form. It must recognize that the person being disciplined is in no way inferior to anyone else. It must be used to help, and never hinder, the person who is being disciplined. It must, hopefully, gently lead him to repentance and bring him back to the point of eventual restoration, to the place of fellowship. But, second, the Lord Jesus told us that where two or three are gathered together in His name, He is in the midst (Mat. 18:20). Because our Savior has promised to be in our midst when we gather in His name, we have a spiritual obligation, not just an option, to depart from iniquity (2 Timothy 2:20-26), and to put on an attitude which the Lord would be pleased with. Sometimes that means we must temporarily put out those who have an evil testimony (1 Corinthians 5:13), so they may soon return to the assembly in a state of restored spiritual health."

"Can't they just forget the thing and let things work out by themselves?"

"Discipline is not an optional matter, it an obligation commanded in Scripture. It reminds us that all have sinned, including ourselves. We are no better than the person being disciplined."

"But if you say you are all sinners, how can you judge someone else? Doesn't your Bible say, 'He who is without sin cast the first stone?'"

"Yes, Leona, the Lord Jesus said that, because those who brought the woman caught in the act of adultery were out to catch the Lord in a mistake. They didn't care for the woman; she was only a tool, a tool to catch the Lord. If He commanded her to be released they would condemn Him for not upholding the law of Moses. On the other hand if He ordered her to be stoned they would censure Him as being inconsistent with Himself, since He had received repentant publicans and harlots into His presence. Plus, they would accuse Him to Pilate for ordering a Jewish execution which only the Roman government could order. Whatever choice the Lord made, the scribes and Pharisees could get their 'enemy.' The Lord's word, "He who is without sin cast the first stone," caused these unrepentant men to see that if it was really sin that bothered them they ought to cast the stone at themselves before it could be cast at the woman. And this, basically, is what we do in the assembly; recognize and judge the sin in ourselves, and, only then, act as ordered by Scripture to discipline one who has outwardly fallen into sin, has not repented of it, and has brought reproach on the name of Christ on account of it."

"I only asked a simple question, Reverend Ronic," Leona retorted dryly. "I didn't expect a full 40 minute sermon."

Ronic laughed. "But you did ask, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I did make that mistake," she offered in an annoyed tone. She began looking through her purse for something, but then suddenly closed it.

"By the way, while we are on the subject of the meetings of our little group of Christians, I would like to invite you to attend our Wednesday evening Bible reading and study. How about it?"

After a pause Leona answered slowly and unenthusiastically, "I guess I should be fair about it and see what it is all about. At least it will be something different." Her words betrayed a hint of cynicism.

"I suspect you may be right about that," he added with a smile, having in mind some of the unscriptural practices of Leona's church.

Ronic was delighted that Leona had accepted the invitation, believing the experience would make his pathway clear one way or the other concerning their relationship together. It was quite obvious that major religious differences existed between the two young people, as his dad had pointed out. Leona's church was cold, formal, impersonal, clerically oriented and was decidedly liberal in doctrine and social in practice. The believers Ronic fellowshiped with were warm and supportive of others. They had no doubt that the Bible was truly God's Word for them. The meetings were informal, yet very serious, quiet and reverential. Truly Leona and Ronic were miles apart religiously, yet, if she responded favorably to the meeting, as he hoped, then he would be greatly encouraged about her. At this point, however, he expected the worst. All the signs were pointing the wrong way.

CHAPTER 7 - TO THE READING

On the evening of the Bible reading and study, Ronic and his not all that enthusiastic companion were in the taxi going in the direction of the hall. Leona, at Ronic's suggestion had brought a Bible, although she was not accustomed to doing this in her own church. She seemed to have several questions about the meeting she was about to attend, which was a welcome change from previous times.

As they began their taxi ride Leona asked, "By the way what is the name of your church?"

We really don't have an official name for the meeting. We sometimes refer to our gathering as Eastside meeting, Eastside fellowship, Eastside chapel, or simply as Eastside, to distinguish it from other similar groups we fellowship with on other parts of the island."

"That does seem a bit strange, not taking a name," Leona remarked, with a possible hint of sarcasm in her voice.

"I suppose it might seem so, but we don't refrain from taking an official name just to be different. I remember reading that Martin Luther once said, 'Do not call yourselves Lutherans, call yourselves Christians' We just want to be a simple nondenominational group of believers who meet together in Christ's name. We don't want to start a new sect, denomination or church. There are already plenty of them on the island, and throughout the world. We just enjoy meeting together because the Lord has promised to be in the midst of any group of believers who meet together to His name."

"But is there really anything wrong with having an identifiable name?"

"If one looks around there are denominations named after people, and sects named after certain doctrines which their particular group feels are more important than other Biblical teachings. I have one book which lists various denominations in the United States of America, and among them are such names as: 'National Baptist Evangelical Life and Soul Saving Assembly of the U.S.A.' Another one is the 'Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists.' Then there is the 'African Union First Colored Methodist Protestant Church, Inc.' Also 'Triumph the Church and Kingdom of God in Christ,' and many others."

"I still think it odd that you people don't have some name!"

"I guess most of us are satisfied with the names which are given to us in Scripture, such as 'Christian,' 'brethren,' 'saints,' 'believers' and the like. We don't make a big thing about not having a denominational name; I guess we're just content and honored to be known simply as 'His own.' Really, Leona, belonging to Him is really all

the identity one ever needs. If you are a Christian isn't the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and being part of His body, all you could ever dream of?"

Leona didn't much like his answer but lacking a substantive retort decided not to press the issue further. Instead, she asked, "Who is the Pastor of your nameless church?"

Ronic thought for a moment. Sensing the possibility of a building hostility he knew that a truthful answer to her latest question could only increase the distance which was surely prying them apart. He toyed with the idea of leaving the impression that the church was too small to have a Pastor, but knew such an approach would be quite dishonest, so he tried to answer as accurately as possible.

"We actually have several pastors, brethren who minister the word on a frequent basis, visit the sick, and counsel those who have problems. None of them have been officially "ordained" by a religious body. None are the C.E.O. of a church, meaning that none of them run everything in the local church. One or two of them are given some financial support by their local congregation because they have no other means of support. But this in no way is a 'clergyman's salary.' Although they are not clerics they are truly 'pastors' in that they actively and ably 'shepherd' the flock of God, which is what the word 'pastor' means." A shepherd is a leader, not a dictator. He hopes to encourage all believers to exercise whatever gift or gifts the Lord may have given them. Ideally, almost everyone in the meeting might be a pastor, a shepherd, but that depends upon whatever gifts the Lord has given.

"But haven't they been to school to learn to be Pastors, like my father?"

Ronic exercised nearly all the self control remaining within him to avoid stating his extremely negative opinion about the kind of so-called 'Pastor' her father was. Pastor Velter would certainly not be the type of 'Pastor' the saints he knew would want to emulate.

"No, they haven't been to a formal theological cem -- ah, seminary." Ronic caught himself at the last moment before his favorite label 'theological *cemetery*' was blurted out. "But all have been in the school of God for most of their lives. By 'school of God' I mean that God is constantly teaching us in the meeting, in our homes, and by all of life's experiences. But particularly in the meetings do we attend the school of God. No one becomes a shepherd, or pastor, by attending a Bible school, or a theological institution. No one becomes a true Biblical shepherd simply because some denominational body has decided to make him one. There are no "Reverends" in the Word of God, except for God Himself."

"That all sounds very home-made to me," indicating by the tone of her voice that she did not desire to continue the conversation.

Ronic sat in the taxi in stony silence for the rest of the trip. Leona's attitude was not encouraging. "If only she could fathom the joyous hours I have spent with those in the meeting," he thought to himself. "Her own church is formal and dead. If only she would allow herself to enjoy the precious treasures which could be hers."

Ronic and his family had been on the side of formality before, and had left it. A few times they had even attended services at Pastor Velter's church but had found it cold and unrewarding. Eastside, by comparison, was a little bit of heaven on earth. After all, what else might one expect if saints truly meet in His name alone? What else could be true for those who believe His promise, 'I am coming to you'? With Christ in the midst how could any genuine Christian fail to sense the love and joy and peace which only He can give? He knew that Eastside is far from being a perfect meeting. After all, it is composed of real people. But they are people who realize that in themselves nothing good dwells, that what they are they are by grace, and for this reason they look forward week by week to gather to His name. No, Ronic would **not** leave that for the dead religion of Leona. **"Let them return unto you, but do not return unto them," (Jeremiah 15:19)**. As the meeting hall came into view Ronic knew that the time was at hand, and he breathed the prayer, "May it be, Lord, even as you wish."

CHAPTER 8 - ARRIVAL OF REALITY

The meeting hall was a simple structure. A sign on the exterior said simply:

EASTSIDE CHAPEL

(Christian Meeting Room)

Family Inspiration Hour: 11:00 AM Domineek

Bible Reading and Study: 7:30 PM Wednesday

Everyone Most Cordially Welcome

Ronic had forewarned Leona that all the women would be wearing a covering on their heads as a token of obedience to the scriptural injunction (I Corinthians 11:1-16), and that she would feel less out of place if she did likewise. Leona appreciated that bit of information and did so, not out of obedience to the Lord, but in order to avoid feeling conspicuous.

Several families had already arrived and greeted the two warmly as they went in. While she did not say so, Leona felt good about her welcome, and could not help but compare the genuine happiness which was apparent here with the cold calculated atmosphere at her father's church.

As Leona entered the meeting room, however, she was dismayed by the utter lack of religious trappings inside. The windows were of plain glass. There were no pews, only plain folding chairs arranged in circular rows facing the center of the room. There was no soft organ music to set the mood. Instead, there was an upsetting sign on the far wall which read, "**The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 3:23).**" She noted that there was a plain portable pulpit in one corner, stored behind a row of chairs, obviously not to be used tonight. Ronic gave her a hymn book from a stack on a table by the door. They then made their ways to the second row of chairs to await the commencement of the meeting. Several more families quietly found their places. Leona was surprised that the meeting was so well attended. Nearly every seat was filled, in contrast to Pastor Velter's church where most services were sparsely attended.

Finally, about 7:33 PM one of the men in the congregation said in a clear voice, "Hymn number two thirty one." He then read aloud the words of the hymn:

"We're pilgrims in the wilderness;
Our dwelling is a camp;
Created things, though pleasant,
Now bear to us death's stamp.

With fellow-pilgrims meeting,
As through the waste we roam,
'Tis sweet to sing together,

'We are not far from home!'

Lord, since we sing as pilgrims,
O give us pilgrims' ways!
Low thoughts of self, befitting
Proclaimers of Thy praise."

". . .number two thirty one."

Leona had turned to the hymn while it was being read, and received yet another shock. The hymnbook contained words only, no printed music. "How do you sing this?" she whispered.

Ronic smiled and whispered back, "The music is not printed so any one of several appropriate tunes can be used with the words."

"How strange," she thought to herself.

After the hymn was read, a few seconds elapsed and one man started singing. A moment later the whole congregation joined in singing the hymn. A beautiful and joyful noise ascended to the Lord. The hymn tune was only somewhat familiar to Leona but she was amazed that the singing was so united, even without instrumental music. Something within her seemed to be pulling her to almost enjoy the meeting. But some other force was pulling her the opposite way.

After the hymn there was another period of silence in which all the congregation silently prayed. Leona squirmed in her seat. Then, after perhaps thirty seconds, Ronic's good friend Leonardo rose to his feet to pray audibly. After the prayer another man opened his Bible saying, "We have been reading in First Chronicles, and I believe we finished with the twelfth chapter last time." The man then rose to his feet and read the entire thirteenth chapter.

Following the reading of the Word, one brother after another made comment on the first verses of the chapter, allowing time between comments for others to participate. Eventually, nearly all of the men present, including Ronic, had made some comment, or comparison of the particular passage under discussion with some other portion of scripture. Sometimes the comments were simple and down to earth observations, while other comments were much more profound. Leona became bored, and her resentment began to build. She could not understand why anyone would want to "**study**" the Bible anyway. Some simple Domineek School stories would have been all right, but this serious stuff was going much too far. At the end of the study a second hymn was sung and another prayer offered. The people then rose to greet one another before departing for home.

A few people between their seat and the door attempted to warmly greet Leona as

she headed directly for the exit, but her mind was fixed on one place, **the door!** She had become more and more uncomfortable as the meeting progressed, particularly as the Word was read and studied, and wanted only to get out of that horrible place. Ronic quietly pondered her reaction in his heart as the taxi drove toward her house.

"How come only the men did any talking?" she asked abruptly.

"Well, Leona," he began, "Just as the covering on the head of the Christian women signifies that they have accepted their place of honor in subjection to Christ, the scriptures likewise indicate that 'the men' are to pray (1 Timothy 2:8) and the women are to be silent (1 Corinthians 14:34) and to be in subjection (1 Timothy 2:11-12)."

"Don't you people know that these are modern times?"

"The truth of Scripture is eternal. That is, it is true today, just as it was true yesterday, and will be true tomorrow. It does not have to be changed to suit the customs of the evil day in which we live, Leona. Rather, **we** should, like the hymn said, walk as pilgrims, recognizing that the world through which we pass bears the stamp of death. Therefore, we ought not to be conformed to this world system which has been judged and condemned. We ought, rather, to walk as pilgrims, in obedience to the way He has set before us in the Word of God, the way of life and spiritual joy."

"All that sounds to me like some narrow sect or cult. You must actually believe that old Bible you were reading, and take it literally? I'll take my own religion over that any day."

Ronic had the answer he had been seeking. Leona was fixed in her tradition of unbelief. She would not leave the stench of empty religion, for the sweet milk and meat of God's word. He then asked calmly, but bluntly, "Leona, do you really prefer **'your'** man-made religion over what God has revealed in His Word? Are you saying that you would be willing to stand before God some day and tell Him to His face that **'your'** ideas are more important than the eternal truth which He mercifully tried to communicate to you?"

Leona was furious. "I've got my own idea of what **I** like, and that's the way it is, **period, exclamation mark!!!** One thing is for sure, Ronic. That so called church of yours is just a hall full of _____ religious fanatics who like nothing better than to be different from others."

This was not the first time Ronic had heard Leona use profanity, but the mere thought of this careless language coming from her mouth caused him to shudder. He had always tried to tell himself that it had not really happened, because he had been trying to picture her the way he **wanted** her to be, not the way she **actually was**. What if one of the brethren were to hear this? He knew clearly that it was utterly useless to reason with her. Any change in her attitude must come from the sovereign

quickenings of God and the moving of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, he felt it necessary to respond briefly to the defense of his fellow brethren.

"Leona," he responded slowly and quietly, "we are not trying to be **different**. We are only trying, humbly, to do what is right. And the only way we know to do what is right is to look to the Lord and His word.

"I really don't give a hoot what is right or wrong. All I am saying is that right or wrong I **like** my religion better than yours, **end of discussion!!!** At that point Leona fumbled angrily through her pocket book, found a pack of cigarettes and lit up. Ronic looked at her in disbelief. He believed the body was the temple of the Holy Spirit and should not be defiled with hazardous vile smelling disease-causing toxins. Leona had previously been careful to hide her addiction to nicotine. Although Ronic had smelled the unmistakable odor of smoke from time to time, he had supposed that she had been in the vicinity of a smoker. Surely, the pieces of the puzzle had already come together to present a very clear picture to him, a picture he detested, but one he had to accept.

Shortly after she finished her cigarette the taxi rolled up to the door of her house. Ronic paid the driver and the two of them walked to the door.

Leona had cooled off slightly by this time, and it began to dawn on her that she had perhaps been just a bit too harsh in her candidness concerning Ronic's 'church.'

Ronic told her calmly, "Leona....., thanks for giving it a try anyway."

"I'll try anything, or almost anything, once," she returned with a forced smile.

As Leona went through the doorway he remained outside. "Let her return to me, but let me not return to her," he again thought, as the reality of what had just transpired settled upon him. Ronic unchained his motor bike and began the drive home. The two of them were finished and he knew it. He was convinced that however beautiful Leona was, she could be a part of his future only if he were to leave the Christian pathway which he believed the Scriptures taught, and which he loved so deeply. In addition, if she was so adamant in spurning his fond wishes now, what would be the case if the two ever fell in love and married. And would such a person bring up their precious children in a Christian household in the way Ronic believed was right? The thoughts sent shudders up his spine.

As sobering as the evening's events were to him he was glad for one thing, the Lord who knows best had spoken. And, the message was loud and clear.

That night, before retiring, Ronic bathed, washed his hair and hung his clothes near the window to air out. He did not want his parents to smell the odor of stale tobacco smoke.

Later, as he reflected on his final evening with Leona, he thought about how physically desirable she was. That fact could not be denied. She seemed so desirable, in fact, that for a brief instant the thought crossed his mind of turning his back on the pathway he knew and loved, in order to be with her.

"No!!!," he suddenly shouted aloud. Shocked by the sudden sound of his own voice against the silence of the evening, he listened to see if his parents had heard him. Hearing no sound he drifted back into his thoughts. Finally, he quietly, slowly, and deliberately recited the words of Martin Luther, "Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

CHAPTER 9 - THE SUMMONS

The bookstore was reasonably busy for this time of year. Ronic had buried himself in the translation work now that Sarah was thoroughly familiar with the day to day operation of the business. News of this work was slowly spreading and the resulting increase in business might make it possible to finance the printing of additional translations.

Several customers were browsing when a stocky man in a business suit entered the store and, without looking at the books, made his way directly to the counter and asked for the owner. Sarah pressed a button under the counter and a buzzer sounded at the desk in the basement office.

Making his way to the counter Ronic knew immediately that the reason for the buzzer was the stocky man whom he assumed was a salesman.

"Good morning sir," Ronic proffered.

"I have a request," the man began, without responding to Ronic's greeting. He pulled out his wallet and showed his identification: 'ANDROCK POLICE, LIEUTENANT VICTOR B. SCHTAUV.' "Someone wants you to read the Bible to him."

"Read the Bible?"

"Yes, would you please come with me!"

Ronic clearly sensed that the lieutenant did not have in mind a 'come at your convenience' message, so he quickly went to the house in back of the store to pick up his Bible and briefcase. He then rejoined the officer in the store and accompanied him to his unmarked car.

As the lieutenant drove toward the west end of the city Ronic attempted to learn more about the person to whom he was to read, and why he had been chosen rather than one of the local clergy. But each time he would raise these questions he was somewhat less than politely rebuffed, so he decided to sit out the remainder of the ride in silence.

The lieutenant took the main highway north. As they left the city behind and entered the farm basin Ronic began to wonder whether this venture was on the level. Was he, perhaps, being kidnapped or spirited away to be disposed of in some unknown way? He didn't think this likely, but the thought of foul play was enough to make him edgy. The lieutenant was a good driver but an awful conversationalist. Ronic watched his stone faced expression out of the corner of his eye as the car made a left turn onto King's Highway, the branch highway which heads west. This thoroughfare was so named because it passes within sight of the king's country palace. Beyond it

is the western fishing village of Augrey. Thinking he was being taken to Augrey he wondered who in Augrey might call upon him? A Christian Assembly in close fellowship with Eastside was in Augrey, and, there were a couple of the formal churches. If anyone wished the scriptures read there were a number of well respected brethren in the Augrey gathering who were quite capable of performing that service. And, of course, the clergy in the more formal churches could have been summoned, although one, in particular, might have to search his parsonage high and low for a dusty copy of God's Word. Ronic wondered whether it might be someone who does not attend any church or meeting and who, therefore, might feel strange about calling in some local pastor.

As he mulled these things over in his mind they came within sight of the king's palace which was set back from the highway about 2 kilometers (about half a mile) and partially hidden behind a screen of magnificent trees. Modest for a king, the palace was nevertheless a good sized mansion of pale yellow with brown trim and roof. The palace itself was on a hill and had a grand view of the sea. One would faintly see some of the lavish gardens surrounding the palace when they would drive past. Soon they would pass the gate to the access road leading to the palace itself. Ronic thought to himself how he would hate to have to be isolated from life like King Ampli, even in a beautiful mansion such as this.

Now the entrance gates were in sight. The driver began slowing his vehicle. Ronic assumed the lieutenant wanted to catch a glimpse of the estate. But, to his surprise, the driver made a quick left turn toward the gates themselves. As soon as he entered the access road the guards stationed there opened the gates and waved him through.

Beyond the gates was a two lane paved road which meandered through the private gardens of the king. As they zipped past the meticulously kept picture-book park luxurious flowers of every imaginable color beckoned to them. The lieutenant kept his eyes glued to the road ahead as if the lovely gardens did not exist. Ronic wanted to comment about their beauty, but decided to maintain the silence which seemed to best please the driver.

A few moments later the car pulled to a stop at a small parking lot at the side of a steep hill. The driver nodded toward a small guarded building built directly against the side of the hill. Ronic followed him as he walked toward the guards. As soon as they reached the guards, the lieutenant paused and mumbled a couple of words to them. The shorter of the two guards approached Ronic, looked through his briefcase, and quickly frisked him for weapons. Finding none the driver walked back to the entrance of the small building without comment. He looked at Ronic and entered the doorway of the building, with Ronic instinctively following.

As soon as they passed through the entrance Ronic could see that the small building consisted of a single room about 3 by 4 meters (9-1/2 by 13 feet) which was nearly empty except for two or three folding chairs. He assumed that the simple structure

provided the guards shelter from the rain and noonday sun. At the rear of the room was a metal door which the driver opened.

The doorway led into a brightly lit tunnel-like passageway with sides beautifully finished by a stone mason. Their footsteps echoed sharply as they stepped briskly through the tunnel's 20 meter length. At the far end was another metal door identical to the first except that there was no doorknob. The officer stopped about 5 meters from the door and picked up a telephone from a niche hidden in the side-wall.

"Borg," was all he said into the telephone. The effect of this word was the clanging of a steel security bar on the other side of the door. A single guard dressed in a blue uniform opened the door and stood back while they passed through. The driver then led him to a small room decorated with an expensive looking light blue tapestry. "Wait here," Ronic was told as the driver beckoned toward a chair. Having said this the lieutenant left him alone while Ronic collected his bewildered thoughts.

Why was he here? Why him? He still wondered whether it might be a trick, but dismissed this as being improbable at this point in the complicated sequence of events. Failing to come up with a rational explanation to these questions he silently asked God to give him the strength and wisdom to do His will in whatever awaited him. As he prayed a strange thought crossed his mind, almost as if an echo of the words "**DO HIS WILL**" were reverberating (yet without sound) through the tunnel of his mind, just as his footsteps had echoed through the tunnel a few moments before. He prayed again, "Yes, Lord, help me to perform your will, whatever it might be."

As Ronic looked up from his prayer, a middle aged lady stood directly before him. She smiled as she caught him in his bewilderment.

"Let me explain why you are here," she began. "The king's health is failing rapidly. There are several things troubling his mind and he thought you might have the right words to comfort him. If you will please follow me we shall go directly to him."

"Then it is the king himself who summoned me," Ronic thought, "not one of his servants. I wonder if he got in touch with me because of one of the bookstore ads or Scripture messages I put in the paper?"

The two walked through the door on the far side of the room into a carpeted hallway. After walking a few steps the lady turned to the right, down another hallway. Once again they turned right toward a large room. In the room were five armed guards, two of which closely guarded a doorway on the left. On entering the room Ronic was asked to stand on the far side while the lady entered the closely guarded doorway. In about a minute the lady reappeared stating, "The king will see you now."

Passing between the guards Ronic followed the lady into a short foyer which led to yet another room. Without fanfare we entered a magnificently carpeted and

decorated bedroom. Expensive tapestry clothed the walls and luxurious chairs graced the floor. As they entered the room they turned left, and hidden by a jog in the wall was the king, sitting in a beautifully padded rocking chair beside his bed. Ronic remembered seeing the king on the beach about 15 years ago, and then only from a distance. The effects of time and of the illness which was ending his life caused him to bear little resemblance to the picture which appeared on official posters. Nonetheless, knowing that it was the king, he was able to recognize him.

Ronic spoke while politely bowing to his rank, "Your majesty, your servant has come at your command."

"Sit down, please, young man." The king beckoned toward the chair directly facing him.

Ronic sat, somewhat ungracefully because of the unanticipated lushness of the padding and the unexpected depth to which he sank. As he settled into the chair his memory told him that something was familiar about that voice, and the mannerisms behind it. "Young man," he thought to himself. "Young man!" Where had he heard that before? As he pondered this the king began to speak.

"Young man, did you bring your Bible?"

"Yes sir," he replied as he took it from its case.

The king looked toward the lady and said, "That will be all Martha."

Suddenly it hit Ronic. The king was the bearded old man who had visited the store! The beard must have been a disguise. But why had the king sent for Ronic, of all people?

As Martha left, the king asked him to read the twenty third Psalm. Ronic opened the book and began to read from the Androckian translation:

Yahveh ib pastoriz ilim....

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul:

**He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for His Name's sake.**

**Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,**

**I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.**

**Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
for ever. (Psalms 23:1-6)**

Ronic then read from the first chapter of John's gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light that is light for every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1:1-5,9-14,16-18).

Ronic then prayed, and for a short time the two of them talked of spiritual things, but the king gave little indication of understanding these things. Soon Ronic discretely posed the vital challenge, that all, rich or poor, prince or commoner, must one day appear before the Great Majesty on high, and that the time to be right with God was now. That all who truly recognize their sinfulness and repent, casting themselves completely on His mercy, relying on the Son of God and the holy sacrifice He offered on the tree at Calvary, would be given the mercy of God and eternal life in the glory above. The king nodded as if in agreement, and although his eyes were moist Ronic could not tell if the king appreciated the reality and significance of an approaching

eternity.

After a time the king said, "Young man. The clock of time is ticking and my days shall soon end."

"May it not be so my king," Ronic respectfully interjected.

The king continued to speak as if the comment had not been made. "When I die the people will have no ruler, for I have no heir." The king's gaze dropped, fixing itself on a slight defect in the pattern on the carpet.

"Not that it will make much difference," he continued dejectedly. "I have not been much of a king, except to soak up the luxuries of the island."

Ronic wanted to say, "Not so my king," but the words would not come forth. He knew in his heart that the king had spoken the truth.

"Go to the bookcase and bring me the maroon volume on the third shelf."

Ronic did as the king had spoken. He removed the beautiful book from the shelf and gently handed it to the king. The king carefully opened the volume, but instead of being a book the volume was a disguised storage box for the king's seal, and for some important looking papers under it. The king removed some papers from the box and carefully signed them and sealed them with the royal seal.

"Take this seal and these papers," the king continued, closing the book and handing it to Ronic. "You will need this after I die. This book contains all the properly executed legal paperwork which will make you, Ronic Paterson, the new king of Androck, Amply the First, when I die."

Ronic was nearly struck to the floor at the impact of the king's statement. He stared expressionless at the king, as if in a state of shock. At first he thought the king's words were some kind of joke, and he muttered some incoherent words. But before Ronic's mind could begin to formulate a meaningful response the king continued.

"As per our conversation in your little bookstore, young man, no one knows about this. All that is known is that the king will select a successor, but who that new king will be is unknown by everyone except the two of us in this room. It will be left to you to establish yourself. I don't know how you will do it without revealing your identity to anyone, but whether you finally choose to be a private or a public king, **'THE KING'** you shall indeed be. As to my wealth, this palace belongs to and is kept up by the government and is yours to use when you become king. A sizable stipend will be secretly delivered to your bookstore each month, beginning immediately, to enable you to commence your plans to establish your reign when the time comes."

After several minutes during which he spelled out many details of the transfer of

power the king at last finished his monologue. Ronic had regained enough of his powers of concentration to absorb most of the king's instructions and observations. Eventually he spoke to the king.

"But, your majesty, I am only a bookstore owner. I... I really don't know how to be a king."

"I'm sorry, young man, the decision has been made and the papers have been signed. I have talked to people without number about any ideas which they might have about the future of the island and how to improve it. I have talked with people in and out of the government. I have talked with rich and poor for their opinions and none of them show much merit. Perhaps you will fail, as I have, but your ideas expressed to me at your store months ago appeal to me as having at least some small potential for success. Like it or not, young man, the burden of the kingdom will soon be yours, and you had better busy yourself immediately by seriously planning to be what you shall indeed be. And now," the king continued as he pressed a signaling buzzer on the night table, "it is time for my weary body to rest."

The signal to depart having been given by the king, Ronic quietly slipped the book containing the Androckian royal seal into his carrying case together with his Bible and bade his farewell to the king. The king's attendant, Martha, had already entered the room and Ronic soon found himself being escorted through the security tunnel to the parking lot, where the Lieutenant waited in the car ready to drive him back to Rekorda City.

The drive back to the city found Lieutenant Schtauv as lacking in conversation as before. As the hills and valleys, cottages and farms, passed by the window neither of them uttered a word, for which Ronic was now extremely thankful. At this point he was in no mood for light conversation.

The events of the past hour turned over and over and inside out in Ronic's mind as they returned to the city. His mind raced in an incoherent and feeble effort to face the reality of what had just taken place, and to make some sense out of it. Being a king, the king of Androck, was not something Ronic had either sought out or desired. Yet it appeared that for some reason God was going to bring it about, like it or not. It was simple, as an armchair politician, to theorize about how to cure all the ills of society and a corrupt government, but the real thing was clearly another matter. How easy it would be to simply move into the royal palace after Ampli's death, bask in an isolated luxury and let the anarchy of the night continue to rule the day, as it had done for so many years.

As the car entered the outskirts of the city the fact that Ronic had been trying to sort all this out by himself convicted him, and he found himself thinking a simple prayer, "Lord, please... please grant me wisdom in this great thing which you are about to do to me, for I ask it in the name of the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Lord Jesus,

amen."

After what seemed like hours the lieutenant arrived with his passenger at the bookstore. Leaving Ronic by the store, and without formal farewells, his car made a U-turn and sped off in the direction from which it had come. Compulsively he watched the car retreat until it disappeared in the distance.

Ronic entered the now closed store to go through the motions of making a last minute check on things before starting home. Once in the store he spotted the comfortable chair in his basement office and sank into it. His mind revolved like a whirlwind as he once again rehearsed the events of the day. After an extended period of time that could have been minutes or hours, it dawned on him that absolutely nothing was resulting from all of his mental gymnastics. At that point he climbed the stairs and sorted through his mail, without really seeing it. After looking at the envelopes for some time, he put them down, left the store and unchained his moped. "I've got to talk to Leonardo," he thought, and turned back toward the store to telephone him.

Inside the store once again he called Leonardo's office but there was no answer. "He must have left for the day," he muttered to himself. Instinctively he picked up the telephone again to call Leonardo at home but after thinking about it a few second he put it down again. Ronic crossed the office and sat in the chair behind the counter. Slouching, he rested his left elbow on the counter and supported the weight of his head with his palm. "Leonardo's chess night is tomorrow," he thought. "Maybe I should wait until then to talk to him. Maybe I can make some sense out of this whole thing by then."

Behind the counter he continued to try to think through the situation, but his mind was numb with fatigue. Again he tried to force himself to sort things through but all he could do was stare blankly across the office. Finally his gaze passed to the clock and he woke to the reality that he would soon be expected for dinner. "I'd better head home right away," he thought as he reenacted the process of leaving the store.

At dinner that evening Ronic made a conscious effort to avoid revealing his troubled mind to his parents. After dinner, and following the family devotions, he mentioned that he was a bit tired and retired to his room. After making a few notes he prepared himself for bed. He did not expect much sleep that night, and he was not totally wrong in his prediction. Nevertheless, his mind was quieted enough to prepare him for the next day's activities.

CHAPTER 10 - THE SPONGE

The night passed with Ronic having somewhat less sleep than usual, though with much more than he had anticipated after the whirlwind events of the previous day. He was very pleased that Sarah had become such an adept saleslady at the store in so short a time. She had made it her business to do her job as unto the Lord. As a result she could now operate the sales end of the store with little or no help from Ronic. Her devotion to the business had freed his time for doing things such as placing orders, paying bills, accounting, and especially translating books and some articles he thought might be appreciated.

As yesterday's events once again flashed through his mind he resolved to put Sarah on full time and teach her every aspect of the business excepting the translation work. "If King Ampli's expectations come true," he mused, "Sarah's work will be indispensable. How could I as king over a problem island ever find time to run a busy book store?"

The day wore on all too slowly. Ronic looked forward impatiently for the evening meeting with Leonardo, and wished, for once, that Leonardo would not be interested in playing chess, but would rather be in the mood for a serious discussion.

Many had been the times when Leonardo and Ronic talked things over. Leonardo's parents had lived in the north section of Rekorda City and had attended Northside chapel. Eventually Leonardo's family moved within the city and began to attend Eastside meeting. Several years ago Ronic and his parents had attended a denominational church a few blocks from their house, but were not at all happy with that situation. Leonardo and Ronic first met as students in the local elementary school and quickly became friends. Ronic frequently stayed for dinner at his friend's house, and eventually attended one of the Eastside meetings with Leonardo and his parents. He had never experienced anything like it in his own formal church and soon he persuaded his own parents to attend Eastside. One day, when Leonardo's father was preaching the gospel at the Domineek morning family hour the eternal challenge presented itself to Ronic, and to his dad and mom, and all three cast themselves upon the mercy of God, to rest in faith in Him alone for their eternal welfare.

But that was many years ago. Leonardo, his wife Jannie and little Mary, their new addition, were a charming family. Ronic often hoped he would be as fortunate in the choice of a lifelong mate as Leonardo had been. Now that he had not dated Leona for some time it had become quite clear to him that they were never meant for one another. It was an unequal yoke. There was simply no match.

To hasten the day at the bookstore he had buried himself in work at the office. The translation work seemed to progress slowly but he was pleased to complete the final chapter of a recent English language paperback, 'Teenagers in Troubled Times.' Once a final reading of the translation could be made the work could go to the printer

and islanders would have another valued work in their own language.

After lunch Ronic paid a visit to the Rekorda Times to pay a bill and to arrange for some more advertising and the submission of one of the short articles which he published in the paper from time to time. Hugh Trumbore was the owner/editor/publisher of the Times, which was part of Commukations Centrale, or Comm-Centrale for short, a complex consisting of Radio, Television, and, of course, The Rekorda Times. Although Ronic was quite sure Trumbore was involved in various sorts of underworld activities, there was no other choice of publication that would cover the intended area, the entire island. A couple of attempts had been made by would-be publishers to create competitive papers but neither had been successful. A sudden fire had destroyed one of the offices and the other simply ceased publication without any explanation. At any rate reader response to Times advertising had been gratifying and several serious inquiries had been received regarding the short messages. "As long as Trumbore will print them I'll continue to put them out," Ronic reasoned.

Finally, the day was over and it was time for his usual weekly visit with Leonardo, Jannie and little Mary. Tonight he would visit his friends at their house. Ronic's parents decided to stay home to save money on taxi fares. Anxiously he rode his moped to its destination, chained it to a tree and started for the front door.

"You must have been speeding," Leonardo joked from the front door. "You're ten minutes early. If you need council to help you with a speeding ticket you have come to the right place."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ronic replied, turning back toward his moped. "I'll circle the block for another ten minutes so you can help Jannie clean up the dishes."

"Come on back," he continued jokingly. "We'll let you help with that job."

Once inside, Ronic talked with Jannie and played with little Mary and her stuffed kitty cats before she was put to bed. In a few minutes Jannie was involved in that task and the two men were alone. Much to Ronic's chagrin, Leonardo whipped out the chessboard and the game was soon under way. Ronic enjoyed chess, but tonight he had far more pressing things on his mind. He felt the nearly irresistible urge to flick one after another of the chess pieces across the room with a snap of his finger.

After just a few moves Leonardo began to have suspicions that something was troubling his friend, but decided to say nothing. As the game progressed, however, it became obvious that Ronic's mind was a million kilometers away. An unthinkable blunder on Ronic's part caused the premature and disastrous end of the game. Looking up from his hollow victory Leonardo's probing gaze fixed itself upon the loser. "Want to tell your friend about it brother?" he compassionately asked.

Although he had waited nearly two days for this opportunity to speak with Leonardo he looked up at him as if to say, "What do you mean? Tell you about what?" But this was no game of psychology. Ronic had a real problem and needed to release the bottled up pressure King Ampli had dumped on him. He knew Leonardo would be the sponge to soak up the problems he would unload.

Jannie had returned from putting Mary to bed and was busy knitting on the sofa. Ronic looked at Jannie, then back at Leonardo. "I just started a new volume," he began as he rose to his feet and began making his way to Leonardo's study.

Leonardo instinctively understood that his friend's problem was too personal to be discussed in front of Jannie, and followed him into the study.

Leonardo's study looked somewhat like a miniature book store with several types of books, but particularly on the subject of law, his chosen vocation. When the door was closed and the two were seated, Leonardo, after a long pause, spoke first.

"Ronic, the last time I remember you looking this troubled was when we were in school and you accidentally hit the ball through the principal's window."

"That was a long time ago," Ronic replied mechanically, as if to get the small talk out the way as soon as possible. He then continued abruptly, "Leonardo, something incredible happened to me yesterday afternoon. I've got to tell someone about it before I literally crack. You are the only one I dare share this with."

At that word Leonardo became very concerned and redoubled his effort to analyze Ronic's words. "Is it anything to do with the occult Ronic?" he asked hesitatingly.

"No, nothing quite as bad as that," he replied, while trying to decide how best to start his story.

Leonardo was greatly relieved but still quite concerned for the welfare of his friend. "Ronic, brother," he said softly, "suppose you begin at the very beginning."

And so Ronic unfolded the story of the old man's visit to the store months ago, and of his visit to King Ampli two days ago. At the end of the tale Leonardo was sitting on the edge of his chair, eyes wide open, hardly believing what he had just heard. Just as Leonardo was about to speak, Ronic produced the maroon volume which King Ampli had given him, and opened it for him. If Leonardo's eyes were wide open before, they nearly popped out of their sockets when the contents of the volume were displayed in front of them.

Finally, when all was told, and the volume was closed again, Ronic hesitated, and after a long period of dead silence asked weakly, "Leonardo, what... am I to do?"

Leonardo thought in silence, his eyes transfixed upon the closed volume on the table. Finally he spoke, with a voice that broke, and was barely audible, "You are to be the king, that's what you are to do!"

The two of them talked for nearly an hour more and agreed to meet the following night at the bookstore. Nothing of this would be disclosed to anyone, including Jannie. They then had prayer together and Ronic departed for home with his 'book.'

The following evening Leonardo arrived nearly half an hour before the appointed time, and the two men went immediately to the basement office which was used for the translation work. Soon they were into serious discussions. Leonardo felt that the most important requirements would be to provide the people of Androck with a police force that would actually protect, rather than rob and harass, the citizens. This, together with a policy of giving quick feedback to the public regarding the consequences of lawlessness, would hopefully result in a lowered crime rate.

The island police force was headed by Police Principal Alex Nostol, who was notorious for his corruption. As a result the police organization suffered from a thoroughly rotten reputation. Nostol and his henchmen would have to go. Both Leonardo and Ronic agreed on that without further discussion. But, who would replace Nostol? Leonardo said he had a couple of ideas. One possibility was a top notch licensed private investigator named Bruno who sometimes worked for Leonardo on certain cases.

"Good," Ronic replied. "See if this Bruno is interested. We will need several others. We need to build a security organization that can move in, fully trained, at the proper time to instantly replace the existing corrupt police department. We also need a Principal Administrator. That's **you** Leonardo."

Leonardo looked at Ronic, and then gazed at the tabletop. "All right," he said slowly in a voice void of emotion.

Ronic had not expected him to agree to take the job, let alone agree so quickly. But the many hours of discussion that had taken place between Ronic and His longtime friend had obviously made a lasting impression on him, even though they both felt at the time there was no real possibility of transforming theory into reality. "And," he continued, hoping to jump into another subject before Leonardo had a chance to change his mind, "we need someone to act as Principal of Communication."

When it was obvious that Ronic had paused long enough, and that he was not going to suggest a name, Leonardo popped out, "Seiss Timnar?"

"The Seiss Timnar of Northside chapel?" Ronic queried.

"One and the same. A brilliant fellow, educated abroad, reads several languages,

including classical Greek."

"When did you think of his name?"

"Many weeks ago."

"So, you have been Principal Administrator of the Provisional Kingdom of Androck since all our hushed discussions took place!"

They both laughed and shook hands, thankful that the tension had, for the moment, been broken, and that a small first step had been made in establishing the future administration.

"Leonardo," Ronic said thoughtfully, "what do you suppose the brethren would think of all this? I mean getting involved as a king, and as the king's Principal Administrator and all that? You know that although our people obey the powers that be, they tend to want to be apart from them, knowing that our real citizenship is in heaven."

"I think it is important for you to realize that God, through circumstance, has given this position to you. You did not seek it, nor did you want it. As to being in high places one might consider Joseph or Daniel."

"But that was God working for the benefit of His chosen people Israel. Our little island is by no means to be thought of as God's peculiar treasure as was the nation Israel."

"None the less, Ronic, we know that Joseph and Daniel didn't have to get involved with Gentile governments. God could have worked out His purposes without them. Yet they did become involved, and the Scriptures do not condemn them for it. Oh, there may be a couple of eyebrows raised here and there when the truth finally comes out, but, really, the scriptures never hint that the king of a particular land must of necessity be an unbeliever! This means that although our hope and calling is to 'things above' (Colossians 3:1), we are still given responsibilities here below. And, if the king can be a believer, why not a believer in fellowship with those who attempt to walk in the light of His word, "outside the camp"? The Apostle Paul alludes to believers in high places. The thing is to be a good honest, kind, king, with God's help, and to the best of your ability. If you are a corrupt king and the brethren find out about it you might understandably be put out of the fellowship."

"By the way," Leonardo continued, changing the subject, "I will try to approach Bruno and Seiss tomorrow."

"Good, but please use the utmost discretion in what you tell them, particularly until they are totally committed and you feel you can fully rely on them to keep all this top secret.... Also, make sure they understand that this is not some political conspiracy, but part of a legitimate rule. Also, I might mention that there is a substantial financial

stipend that King Ampli is making available to fund our efforts. You should plan to use these funds to acquire and train whatever personnel will be necessary before the real thing begins. Keep this in mind when you make your arrangements."

In a short time the discussion was terminated because of the lateness of the hour, and both men went their own ways, Ronic on his moped and Leonardo in his automobile. Ronic thought how great it would be to have an administrator like Leonardo who knew his way around and had his head firmly implanted on his shoulders.

CHAPTER 11 - PLANS

Leonardo wasted no time calling Seiss and Bruno to arrange for appointments to judge their willingness to participate in the new reign. Bruno would arrive at 9:30 AM and Seiss at 11:30. He had rescheduled all of his regular appointments for another day.

When the time came for Bruno to appear, he was there, like clockwork. Leonardo personally ushered him to his office. He had given his secretary the morning off so there would be no breach of security.

"So what brings me here today?" Bruno inquired once he was comfortably seated.

"I thought you would never ask," Leonardo replied lightheartedly. "Actually, I have a very important task which needs to be done, a long term commitment," he continued in a more serious tone, "and, quite frankly, you are the only one I know of who can handle the job."

"That's quite a recommendation, Leonardo. Usually I should be the one to market my talents to you, not the other way around. What's the story?"

"By the way, Bruno, let me remind you, as I have usually done in the past, that nothing I say should go outside this room. In this case, however, I want you to multiply the confidentiality factor by a hundred."

"Sounds really sensitive."

"It is, most assuredly. If at any time during this discussion you decide you do not wish to be a part of this, please state this immediately, and we will terminate the appointment as if it had never taken place. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Then, before I get into the heart of the matter let me ask you something. I have never discussed this type of thing with you previously, but I suppose you, like everyone else, wish that certain things in this world could be changed. Certain diseases conquered, hunger banished, repressive governments replaced. What would your personal wish list be for our little island?"

Bruno looked uncomfortably at Leonardo for a few moments before speaking. "I hope this is not some kind of trap."

"Quite the contrary. The doors are closed, the tape recorder is turned off, the secretary is away, and I give you my word I am not an agent of either the present government or the element."

"Well, to answer your question without beating around the bush, I frankly can think of very little that should not be changed."

"Well then, let me ask a more specific question. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you had power over the police department. What would you change?"

"Again, what wouldn't I change! Good old Alex Nostol, the Police Principal, would have to go, along with his corrupt henchmen Patel, Gonzap, Dobbner and all the rest. The influence of Trumbore and his crime syndicate would have to be broken, the police would have to start being servants of the people, not servants of organized crime, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera."

"Then let me tell you what is happening. And, again, this does not go beyond these four walls, not even to your wife?"

"Agreed."

"King Ampli is old and in failing health. He knows this, and has passed on the royal seal to another. On the day of Ampli's death someone else will become king. I happen to know who that future king is."

Bruno's eyes widened as Leonardo continued. "And I happen to know he wants very much to restore meaningful law and order to the island. He needs a Police Principal who would do exactly what you just finished saying should be done. Yes, there are risks involved, but if you and the new king succeed, the reward of satisfaction would be incalculable."

"Frankly, Leonardo, this is just a bit more than I expected. As you know I am a private investigator, not a politician. I thought you were about to fill me in on the details of a nice simple private investigation, or even a complicated one. And you also know, even there I tend to be quite choosy on which cases I agree to take. But Police Principal? Wow! That calls for a good bit of inner contemplation. For example, what makes you think that when the time comes I could simply walk into Nostol's carpeted office, have him quietly hand over the keys to his files and watch him walk out to a peaceful and willing retirement?"

"He won't, and this is why we desperately need you. We need to devise a plan to perform a surprise coup d'etat, albeit a strictly legal coup d'etat."

"It would have to be more than a plan, it would have to be foolproof."

"What about your security guards? Could they be suitably trained?"

"They already have some training, but not enough to qualify them for what you would need."

"How much time would it take?"

"Perhaps 3 weeks. Better to give it six weeks. All that training would have to be done in strict secrecy to avoid suspicion by Nostol, and we would have to do everything possible to avoid having one of the trainees leak this out. Plus, I would need money to make arrangements. I suppose you don't have much of that."

"I have whatever you need to do the job right! So, you'll take it?"

"I didn't say that" Bruno chuckled. I need to know more of the risks and of the philosophy that motivates the appointed king to do this. If he and I happen to disagree on that it's a 'no go'."

And so, for the next hour Leonardo explained in detail the ideas he and the as yet unnamed future king had previously discussed. As the hour progressed Bruno became satisfied with Leonardo's explanations. Finally, he said, "I've been hoping against home that someday, someone would do what you and the new king propose to do. What amazes me is that you want me to be a part of it."

"A crucial part of it," Leonardo corrected.

"All right then, I'll do it. When do we start?"

"Tonight! I will pick you up and take you to a meeting where we will get directly into specific plans."

Once arrangements for the meeting had been made Bruno left Leonardo's office. Although quite amazed by the sudden revelation, he was not totally overwhelmed, as was Ronic after his visit with King Ampli. After all, for this job he was indeed one of the most qualified people on the island, and he knew it. The thing that shocked Bruno was that he had agreed to take on so risky an undertaking on the spur of the moment. As he walked away from the office he smiled to himself, "Leonardo could probably sell electric heaters to Androckians in the midst of a sweltering heat wave."

A few minutes later Seiss arrived in the office. He did not need much convincing because he had been out of work for some time and welcomed the opportunity to be in the communications business once again. He too would be at the meeting tonight.

CHAPTER 12 - THE ROYAL COUNCIL

Both the Christmas and Easter seasons had long passed since the day Ronic received his summons and commission from King Ampli. The island was encased in one of those hot humid overcast days that occasionally introduce the summer season. All morning the various types of island hawkers had been pushing their hand carts through the streets. Several times a day, after making a certain number of sales they would push the carts to the bank to deposit the money earned thus far, and then they pushed them back to their selling locations. No one dared carry much money, nor did they dare to leave their valuable carts unguarded on the street. While this procedure wasted a great deal of time, it was virtually the only way to show a profit at the end of the day, (assuming that the merchandise itself was not stolen). Although the petty thieves who would take only a mango or two outnumbered the serious criminals it was not a good idea to tempt the latter by holding large amounts of money.

Business at the bookstore had been sufficient to make ends meet and then some. Sarah had by now taken on most aspects of the work and Ronic had increased her salary accordingly. He counted her talents as a real plus because it gave him more time for himself, for the translation work and for the top-secret royal work. Any announcement of a new book in the local tongue acted like a magnet, bringing a flock of purchasers. It almost didn't seem to matter what the title, subject or theme might be, as long as it was a genuine foreign book translated into Androckie. Ronic welcomed this opportunity for several reasons. It helped sales, of course, but it was also a made-to-order channel to expose readers to worthwhile writings. Unfortunately, for the last several months the king's summons had resulted in a substantial reduction in the number of pages Ronic could translate per week. Planning for the inevitable seemed to leave less and less time for the bookstore business.

After Leonardo had successfully convinced both Seiss and Bruno to participate in the program the four of them routinely met several times a week to discuss and plan for the fateful day. When a session was over each would go his own way and individually spend countless hours developing ideas into hopes which might change the present course of Androckian history. Each of the cabinet members, (the royal commission if you please), was well fitted for his particular job.

Leonardo had been educated abroad, but his love for his homeland brought him back to Androck, albeit at a substantial reduction in salary compared to what he might have received in another country. His talents as an attorney were proving to be quite indispensable as he authored simple, straightforward laws for the new kingdom, laws that were based insofar as possible on the laws derived from the original Androckian natives. He was particularly adept at anticipating many of the legal loopholes that might arise. He had the ability to draft laws that could not easily be misconstrued, particularly by future generations of lawyers. He was painfully aware that in other countries courts had interpreted various laws in ways that created a runaway system that held the entire populace prisoner to certain ideals not espoused by the actual

creators of those laws. Leonardo's expertise could potentially have the effect of reducing the throat-hold that lawyers enjoy in some 'more civilized' countries.

Bruno, on the other hand had originally been a merchant. With the increasing unrest and lawlessness he embarked on a study of crime and became a private detective, and a good one at that. Finally, he conceived the idea of forming a guard service to protect various businesses from the ravages of crime. This idea caught on like wild fire and the security guard service became a prospering business. The main problem with the business was that he was required to notify the government as to each person or business he intended to initiate a security contract with. The government would then either accept or reject each application with no apparent rhyme or reason behind the decisions. This puzzled Bruno for some time. Why was he allowed to contract with some firms but not with others. His suspicions resulted in his own private investigation into the enigma. He soon discovered that those he had been allowed to service had paid a substantial fee to certain government officials, while those on the denied list had not. In any case, his business was quite successful, because without protection businesses would lose even more than the amounts that changed hands under-the-table.

Soon after Bruno accepted the call to be part of the future kingdom he sent a small contingent of highly promising individuals to a law-enforcement training academy abroad. On graduation, these select individuals were promoted to the rank of lieutenant, and began to conduct extensive training sessions of their own back in Androck. Eventually, the whole company of guards was transformed into a highly trained elite. Although the individual members of the security force did not know it, Bruno would one day rely heavily on their abilities and on their loyalty for a critical project as yet unknown to them.

Seiss, an accomplished journalist who was decidedly the quietest of the four, was nevertheless, a vital member of the team. Only a Junior College existed on Androck. Anyone who wished to have a university degree obtained it abroad. Seiss had a master's degree in journalism from a foreign university. Once he had completed his education he joined the staff of the Rekorda Times. But Hugh Trumbore's interference with Seiss' articles led him to resign about two years ago. It had been impossible for him to find another job that utilized his talents. Trumbore's communications monopoly, which he maintained with acts of terror, saw to that.

Seiss had been ecstatic when he learned of the opportunity offered by Leonardo several months ago. His job in the new reign would be Principal of Communications. He would convey the intent of the king and of the laws to the common people so a core of support for decency could be created. And so, after the meetings with the king and his two other cabinet members, Seiss would write the stories of the future. These would be the pamphlets and articles that, hopefully, would bring public opinion solidly behind them when the time was ripe.

Each time the four assembled they would discuss, criticize and modify the work of the previous night. Leonardo's laws, Bruno's plans for his security organization and Seiss' propaganda. After many months and seemingly endless hours of debate and rehash it became obvious that a new cohesive system of laws was emerging, along with the governmental machinery to publish and enforce them, and, last but not least, the communications necessary to gain public acceptance of the new reign.

The new laws were simple to understand. Punishment would be swift, tough and unavoidable for anyone caught breaking them. The Biblical principle of restitution to crime victims would be a central theme. The rights of the accused would be preserved as much as possible, but the inadvertent violation by some technicality would not automatically invalidate the charge against the defendant. At the same time, law enforcement personnel who violated the rights of the accused would be subject to discipline commensurate with the seriousness of their disregard for the rights of those they might arrest.

One matter, however, became of increasingly greater concern as the number of meetings of the royal four continued, namely, the possibility that their frequent meetings could be noticed by the wrong individuals. It was good that the meetings were split between the bookstore, Leonardo's law office and Bruno's security warehouse training center. But Ronic's insistence that his future royalty be kept totally secret from the general public would be difficult to maintain once the actual transfer of power took place.

The king must be available to his cabinet at any and all times. This meant frequent meetings would be required. It would only be a matter of time before someone would notice the constant activity and suspect the truth as to the new king's identity. All agreed such a discovery early on might well lead to the tragic and premature end of the experiment with legal reform, and perhaps the tragic end of island society itself. If only some way could be devised which would permit the three to meet secretly at any time, day or night, with the faceless king.

Ronic's store was located on the main street only about 150 meters (about 490 feet) from Number One Gouvernave, the government complex containing the Police headquarters, courtrooms, administrative offices, and, interestingly, the king's audience room. None of the four had ever seen this room. Lately all of them had strictly avoided making an appearance in any government building or agency, other than for paying taxes. Between the bookstore and the government complex were numerous small stores and residences.

Ronic romantically thought of the few imported comic books he had seen as a child while spending the summer visiting relatives in Canada. In these comic books of fantasy, heroes like Clark Kent would simply go unobserved to the ever empty store room or telephone booth, change at blinding speed to his Superman outfit and fly out, up and away through the window, completely unobserved. After all, who among the

millions of inhabitants of Metropolis would ever think it odd that someone might fly out of the window of the Daily Planet building!!

Then there was Batman and Robin, who, when duty called, would zoom to the rescue from the Batcave in the Batmobile through a completely secret concealed tunnel that led to the streets of Gotham City. "That's what we need," Ronic said jokingly to the rest, "a tunnel, an unknown secret entrance to the king's chambers."

As Ronic made light humor of this Leonardo and Seiss smiled but Bruno remained serious, apparently having something else on his mind. "Tunnel?" he said finally. "I wonder if...." Bruno cut himself short as he struggled to remember something. "Sir, what do you recall about that so-called storm sewer project a few years ago? Exactly where did they build it and what was it like?"

Ronic replied, "That was 16 or 18 years ago. I was still attending grade school. It was long before I acquired this building. But, if I remember correctly, there is some kind of storm sewer at the rear property line. You know how my property abuts against the rear property line of the house in back of my store. That house fronts on Essen Road. All the buildings on both roads share a common rear boundary line which runs parallel to those two streets. The storm sewer you talk about was probably dug right along our common property lines. I would suppose it comes out somewhere near that little concrete memorial building on Maze Street halfway between Main and Essen. What do you have in mind? I hope you don't plan to dig up that old rusty pipe so we can hold our clandestine meetings lying horizontally in that thing.

Leonardo chuckled once again and said to Bruno, "It would be great. Imagine creating the laws of the land in the world's longest echo chamber, and a filthy wet one at that! Imagine the rats we could play with while we work."

Bruno ignored the levity and his analytical mind continued to dwell on the old storm sewer. At length he took a note pad from his pocket, scribbled something on it and returned it to his pocket.

Everyone presently became aware that the evening was wearing on and the meeting ended. Leonardo collected his paperwork, the notes from which more laws would be carefully written and he quietly left with Seiss. Bruno, still deep in thought, also made for the door.

The four future leaders of the island kingdom continued to meet after-hours. Each of them continued to worry that someone might become suspicious, but so far there had been no known problem. These meetings continued to hammer out the plans for assuming control when the fateful day would come. A series of criminal laws had passed through several revisions. Plans for an intensive publicity, or shall we say 'propaganda', campaign were drawn up, and scores of details of every kind were discussed during each of their meetings. Yet, in spite of all the planning, everyone

knew the stark reality that there was less than an even chance the legal coup d'etat would succeed.

Each wondered what the future might hold in store. It was not easy to live one day at a time under the present circumstances.

CHAPTER 13 - DOMINEEK

Today was Domineek, the first day of the week, and Ronic was especially cheerful. The morning meeting with the saints at Eastside had been a time of particular refreshment and spiritual uplift for him. But now it was afternoon and he had just finished presenting the gospel at Northside chapel. He was usually asked about 3 or 4 times a year to conduct the gospel meetings at each of the three city chapels and occasionally at one of the five other chapels in the countryside. The same was true for many of the other ministers in the meetings. The exchange was good for the meetings because it added fresh ministry for those in attendance. It was good for those who spoke because it gave them an opportunity to be encouraged by the exercise of gift (Romans 12:3-13). Finally, this promoted an island-wide sense of Christian unity among the various gatherings of believers.

Now that the formal part of the meeting was over, the saints took the time to visit with those in attendance, an activity enjoyed by all. Several people had come over to thank Ronic for the refreshing words he had spoken. One elder brother, a Mr. Juan Samos, got Ronic's ear and talked for about 7 or 8 minutes. In the meantime Mr. and Mrs. Schulte and their two daughters had made their way toward Ronic and seemed to be waiting for Mr. Samos to finish his dissertation. Ronic, recognized that fact and tried to politely break away, but Mr. Samos had not finished making his point. At length, Mrs. Samos appeared, after she had finished her own visiting, and this was the signal for her husband to quickly terminate his sermonette. The Schulte family then approached Ronic. Herman and Grace Schulte shook Ronic's hand and expressed their appreciation for his gospel message, as had many others before them.

Herman Schulte then spoke to Ronic, "Say, have you ever met my two daughters?" Ronic recalled greeting both of them on various occasions but had never been formally introduced. Before Ronic could reply Herman continued, "I would like you to meet my older daughter Maria, and my younger daughter Rosa."

Ronic greeted each one in turn and spoke with them briefly. Rosa was an attractive and very polite girl in her late teens. She had medium brown hair and an engaging smile. Her sister Maria was, according to Ronic's guess, in her early twenties, possibly a couple of years younger than himself. She was equally as attractive as Rosa, and just as personable. But something about Maria's quiet perceptive manner, and the sparkle in her eyes, caught his attention and he quickly felt at ease speaking with her.

Their conversation was cut short, however, by several others who approached and wished to greet him. As they did so the Schulte family moved on to greet others and to depart for home. Ronic had hoped to speak a bit longer with Maria but this would have to wait for another time.

One of those who greeted Ronic was Seiss, member of the secret royal counsel. They exchanged a friendly handshake and words of friendship, none of which gave any hint of the serious interchanges which had recently passed between the king and his propaganda minister.

CHAPTER 14 - DEATH OF A KING

As the weeks passed the details of government began to saturate Ronic, Leonardo, Seiss and Bruno. It would be difficult to imagine a group of would-be rulers more devoted to the hopes of Androck. Yet, with all their seriousness they retained a sense of calling to the cause, and had no difficulties with petty jealousies or aspirations for personal power. Each was content to plan for the job to which he was appointed. And they continued to wonder what the future might hold in store for them and for the island.

It was a bright Wednesday morning. Sarah was minding the store so Ronic decided to get his weekly message to the newspaper early in the day. He usually delivered it later in the day after much of the staff of the Rekorda Times had gone home.

Putting the envelope containing his weekly article under his arm he walked up the street toward the government complex, Number One Gouvernave. As he walked past the government complex he thought of the greed and corruption which was rampant behind those white stone walls. He sometimes referred to the complex as "the whitewashed walls" in remembrance of the apostle Paul's reference to the corrupt high priest of Israel (Acts 23:3).

Crossing the road he walked west a couple of blocks on Northumber. Several small shops dotted this street. One conspicuous landmark was the remains of a clothing store which had burned to the ground earlier in the year. He remembered when the owner lost his business and all of his merchandise.

Trumbore Sal, the Rekorda City's most modern street lay directly ahead. Most businesses on the street were controlled by Trumbore, including Comm-Centrale. As he approached this radio, television and newspaper complex the distasteful thought of the Trumbore empire again passed through his mind.

At last he arrived at the Rekorda Times. The main offices were in a modern building with 10 granite steps gracing the entrance way. As Ronic climbed the steps the thought occurred to him that the granite must have been imported because no granite is to be found on Androck.

He entered the door and made his way to the center desk where paid advertisements were accepted. In spite of the personal reputation of Trumbore and the false slant of many newspaper articles, the paper was well run, and the employees efficient and helpful. Ronic gave the lady at the desk some instructions about the article and paid his accumulated monthly bill.

On Saturday afternoons he usually didn't have much time to waste, but with Sarah in charge of the store he felt less constrained. Turning from the desk he looked to the left. Behind the door in the corner room was the office belonging to Hugh Trumbore

himself. Ronic instinctively walked up to the office. The door contained a window which was rendered opaque by a thin film of rippled plastic. There was a scratch in the film on the left side of the door. Ronic discretely decided against bending down and putting his eye to the bare spot. Turning from the door he saw a long hallway opposite Trumbore's office. Walking to the hallway entrance he could see a number of modern computerized phototypesetters in little alcoves off of the hallway. He slowly walked down the hallway watching the probably twisted news articles being set up on the video monitors as the various operators manipulated their keyboards.

Each booth appeared to be nearly identical except for the identity of the operator at the electronic machine. As Ronic was passing the fifth booth, however, something made him pause. The lady operating the machine looked up from her work as he stopped. Their eyes met. It was Maria Schulte.

"Miss Schulte, what a pleasant surprise," he stated.

Maria smiled at him and the two spoke briefly before she had to return to her computer typesetting. Ronic walked away from Maria's desk overjoyed by the chance meeting. He was pleased to know where he might contact her. Ever since her father had introduced her Ronic had wanted to see her again, possibly even have a date with her if that was agreeable to her. As he headed toward the exit door he found himself wondering why he was walking away from her. "Why should I wait for another time?" he said to himself. "Why not ask her now!" With that he reversed his steps and began walking toward the hallway again. As he slowly strolled toward Maria he rehearsed to himself the words which he hoped would result in a dinner date.

But Ronic's train of thought was suddenly interrupted by an extremely tall thin man who ran past him, nearly colliding with him. The man had come from the news room in the rear and was pounding on Hugh Trumbore's door. Ronic surmised that something was in the wind and decided to pause a moment to see what might happen. After about a minute the man emerged from the office followed by Hugh Trumbore himself. The two of them stood in front of the office door. Finally the tall thin man cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "May I have your attention. May I please have your attention." The clatter of keyboards and the din of voices became silent throughout the office. "Please come to the front for an important announcement," the man continued.

Hugh Trumbore waited impatiently as the employees of the Rekorda Times made their way to the front. Trumbore was a greatly overweight cigar smoking executive whose grotesque facial expressions, and even his manner of walking, seemed to project an aura of distrust.

At last most of the employees had gathered. Ronic could see Maria standing on the other side of the gathering. The thin man bent over and said something in Trumbore's ear. At that, Hugh Trumbore took the cigar from his mouth and spoke.

"I have just received word from the king's palace that King Ampli the Fourth died at 9:35 this morning." Trumbore then glanced down at a small slip of paper which he held in the same hand as his cigar. "There will be the usual, ah, traditional, royal funeral festivities. The palace reports that a new king has been appointed who will be called Andrae the First. No additional details about the new king have been released. Those of you so concerned will prepare the appropriate headlines and make space for the story, and a picture of King Ampli." With that Trumbore abruptly turned and reentered the office with the thin man.

Ronic was stunned. He completely forgot that Maria was there, forgot about asking her for a date. Walking toward the exit in a daze he thought to himself, "The king, dead?" He knew the time was coming, but now that Ampli's death had occurred it was as if the many months of preparation for this event had never taken place. "Me? Ronic, 'King Andrae the First'?"

CHAPTER 15 - TEASING AND TOPPLING

Dinner at the Schulte household was quiet and pleasant as usual, but more somber because the news of the king's death was fresh in everyone's mind. After dinner, Rosa and Maria did the dishes while their parents relaxed in the living room.

"Did Mom tell you that Susie Timnar's cat had kittens?" Rosa asked as she looked up from the big pot she was scrubbing.

"Really? How many were born?" Maria asked excitedly.

"Three adorable little black balls of fur."

"You saw them?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Their mother has them hidden in that old green doghouse out back of Susie's house but we managed to get a quick look at them."

"I wonder if Susie plans to keep all three?"

"Do I sense that my older sister would like a little pet kitten to curl up on her lap?"

"Well, if they are as cute as you say they are...."

"Maybe you could take one to your office. When it grows maybe you could train it to steal Mr. Trumbore's cigars and hide them."

"That would certainly make his office smell better, but I would feel sorry for the poor cat who got near one of those things. By the way, do you remember a few months ago when the man Ronic from Eastside chapel took the afternoon meeting?"

"I sure do. I also remember watching you smile when we spoke with him after the meeting."

"Well, you were smiling too Rosa."

"I may have had a little tiny smile, but you.... I thought your whole face was about to turn itself completely inside out."

"Exaggeration, exaggeration!"

"And I remember how you talked about him the whole time we were going home, and for days after."

"Rosa, you are a tease."

"I can still see you smile, sort of like you are smiling right now. As a matter of fact, **exactly** like you are smiling now. Now don't tell me. You saw that Ronic again didn't you. It's written all over your face."

"Well, he did come into the office."

"See, I told you. And he asked you out?"

"Now you're jumping to conclusions. No, he just stopped by my work station to say hello."

"How did he know where to look you up?"

"I don't know. He said he had stopped by the advertising desk. You've seen the bookstore ads and the scripture meditations in the paper haven't you?"

"Oh sure. Dad says they are probably the only truth in that whole newspaper."

"Thanks a lot. All of **my** articles are factual."

"Maybe your old news articles were too factual. You suspected that is why your boss took you out of the news pool and put you on 'Home and Garden.' But getting back to Ronic, you say he didn't ask you for a date, or even you're hand in matrimony?"

"Rosa!"

"Then, were you hoping he would ask you out?"

"I suppose, maybe."

Just then Mom walked into the kitchen.

"You know," Rosa continued, you're not getting any younger. Why don't you call up Ronic and ask him for a date?"

"Shame! You know we don't do things like that," Maria answered.

"But you'd like to, wouldn't you?"

Maria was silent, but her shy smile answered Rosa's question.

"And who are you tempting your sister with Rosa?" Mother said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Ronic, from Eastside meeting visited Maria at the office today."

"He just stopped by to say hello while he was there on other business. That's all," Maria corrected.

"I still think you should go on a date with this Ronic," Rosa countered.

"But he hasn't asked me."

"Father and I have known the Pattersons for years," Mother began. "Ever since they left the National Church and began fellowship at Eastside. I could very easily make a call which might bring the desired action."

"No, Mom, at least not right now," Maria answered. "I'm sure that whatever is right will work out in its own way."

Rosa countered, "But maybe he will find someone else by that time."

Maria's smile was instantaneously replaced by an expression of annoyance.

"Maria is right," Mom answered. "It is always best to let the Lord work things out in His own way. But, at the same time, it doesn't hurt to help things along just a wee bit if the opportunity comes about. By that I mean, try not to miss the monthly all-points fellowship meeting, and so on."

"That's right," Dad said entering the kitchen, having missed the whole point of the conversation. "That meeting is on Domineek afternoon three weeks from now. I would imagine there will be a lot of private discussion as to the new king."

"Andrae the First," Mother added.

"Dad, do you think things will be better under Andrae?" Maria asked.

"I wish I knew darling. You're close to the news. Have you heard anything?"

"Not much, really. No one seems to know anything about him, not even who he is. There has not been much talk, positive or negative."

"I overheard some people saying that he would probably be no better or worse than Ampli the Fourth," Rosa reported.

"That is just gossip Rosa," Mother retorted. "We have to hope and pray that things will get better."

"That's right," Dad replied. "The problem is that organized crime controls the power and the money, both within the government and outside of it. What can one man do to change all that?"

"But still we must hope," Maria suggested.

"You are so right," Dad replied. "The scriptures tell us to pray 'for kings and for all who are in authority' (I Timothy 2:2). Let's make sure that all of us do that before we sleep tonight."

* * * * *

The days following the king's funeral were somewhat more restrained than usual in the little island kingdom. The splendor of the traditional funeral celebration captured the attention of the people and crime took a temporary breather. All knew it would return with all its ugly fury as soon as the festive atmosphere wore down after many days of celebration. Ronic also knew that the calm eye of the hurricane could be followed by stormy winds of crime as the mobsters seek to make up for lost time.

Ronic, Leonardo, Bruno and Seiss had taken advantage of the festivities to put the finishing touches on their plan to assume power. Even though Ronic was now already the legally constituted king of Androck, this fact would be meaningless unless King Andrae could wield his power in a meaningful way. King Ampli undoubtedly had good intentions, but they were quickly laid to rest by the crime syndicate, or the "element" as it was commonly called. Ronic could never be the puppet of the element. Such a thought was utterly repulsive to him. And so, the long hours of meetings during the many months preceding this moment had finally resulted in a plan. This plan, it was fondly hoped, would bring order out of chaos. In this plan Bruno and his network of "security guards" would play a crucial role.

* * * * *

"It was a humid overcast day which offered itself for the eighth and final day of the royal funeral festivities. The weather was expected to be rainy later in the day, but rain or shine, the last day would see a multitude share in the revelries of the occasion.

Bruno had arisen before daybreak. It was time to put the crucial plan into action. There would be one opportunity, and only one.

The new "Police Principal" made his way to a market place just outside the Rekorda city limits. The markets had opened at 7:30 AM to serve the early risers before the heat of the tropical day. Precisely at 7:35 AM he walked behind a small grocery store and was joined by 6 of his most highly trained security team dressed in plain clothing of various descriptions. Two additional members of that team had already gone on duty at their usual posts. These two wore the familiar tan and brown uniform of the private security force which was familiar to everyone throughout the city. They normally began work at 7:15, fifteen minutes before the businesses opened, and today they started work at their normal posts at the usual time. One of the uniformed members of this team regularly protected a small grocery store for Bruno's licensed

security agency. The other post was about 500 meters (three tenths of a mile) closer to the city limits where the second guard kept a watchful eye on a small fenced-in area covered by a tarp to protect the wares from the rays of the sun, and from theft. This concession was run by a businessman who sold fruits, vegetables, newspapers and various household items.

After a few minutes' briefing, Bruno and his six employees in plain clothes dispersed among the crowd. At 7:48 AM a large white police car approached the grocery store. The car was driven by a uniformed police officer. In the rear seat was Police Principal Alex Nostol, popularly known as "ha nishtol", "the corrupt one," an obvious play on words in the Androckie language. As the car passed the little grocery store Bruno's guard put his hand-held two-way radio to his lips and said, "Unit 19 to command post, contact established."

When Bruno heard this he removed his hat and wiped his forehead, a signal which alerted the 6 to slowly make their way to preappointed locations near the newspaper concession. Two of the 6 had a special duty to perform with their automobiles. The other 4 did their best to blend in with the other early morning shoppers.

As the plain-clothesmen 'shopped' in the area, Nostol's car stopped in front of the concession. Getting out, as was his daily custom, he walked to the market, grabbed a copy of the morning edition of the Rekorda Times, and without paying for it, as was also his usual custom, turned to go back to the car. At that instant the uniformed security guards and Bruno skillfully overpowered Nostol, snapped handcuffs onto his thick wrists and a gag over his mouth. At precisely the same instant, one of the plain-clothed guards slipped into the rear door of the car which Nostol had left ajar, and unlocked the front door locks, first on one side of the car and then the other. Two more guards suddenly entered the front of the car and overpowered the driver from both sides. It all happened with such surprise, speed and precision that the driver didn't even try to reach for his weapon. As an added, but, as it proved, unnecessary precaution, the two other members of the guard detachment had simultaneously moved their automobiles into position tightly blocking the front and rear of Nostol's car.

Nostol and his driver were hustled to the rear seat of their car and were secured as common criminals. One of the security guards then drove the car away and the two prisoners became the first inmates of the River Street warehouse. This facility had been secretly outfitted by Bruno under the guise of a high security storage facility.

As soon as the white police car left the open market, the proprietor of the market reached for the telephone to inform Police Central. But the phone had 'unexpectedly' gone dead. He turned around to seek another way to notify the police but stopped helplessly. Facing him squarely was the formidable 'guard' which 'protected' his store.

Bruno then spoke into his 2 way radio, "Security One to all units, phase one complete, take your appointed stations."

At Police Central the patrolmen were assembling for inspection along with the police brass on duty that day. Their normal routine was to receive preliminary orders, sign out for their weapons and stand inspection. 'Mysteriously' the key to the arms room could not be found. But since the Police Principal was due to arrive at any moment, the captains decided to hold the formation anyway. As the duty police stood in formation, unarmed, in the large room, the doors burst open and a flood of Bruno's security guards descended upon the formation, taking everyone by complete surprise.

One of the captains instinctively went for his weapon but quickly aborted the action when he recognized that the odds were definitely not in his favor. The room was teeming with Bruno's security force. All patrolmen were searched and temporarily fettered to a long iron railing.

At that point Bruno entered the room. "Please give me your attention," he began in a commanding voice. "By authority of his royal highness, the new king, his majesty Andrae the First, who is by Almighty God established as protector of all inhabitants of Androck, I have been appointed as the new Police Principal, to rid the kingdom of the longstanding menace of crime and violence, to prepare the way for decent and industrious people to pursue an orderly and productive way of life. As proof of that appointment I present to you this document bearing the official tribal imprint of the seal of the Royal Office, and the signature of his royal highness, **King Andrae the First.**"

A spontaneous cheer broke forth from the security contingent, and even from some of the police who were chained to the iron bar. Official police badges were then distributed to the security guards. The arrested police officers were transported to the high security warehouse for careful interrogation, and the security guards were dispatched to prominent public places to distribute copies of a pamphlet which briefly explained the policies of King Andrae and the new anti crime laws and the associated penalties for disobedience. The remainder of the police, those already on patrol, were likewise rounded up and interrogated. Because of the festivities virtually all the island's police contingent were in Rekorda City, which made Bruno's 'roundup' all the more effective.

CHAPTER 16 - REACTION

An anxious day was in store for Ronic and the three members of the royal cabinet. How would the people react to the changes? Ronic was optimistic on that score, although he had heard that the television report of the takeover had been decidedly negative. Of course, this media as well as the radio and newspaper were under the firm control of Hugh Trumbore. Ronic biked his usual route to the bookstore and tried to gauge the expressions on the faces of those whom he passed. Some were happy, even gleeful, others somber. "Not much consistency there," he thought. Although it was not his usual habit he decided to stop by a news stand for the morning paper.

"Good morning," he said to the news dealer. "And how is the news today?"

"Terrible!" was the reply. "It couldn't be worse." Looking around to be certain there were no other listeners he resumed more cautiously, "Looks like the new king is a barbaric butcher. Look at the headlines."

Ronic bought the paper, and without responding to the dealer, clutched the paper nervously and stared incredulously at the headlines as he slowly made his way to his bike. The headlines read,

**KILLER "KING"
ANDRAE THE FIRST
RUTHLESS DESPOT MURDERS POLICE FORCE
GAINS ILLEGAL POWER
BARBARIC LAWS ANNOUNCED**

Ronic was both shocked and angered to the point of being barely able to navigate his bike. Although he was the new king he suddenly had a sickening feeling of being completely powerless.

When he arrived at the store Bruno and Leonardo were already waiting in a car across the street. Pretending to ignore them in case any 'observers' were present, he opened the store. The two entered a few moments later. Ronic locked the door behind them and together they went to the basement "Office of High Command." Sarah would soon arrive to open the store for regular business.

"I presume you have seen the headlines sir," Bruno offered, glancing at the crinkled newspaper in the king's left hand.

"Well, you're the one who did the killing - if any was done," Ronic retorted.

There was a long silence when no one dared speak. Finally Ronic said, "Bruno, I really, - I didn't mean that seriously. It's just that I'm extremely upset by these headlines."

"The real question is what we are going to do about it," Leonardo advised. We can ignore it and just sit back to see what happens in the days ahead, or we can arrest Trumbore, or we can...."

Just then the buzzer sounded, indicating that Sarah wanted Ronic upstairs. Ronic climbed the stairs and entered the store. It was Seiss. Ronic escorted him downstairs to join the rest.

"I was hoping for better press coverage," Ronic said to Seiss, still smarting from the headlines.

Seiss replied, "I guess neither of us were prepared for this blast. But really! What else did we expect from a Hugh Trumbore, number one crime boss, narcotic father, and sower of the seeds of iniquity? Why, he is practically a blueprint of the wicked one himself."

Ronic explained, "We were just discussing what we should do about it. It seems to me we are in a no-win situation. If we ignore Trumbore's blast he might succeed in turning what is left of public opinion away from us. He might successfully organize a coup and overthrow us. If, on the other hand, we seize his paper without an overwhelming quantity of hard evidence against him we would be accused of destroying the freedom of the press."

"But," Leonardo interjected, "freedom is not unlimited license. A person is 'free' only when subjecting himself to established law. If I decide to drive my car on the wrong side of the road I soon find how short lived my 'freedom' is. Only when submitting myself to authority can I be free to pursue life. If I drive on the wrong side of the road, (an act of anarchy, not freedom), I crash into others. My so-called 'freedom' hurts others; it infringes on their freedom to use the road lawfully. I also suffer the consequences of a destroyed automobile and possibly a broken body. If Hugh Trumbore's communications empire destroys the chance for Androckians to enjoy freedom in the near future, then we have every right to stop him."

"Your point is valid," Seiss replied. "But the public has only heard one side of this situation, Trumbore's side. A significant percentage probably believes those headlines are true. They may think we indeed did murder several policemen. They might not be easily convinced that we have the right to silence a detractor. I think our biggest potential asset, one we dearly need to build upon, is public support. We've got to show the public we are all for them. We have to counter Trumbore's propaganda machine with the truth."

"Gentlemen," Ronic began, "we've done a lot of talking and planning for this moment. It would be an unthinkable tragedy to let this never-to-be-repeated opportunity slip away from us. It is finally time to put wings on our words and make a now-or-never effort to carry our goals to completion."

"Seiss, you are Communications Principal. I want you to busy yourself communicating our real goals to the public. The public has lived with crime so long they have almost come to accept it as a way of life. You have spent months preparing for this moment, writing stories of what it might be like in an Androck with crime under control. You have written about that happy family who will soon walk safely through the streets. You have described the shopkeeper whose profits will increase and enable his family to afford adequate sanitation and medical care. You have all these pamphlets printed and ready to do their job. You distributed a few yesterday after our takeover, but now is the time to get them into the hands of every man, woman and child. We have money. Hire the jobless, or whatever you have to do, to hand out your pamphlets. Try to buy time on Radio, Television and in the newspaper. If Trumbore won't accept your material, which I am sure he won't, then find someone who can set up their own radio station, their own newspaper. We'll give them a license, and protection. We'll also pay them for the time or space."

"Several weeks ago I met with an amateur radio operator who lives near Norte Pointe," Seiss replied. "He has a powerful AM transmitter which, at my request, he has already converted to a public frequency so we can counter Trumbore's Comm-Centrale propaganda. Of course, there is Mr. Trucker who printed all the leaflets we began distributing yesterday. I'm sure he will continue to help us."

"The radio transmitter is a great idea," Ronic observed, "and get someone ready to do live news feeds to the transmitter. We need results immediately, or it's all over with. I do like the idea of bringing Heinz Trucker into this. I get all my bookstore printing done by him. A good man. I think he would love to print a little daily newspaper with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And Bruno, now that you have access to government files, dig through them. Find out everything there is to know about Trumbore and every member of his 'element.' If something is bad they have probably done it. Develop an ironclad case against them. Then we'll get them for dope, murder, prostitution, whatever crimes they are involved in. The radio, television and newspaper businesses may then just take care of themselves."

"And Leonardo," King Andrae continued, "test out the courts as soon as possible. The judges are all on notice that bribery means automatic termination of their positions. Also, you might want to investigate their past judgments to see whether they have been bought by the element. Push through test cases. Find the honest judges, if there are any. Get rid of the dishonest. Appoint new judges who know what truth in judgment means."

Leonardo replied, "We have enough evidence on Alex Nostol, the former Police Principal, to send him to a thousand years in prison under the old laws. What if I bring him up on a few minor charges to start with to see what the judges will do with their old friend?"

"Sounds like an interesting suggestion to me. However, when you find a bad judge,

instead of going after him immediately, why don't we leave him alone for the time being so as not to alert the other judges. Go through all of the judges with similar trials. Then suddenly clean house. And do provide a legal staff for Bruno. He will need lots of help preparing cases for trial."

The meeting lasted about an hour. When it was over each left a few minutes apart to avoid suspicion by passersby. When all had left, Ronic remained at the table in deep thought, his head supported by his hands.

Later that morning Ronic decided to visit the Rekorda Times. Maybe he could learn something that Trumbore was planning. Maybe Maria could help, but he knew he had to be very careful about revealing anything to her or to others. The whole future of the kingdom depended on it. His life, and good intentions, would be all too short lived if Trumbore were to discover the identity of King Andrae the First.

When lunchtime approached, Ronic found himself climbing the famous granite steps of Trumbore's modern media center. What a shame such a building was devoted to the propagation of falsehood. Inside, things seemed no busier than usual, but joviality seemed to be definitely lacking. He quickly went to the place where Maria worked. She was not there. He was about to find someone so he could inquire of her whereabouts, but at that instant he heard Maria's voice behind him.

"May I help you? Oh it's you. What a pleasant surprise."

"Miss Schulte, so nice to see you again. And please call me Ronic."

"Only if you call me Maria," she said with a smile.

"Agreed then," Ronic replied. "I don't want to keep you from your work, but wonder if I could talk with you a few minutes during your lunch break?"

"All right," she said slowly, "I'll be finished here in about ten minutes. I have my lunch with me."

"Great, I'll wait outside for you by the steps."

"I'll be there."

Ronic left Comm-Centrale and purchased a sandwich from the market down the block. Conspicuous by his presence at the market was one of Bruno's security guards, proudly sporting an official police badge of the Kingdom of Androck.

Maria appeared at the front door of the building just as Ronic got back from the market and had begun climbing the granite stairs. "How about walking over to that little park by the stream Maria?"

"Sounds fine to me Ronic."

As they walked along Ronic wished he were just an ordinary citizen again, but reality gnawed away at him. Not knowing how to start the conversation he came out with the unconvincing words, "These surely are momentous times aren't they?"

There was a pause, then Maria replied in a low voice, "I suppose 'momentous' is a pretty good way to describe them." There was another pause and she continued. "I hope things work out for the better."

Ronic was quick to reply, "We both know 'All things work together for good...for those that love God.' (Romans 8:28) I think if we could only see all that is involved, rather than just the surface of things, we could better understand what that means."

They had arrived at the brook and both sat down on the lush grass and prepared to eat their lunch. Ronic said, "Someday, Maria, there will be a park bench by this brook."

"It would be nice," she replied. "Ronic," she said hesitatingly, "what do you think about what has happened? I mean, what do you really think?"

"I was just about to ask the same of you, Maria."

Maria looked about to see if anyone was within earshot. "... I just don't know. I'm so confused. I simply don't know what to think, what to believe. We all had such high hopes for the new king, but the newspaper articles...."

"Do you believe Mr. Trumbore's editorials? Do you have faith in the man? Do you think he is an objective journalist, who has told the truth?"

Maria looked down and slowly shook her head. Ronic could read her thoughts. She knew Trumbore's personal regard for truth was highly questionable. She had heard rumors that he might be involved in some questionable activities. But rumors are rumors not facts. She did not want to defame the man in the absence of factual evidence against him.

"It would be nice to think Mr. Trumbore was objective and honest. When I first took my job at Comm-Centrale I was under the impression that the paper was reasonably factual, but now -- yes, I do have doubts. Serious doubts."

"Maria, in the days of King Ampli the paper had little to lose by being factual. Ampli was a puppet king who did not oppose the established order, even though he knew it was corrupt. Now that a new order has come, a government which intends to fight crime and corruption, Trumbore has a lot to lose, especially if he is part of that corruption."

Carefully choosing her words Maria replied, "I know a lot about myself. I try to be honest with myself and with everyone else. I was always completely honest when I was working at the news desk. I got a lot of good comments on my work from my editors, until I started a journalistic investigation of some aspects of police corruption. At that point I suddenly found myself transferred to 'Home and Garden.' But because I was raised in a home where honesty was simply taken for granted I find it difficult to adjust to the fact that everyone else does not share those values. In my heart I find it hard to accept that other reporters do not have the same regard for truth that I have. Yet, it is quite evident "truth" does not mean the same thing to everyone.

"And what about Trumbore's personal article about the 'Killer King'?"

"I desperately want to believe the new king is a good person. If the article turns out to be false that would be the ultimate injustice for the king and for our entire society. But I can't make a decision based only on what I would like to believe. It has to be on the basis of factual evidence. It has to be this. And so far I personally have no basis in fact to either support or condemn the king."

"All right then," Ronic countered, "Were the people supposedly killed when King Andrae assumed power real or fictitious people?"

Maria thought for a moment. "Are you saying it was all made up?"

"The bigger the lie the easier it is to convince people. Honest people, like yourself, tend to give others the benefit of the doubt. When we see something in print we say to ourselves that if it was not true it wouldn't be published. "Maria," Ronic continued as he looked soberly into his friend's eyes, "let me tell you this. I have it on good authority that there were absolutely no deaths, or even injuries, during King Andrae's assumption of power. And all this was done in a strictly legal manner."

Maria studied Ronic's face intently, then asked slowly and quietly, "How do you know all this?"

Ronic had said far too much to avoid triggering Maria's inquiring mind and he knew it. Stumbling, in an effort to hide his true involvement with the situation, he came out with, "I, er... Maria, I hear a lot -- on good evidence. But some of those things would best be unspoken, for the safety of both of us. At least for now. Someday soon we will hopefully be able to talk more freely. Suffice it to say, I am absolutely sure King Andrae is an honest and gentle person. I also understand he is a fellow Christian. He is trying his best to be a good king. Maria, I am absolutely convinced Trumbore's editorial about the so-called 'Killer King' was pure and utter fiction. Please pray that King Andrae will be able to survive these early difficult days, days made especially difficult by the lies Trumbore has been printing."

Maria had studied Ronic's face all the while he had been speaking, and was

convinced of his sincerity. "Thanks. What you've said is just what I needed to give me hope for the future of our island. I'm going to conduct my own investigation to check out the names of those who supposedly perished."

"Be careful Maria. This could be a dangerous thing to do, especially if you happen to uncover more than you bargained for."

"If Hugh Trumbore is consciously printing lies I am afraid I could not continue to work for him."

Ronic answered, "Maria, don't make any hasty decisions. You may find that in a short time the truth will all come out. Trumbore's days may be numbered. If you hold on for just a little while longer, until you have the right facts, things will work out for you." Ronic wanted to tell her Trumbore was under intensive investigation, but could not for fear of revealing his connection with the new regime.

They both continued to talk about several matters, but soon it became time for her to return to work. As he escorted her back to the Center Ronic began to realize how different she was compared to Leona, how she made him feel so at ease. She did not share the shallow emotionally driven mind of Leona. Instead, Maria projected the image of staunch honesty, of objectivity, depth, and a deep regard for the rights of others. "She's my type of person" he thought.

After he left Maria at the Comm-Centrale news monopoly he continued to wonder how many people had been unsettled by Trumbore's false propaganda. Maria had seemed genuinely relieved just to talk this matter through with someone who could give her a glimmer of hope. She had long suspected that a black cloud overshadowed Trumbore's credibility, but out of fairness to Trumbore she had resisted having her opinions governed by anything less than hard evidence. But that evidence would be quite difficult to uncover. Trumbore had done a masterful job of hiding the extent of his corruption.

"But someday she will know," Ronic thought. "Someday everyone will know. It has to be that way, - someday."

CHAPTER 17 - THE TUNNEL

Back in the office Ronic and Sarah worked on the quarterly inventory, a job which, while somewhat tiresome, was occasionally necessary to appraise the health of the business, and the extent of the inevitable shoplifting. Yes, family and children's books were sometimes stolen, even Bibles. Some thieves would even attempt to return their stolen merchandise for a 'refund.'

As they meticulously went through the books it became obvious once again that Ronic's translations had been as popular as ever. "Too bad," he remarked to Sarah, "I couldn't spend 16 hours a day translating these writings into Androckie."

They had been at the inventory about an hour when the phone rang. Ronic answered. It was his publisher Heinz Truker from Nord-Lac chapel. Heinz wanted to make final arrangements for publishing a small booklet that had been translated from the English. After settling on the color of the cover, the number of copies to be printed, the price and the expected delivery date the two talked for a few minutes. Heinz expressed his delight at how the government was beginning to give him quite a bit of welcome new business, and that he might be able to survive in the printing trade after all. Ronic smiled to himself all the while Heinz spoke.

Nearly an hour later, the two of them finished the inventory and Sarah had left for home. As Ronic pattered around the store, the telephone rang, and Bruno was on the other end.

"Sir, remember what we discussed a few days ago?" he asked in a low voice.

"About your aunt Nell's weight problem?" Ronic answered. There had been a hundred and one things the two of them had discussed and Ronic was no mind reader.

"No, no. The Gotham City thing, the Bat Cave."

"Oh, you mean the sewer pipe?"

"That's it, and the next time I see you I will have the most interesting information about that so-called sewer pipe."

As Ronic hung up the telephone he pondered what that most interesting so-called sewer pipe information might be. For now he made his way to his basement office to prepare his newspaper advertisement. Now that he was being swamped with royal duties it was more important than ever to avoid suspicion by making sure he continued with his usual activities, including placing weekly advertisements in the paper.

Two days later the three members of the royal cabinet met with their king for a routine get together. High on the agenda was Hugh Trumbore's continued vicious attack on the new regime, the refusal of many judges to cooperate, and the facts Leonardo was documenting against them.

When it appeared that all that could be said about these concerns had indeed been said, Ronic turned to Bruno. "And how is the sewer business?"

Puzzlement crossed the faces of Leonardo and Seiss as they looked first at Ronic and then at Bruno.

Sir, you are no doubt aware that the government buildings which house the police station and other offices have a very special section reserved for the king, namely the royal meeting chambers?"

Ronic nodded while the others continued to glance quizzically.

"I don't know if King Ampli ever used those chambers, but his father, Ampli III, would occasionally hold important meetings there, especially when relations were deteriorating with his cabinet, and the 'element.' I have been trying to get into that complex of rooms for several days, but the key is nowhere to be found. I finally brought in a locksmith who has done work for me in the security business, and he was able to open the lock and make a key. When I inspected the rooms I found another door in a small foyer directly beside the main chamber. After a considerable search I found the key to that door well hidden in the main chamber. I opened that door and, lo and behold, one each 'sewer pipe.'"

The others smiled dismissively, but Ronic continued to listen attentively.

"Except," Bruno continued, "the so-called 'sewer pipe' is not a sewer at all. It is a completely dry, artificially illuminated tunnel. I walked the length of that tunnel and at the opposite end is a stairway leading up to the inside of that ancient tribal memorial around the corner from your bookstore. I think the whole thing was an escape route for the king. And, the tunnel passes right in back of your store. What if...."

"A connection?" Ronic interrupted.

"Precisely," Bruno continued. "A connection to the office in the basement of your store."

Leonardo and Seiss finally understood the implications of the newly discovered 'sewer pipe,' and the help it could be in their plans for the kingdom.

"My dad is a contractor," Seiss suggested.

"How about those who work under him?" Leonardo asked. "Can they be trusted?"

"Maybe we won't need them. My dad normally operates the machinery himself anyway, and, among my few talents is the ability to lay bricks."

"Go to it then Seiss, only do be speedy and do be careful. By the way, we're going to need more space in the basement for meetings, office, and equipment. Let's use the opportunity to add an extension to the basement to within a meter or so of the sewer, or tunnel."

Seiss excused himself from the group to make a telephone call to his dad. A few moments later he returned announcing, "All is ready. The work will begin tomorrow. The contracting business is quite slow and Dad needs the work. I will explain the job to him as soon as our meeting breaks up. I will include the extra basement space you mentioned, including electrical work and telephone lines. We will also include a high tech security system to monitor activity in the tunnel. I think it would also be wise to have a strong metal door built into the tunnel wall leading to the short passageway that will connect your basement to the tunnel. I suppose we could even place a few false "doors" at random locations along the length of the tunnel to give the impression that all such "doors" might have been installed at the time of the original construction years ago, and were intended for "service use" as a decoy for any unauthorized person who might venture into that tunnel. I think the final connection between the basement and the tunnel could all be made underground, out of sight of prying eyes.

The next day work did indeed commence on the extension. Fortunately the work did not attract more than cursory attention, and in a few days the earth was back-filled over the new area. To avoid any public suspicion, Seiss had his dad build the extension about 1 meter shy of the 'sewer.' In fact, the excavation, by Seiss' design, did not expose the tunnel construction at all.

When work was completed, and Seiss' dad had removed his machinery from the construction site, Seiss himself, with Ronic's help, excavated a narrow 1 meter wide by 1 meter long tunnel to the walls of the 'sewer.' Finally, borrowing his dad's masonry saw, an opening was made into the long connecting tunnel, and the new connection to the tunnel was lined with cement.

It was decided to install high security doors at both the exit from the bookstore and at the portion of the tunnel leading past the bookstore to the tribal memorial, just in case someone might force their way into the memorial. Bruno's expertise then added communications and a security system for the tunnel, for the basement and for the entrance to the king's chamber in the government building complex.

While work on the basement extension was in progress Ronic continued his usual

schedule of work. Late in the afternoon each Wednesday he delivered the paid advertisement and devotional message to the newspaper for publication, and this Wednesday was no exception. Today, however, he decided to visit the newspaper office earlier in the day. He had one more reason for visiting Comm-Centrale, namely, to ask Maria to dine with him at Lac du Mange restaurant this Friday evening. After submitting his advertisement he found Maria busily pasting up ads. She was delighted to see him and when he asked her for the dinner date the beaming smile which imprinted itself on her face told it all. She was absolutely delighted to accept his invitation. Ronic made it a point to pay a visit to the Schulte family that evening to ask permission for the date, a custom followed by those in the Christian fellowship.

The next afternoon passed slowly for Ronic as he contemplated the dinner date still two days away. He had purchased some furniture for the new "royal office" in the underground extension of the store, and had kept it in the living room of the house proper. The counsel would meet with Ronic in a few minutes and he would obtain their help in moving the items down to the new room. He had also purchased some acoustic material so he busied himself installing it beneath the basement ceiling. Eventually his sore muscles began to complain about the treatment they had been receiving.

Soon the appointed time for the meeting arrived. Bruno, Leonardo and Seiss would, for the first time, be coming through the tunnel. As Ronic glanced at the security system that monitored the tunnel he could clearly see the trio on the closed circuit TV system as they began their walk through the 'sewer.' When they arrived a password was given and Ronic unbolted the door.

"And how was your walk through tunneldom?" Ronic quipped.

"Oh, you mean the scenic route, sir?" replied Seiss.

Ronic chuckled.

"I think this 'sewer project' is going to prove very worthwhile," Bruno added. "We enter a conference room in Gouvernave, and unbeknown to anyone we meet with you here."

"Or, I could meet with you there," noted Ronic.

"Before we get down to business we will need some chairs and a conference table. It so happens they are upstairs ready to be brought down. Guess who are appointed to be the furniture porters tonight?"

A few minutes later everything was in place and the counsel held yet another meeting with the king.

When the meeting had adjourned the trio began to leave by way of the tunnel. Ronic wished them well and added to Bruno, "By the way, on Friday evening I won't be home." Ronic tried to keep Bruno knowledgeable as to his whereabouts. "Do you happen to know a girl by the name of Maria Schulte?"

"No sir, can't say the name rings a bell."

"I know her," Seiss interjected. "She attends the Northside meeting."

Ronic continued, "A few weeks ago I was introduced to her and became rather impressed with her."

"Don't tell me, sir! You asked this Maria for a date?"

"Seiss, your sharp mind continueth to be perceptive, my dear friend."

Smiles crossed the lips of the royal counsel.

"That's right. How could I possibly have declined to ask her?"

"My good wishes to you sir," Bruno added. "And where will you be?"

"We expect to dine at Lac du Mange about 6:30 or so, and I would guess that by the time I leave her off at her place I might get back to my house about 9:30 or 10:00 PM."

"My very good wishes as well," Leonardo added. "But, your Majesty, remember, 'Beauty is vain....' (Proverbs 31:30). But, then again, if all the other qualities go with it...."

"Time will tell," Ronic replied as the trio exited into the tunnel."

CHAPTER 18 - THE EXPLOSION

Thursday morning was quite windy and cool. The radio reports told of a storm skirting the island. Ronic decided to take the bus instead of risking being blown from his bike by an unexpected gust of wind. As he walked the 10 minute trek to the bus stop he bubbled with excitement because of tomorrow's dinner date with Maria. He might be getting to the store later than usual because of the unpredictable bus schedule, but hopefully early enough to open it on time. At the bus stop were 3 women, two of which looked vaguely familiar to him. Perhaps they were from the area near his house and he had seen them at some time in the past.

The bus was late. No surprise. He looked at his watch impatiently. The gusts of wind thoroughly ventilated his hair. The bus route followed Banmerk Road which was not far from the shore. From the bus stop he could see the surf through one small break in the trees. He recalled the time when he saw King Ampli visiting the beach many years ago. The once youthful King Ampli, the bearded old man, the ailing king, and now dead and gone. This brought to mind the lines, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last." Time has a way of rushing all of us through the road of life, one way or another. He hoped his own pathway would be happier and more fruitful than Ampli's.

He peered down the road again. Still no bus. He again looked at his watch. Time was not standing still. Finally, the bus rounded the distant corner, progressed down Banmerk Road and slowed for the stop. He could see the bus was already packed. "Guess a lot of people wanted to avoid the windy bike ride," he thought.

When the doors opened the 3 women laboriously pressed their way onto the bus, followed by Ronic. Suddenly there was shouting in the rear of the bus but he could not see anything because of the crowd. Finally the driver closed the front and rear doors and we were on our way. After we had gone a couple of blocks word finally filtered its way to the front of the vehicle. Some woman had grabbed another's purse and had exited via the rear door at the bus stop. When the driver heard what had caused the commotion he simply said, "Oh well, that's life as usual, what can you do!" and kept going.

A few minutes later the bus stopped at Gouvernave, the stop nearest the bookstore. Ronic got off along with many others, among them Sarah.

Ronic greeted Sarah. She had been sitting about half way back in the bus, and did not see the trouble either. The two of them walked briskly towards the store.

"Has anything like that happened before?" Ronic asked.

"Many times. At least this time the victim wasn't injured."

Ronic thought about that and replied, "I really think the new king should try to do something about that type of thing."

"I surely hope he will Ronic. It is all so discouraging. One doesn't dare carry much money for fear it will wind up in some criminal pocket. At least they replaced those corrupt police officials," she reflected as they arrived at the store.

Later that afternoon Ronic was working in his basement office when the automatic signal began silently flashing, indicating that someone had entered the tunnel. Ronic looked at the monitor and switched between cameras to gain a better view. It was Bruno. "He's taking a chance that I would be in the basement to let him in. Wonder why he didn't call first?"

Soon Bruno reached his destination and was admitted to the basement office.

"Surprise," Ronic said.

"Sir, there has been a serious incident, an explosion at the telephone building on the north side of the city. One telephone craftsman in the sabotaged area was badly injured and has been taken to the hospital. A few of the women in the front office were shaken up but are none the worse for their scare, but telephone service will be out for a major portion of the city."

"Do they expect the man to live?"

"We don't know much yet. We were quite fortunate to have a unit driving by just after the explosion. Two men were seen fleeing the scene. When our car stopped they tried to escape, but my men were too much for them." Bruno had a satisfied look on his face. "One of them confessed."

"Good job Bruno." Ronic then continued in a soft, slow and deliberate voice. "**Make sure a thorough investigation** takes place. Let's have facts -- incontrovertible facts. Let's get - get - **get** whoever is behind this, whether it be Trumbore or someone else. And let's get them with an ironclad case. Does Leonardo know about this?"

"He sure does. He is the one who obtained the signed, witnessed confession. He was just beginning to interview the second person when I left to inform you."

"I wondered why you didn't call before you paid me your visit. How long before telephone service can be restored?"

"We don't know yet. The damage was quite extensive. The engineer thought

perhaps a week or so but he didn't want to be quoted."

"Thanks for telling me about this. I hope that poor fellow who was injured pulls through. As to the building, sometimes bad news has its bright side. At least it will if it helps relieve the kingdom of the Trumbore headache."

"Sir, I'll do everything in my power to make that event happens soon."

With that Bruno exited into the tunnel as he had come and Ronic continued with his work. Upstairs neither Sarah nor the customer she was helping had the least notion of what had taken place in the basement beneath.

Friday was the day Ronic had been looking forward to. The dinner date with Maria would be very special to him, because she impressed him as a very special girl. Not only was she pretty, she was a very nice person. And, she had been brought up in the right environment, in a Christian home and in the Christian meeting. It would be unlikely that there would be any ugly surprises as they got to know one another.

Ronic continued to worry about the injured man, but at the same time was tremendously excited by the prospects of his dinner date later that evening. The two elements tore at his mood. But any excitement he had about his date that evening was unceremoniously blasted by the headlines he saw when he stopped at a newsstand to buy a paper. The captions read:

NEW REGIME BLOWS UP PHONE BUILDING ONE MAN KILLED

The story began:

"The new king, continuing his reign of terror, exacted a terrible price, a human life, destruction of equipment and great inconvenience to all who are now without telephone service. For what? Merely to punish a business because it owed two month's back taxes. Why the human life? It just so happens that the dead worker opposed the wanton destruction sought by the new regime. How convenient! The evil masterminds if allowed to continue will eventually destroy every life, like a cancer spreading to healthy cells of the body. . . . It is time to reject this heartless rule. It is time to rise up, to overthrow it. . . ." etc. etc.

"Trumbore does it again," Ronic muttered. "I wonder if that is true about the man dying?" Putting the paper in the carrier Ronic mounted his bike and steered a course for the hospital.

A few minutes later he was at the admissions desk. No, the man had not died, but was still in critical condition. No, Ronic could not see the person. He was under

heavy police guard. Yes, he could have the man's name and address. Ronic wrote it down. Yes he could speak to the police guarding the patient but he probably wouldn't learn anything. Ronic thanked the clerk, climbed the stairs to the proper floor and ventured down the hall. Sure enough three policemen guarded the door. Sure enough he could not enter, and sure enough he could not learn anything from the policemen. He wandered down the gleaming hall slowly, pondering the situation. Soon he became aware that someone was walking behind him, although he gave it little thought. The steps behind him became closer. Ronic walked closer to the wall to allow the person to pass. The steps were now at his side. It was Bruno.

"The man had been beaten up before the explosion took place, and he was plopped down and left for dead near where the explosive charge was planted," Bruno explained in a hushed voice, not looking at Ronic. As they continued to walk he added: "He is in bad shape. No way to know which way it may go."

"Did you see the headlines and the write up," Ronic asked in the same quiet manner?

"Yes," was Bruno's only reply.

The two walked around a corner into another hallway. Several nurses were going about their business.

"Thanks," was all that Ronic said as they separated.

Stopping by the admissions office Ronic determined that the injured man's wife was at the hospital critical waiting area, awaiting word about the condition of her husband. Ronic made his way to that area. Only one person was there, a woman in her forties. She appeared to be under considerable stress, waiting for news, good or bad.

"Madame, I'm Ronic from the southside meeting of Christians."

The woman looked at him anticipating he might be the bearer of news.

"I just want you to know that I am praying for your husband."

"Oh, thank you so very much," she said tearfully. "But why? Why did they do it to him?"

"I wish I knew Mme.," Ronic replied sincerely. "Do you know who did it?"

"I guess the new king. At least that's what the papers say."

"Would it help if I told you that I knew for a fact that the new king did not cause this harm? That the new king knows about it and is praying very sincerely for your husband, and for you?"

The woman looked directly into Ronic's eyes and studied his face. As she did so she could see that he was doing his best to hold back his tears.

Finally she said, "Thank you my young friend. God has sent you to me with that message of hope."

Ronic then said a brief prayer for her husband's recovery, kissed the troubled lady sympathetically and left.

The rest of the day dragged on, with Ronic alternately thinking of the injured man and his faithful wife, of the false headlines in the Rekorda Times, and of the coming dinner date with Maria. It was a day of contrasts to be sure.

CHAPTER 19 - MOONLIGHT ROMANCE, MOONLIGHT RIOT

Friday passed at a snail's pace as Ronic looked at the clock a thousand times while awaiting his first date with Maria. Finally, on what seemed like the thousand-first time he had checked his watch, the day, the hour and the minute finally arrived.

The taxi ride to the north block took about five minutes. While the taxi waited Ronic knocked on the door of the little white house. Maria answered the door, displaying that same beaming smile Ronic experienced two days before. He unconsciously fancied whether this might be a continuation of that self-same earlier smile, one that might never have worn off.

Mr. and Mrs. Schulte both enthusiastically approved of Maria's dinner date and told the young couple to have a nice time. Ronic talked with them for a few minutes then the two of them left in the taxi for Lac du Mange, where one could get a very nice meal for a modest 50 kuklos.

The eight-minute ride to the restaurant seemed to take only seconds. When they arrived at the restaurant he paid the driver and they were seated at a nice table on the open-air patio overlooking the moonlit lake behind the building. It was a still night and the moon's reflection from the black shimmering surface of the lake could be seen through the palms. It created the kind of peaceful scene one could contemplate for hours without tiring of it. Yet, it was not the reflection of the earth's satellite in a shallow body of water that held Ronic's attention that evening. As the two of them spoke with one another, each in turn eagerly absorbed the words and nuances of the other.

Ronic found her to be a very pleasant girl, beautiful in her own quiet way. No, she might never have her picture on the cover of a beauty magazine but she was, nevertheless, very attractive. Yet, it was her inward self, her personality and her staunch set of values that had begun to make a deep and lasting impression on Ronic. He could not help but compare Leona's hollow outward beauty (but inner coarseness) with Maria's honesty, loyalty and the stunning inward beauty of the heart. His conclusion? "No comparison at all."

Ronic noticed that the warm tropical breeze gave a magnetically beautiful motion to Maria's hair from time to time. As the evening progressed from appetizer, to soup, to entrée the two learned one another's likes and dislikes, their experiences from childhood to adulthood, their joys and sorrows, hopes, aspirations and fears. And both immensely enjoyed one another. In this context the food became almost an intrusion as their happy conversation continued.

"Tell me about your mom and dad, what they are like," Ronic asked as they waited for the entrée.

"Well, Mom and Dad are really quite different types of people. Dad is very strong willed. I guess it's the German in him. I don't mean that in a derogatory way. I think, for him, it is a virtue. Some of that has probably rubbed off on me. I think we need to be strong willed about some things these days, and I could tell you of a couple of times when his ability to stand firm and true spared the whole family a lot of unpleasantness."

"I can well imagine that in this island," Ronic agreed.

"Mom, on the other hand, is almost like a psychologist. When any of the kids had a problem, Mom sensed it, and always seemed to be able to suggest a solution. Even when we didn't like something, Mom somehow made it seem not so bad."

"Like getting a cold?"

"That's true. Whenever we were sick she would read to us, and when she had run out of the few books we had in those days she would make up stories out of her head."

"And which stories did you like better, those from the book or those from your mom's head?"

"Usually the ones from her head, because she often tried to mould the story to fit our particular circumstance and it made us feel real good."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters beside Rosa?"

"Oh yes, I have a younger brother, Raymon, who is studying abroad."

"What is he studying?"

"He wants to be a computer engineer. He says the time is coming when computers will be indispensable, even here on Androck."

"I don't know that much about computers, but in the industrial countries they seem to play a very prominent roll. In some places stores cannot make a sale if the electricity goes off. That's how dependent they have become on them."

As their happy conversation continued throughout the evening Ronic took great pains to avoid revealing his secret. If Hugh Trumbore, who was Maria's employer, or if any one of the multitude of notorious people on Androck were to have even the slightest suspicion of Ronic's true identity it could be catastrophic for the kingdom. It might mean the end of hope for reform, the death of Ronic and his friends, and now, even the death of Maria and her family. No, the secret must remain sealed for many days, weeks, and perhaps even for months or years. It

would all depend on how things might work out. Besides, it would not be fair to force this complexity upon a happy person like Maria. At least at the moment.

By choice Maria was simple in needs but studious in intellect, perceptive in soul and stalwart, perhaps even stubborn, in standing for what she believed to be the truth. Throughout her life she had refused to succumb to peer-pressure. She was her own person and had an inner charisma that occasionally made others want to emulate her. And even when others declined to do so it was very clear she did what she felt was right even though she might be the only one in the crowd to follow her principles. Yes, sometimes it bothered her that others made fun of her for not participating in various unwholesome activities. I guess they thought she was some kind of religious nut. Why else did she not do the drugs others were hooked on? Why else did she not steal that pair of socks when the store clerk was not looking? Why else did she not corrupt her pure Androckian speech with the stained words which had become all too popular? Apparently, unlike Leona, whose beliefs were the outcropping of a vain self-will, Maria was an uncompromising soldier, a Christian soldier. While she preferred quietness for herself, wishing that others be in the spotlight, she had no problem accepting challenges of any kind when the situation warranted. While part of her job at the paper presently involved computerized typesetting and copy paste-ups, she had majored in journalism in a French university and had graduated with honors. She used to be a news reporter, but recently, because the content of some of her articles conflicted with the editorial slant of Hugh Trumbore, she was no longer a reporter. Her present job was to author a regular column on home economics, gardening and nature. She hoped someday to get back into news reporting or editorial commentary if the climate at the Times should improve.

Ronic observed that among her many qualities, Maria had a way of discerning beauty in commonplace things that others simply missed. Pointing to the lake as they were awaiting the dessert menu she said, "See how the water shimmers in the moonlight, and reflects the splendor of the stars of heaven. Think about it Ronic, that lake is the abode of graceful birds, colorful fish and creatures of many species. It is an exquisitely beautiful palace to those of us who take the time to look, but for those creatures that live in it, the lake is simply the place where they exist. They know no other life. They can't understand the beauty and the design of creation we can see in it. Yet, how often we are just like them. We pass through potentially beautiful scenes of life, yet fail to take the time to notice them and let them enrich our lives. Is it because we are so burdened with the worries of our own every day existence?"

Ronic well knew those words could aptly apply to himself. And this was not the only time this happened. Several times Maria seemed to hit the nail on the head inadvertently identifying some of Ronic's personal weaknesses. It was almost as if Maria had a prior knowledge of his manner of life.

But as the waiter approached the table with the dessert menu it was the 'here and now' that, for the moment, distracted the minds of two beings who had rapidly become pleasantly infatuated with one another. The specialty of the house? Why Tropical Chocolate Ice Cream Cake, of course. No need to see the rest of the menu, or take the time to be distracted more than absolutely necessary from absorbing each other's every move, every word, every smile, every wish. Ronic became involuntarily drawn toward Maria as water surrenders itself to a sponge. And Maria was irreversibly drawn toward Ronic as matter is irreversibly scooped up in space by a gravitational singularity. The moment was precious. The scene was beautiful. The seeds of love had been sown, and ever so faintly, but ever so surely, had begun to germinate.

As Ronic looked at Maria, and Maria at Ronic, something familiar appeared in his peripheral vision that vied for his attention. For the moment he resisted the interloper, as one whose vision was locked to the object of his devotion. But, though he consciously tried to block the intrusion from his mind, its persistence would allow no such thing. Ronic glanced to the side, in the direction from which the challenge to his attention had come. It was Bruno! Coming back to reality Ronic thought to himself, "Oh no! What is he doing here? Why . . .?"

As soon as Bruno saw he had gotten Ronic's attention he made an almost imperceptible motion toward Ronic, and abruptly turned and went out the door. Ronic knew he must follow. Maria sensed that he was looking at someone behind her. Turning to Maria he said rather abruptly, "Please excuse me for a moment Maria," and reluctantly made his way to the door. Assuring the waiter he would be back in a moment to take care of the check he left the restaurant and made his way to Bruno's car.

"What is it?" Ronic said with a perceptible hint of annoyance in his voice.

"It's a riot at Gouvernave. A mob has gathered to blow up the government building. It's retaliation. They believe the newspaper lies that we blew up the telephone company building yesterday. They demand that the two men we apprehended be released. If we don't release them they will blow up the complex. They have guns, explosives and possibly other things. We have to be careful. Some have brought children. They have fired shots at us and one of my men is dead."

Ronic was stunned. "Oh no! I hoped it wouldn't come to this. Who is behind it?"

"We're not sure, but with communications still in disarray anything can happen. Seiss and Leonardo are on the scene. I hate to ask, sir, but, could you possibly...?"

"All right, give me a moment and I'll be right back."

Ronic quickly turned toward the restaurant. He was reassured by the line of taxis patiently waiting for fares and knew that Maria would be safely transported home. As he entered the door his mind raced between what Bruno had just told him and what he would tell Maria. The luscious dessert awaited his return to the table, as did Maria.

"Is something wrong?" Maria correctly surmised.

"Maria," he began, "I'm so sorry. Something has come up."

Ronic reached into his pocket for some money and continued in a hushed voice, "As much as I do not wish to, I must leave immediately. I know this is all very improper, but please finish your dessert as if nothing has happened. And," looking longingly at his own untouched ice cream cake, "finish mine too. Enjoy it for me. Please. Here is money for the check and for the taxi ride home. The taxis are waiting outside. I can't take the time to explain now. Please accept my apology Maria. And, by the way, I would just as soon you didn't mention this to anyone. The fact that I must leave you alone is extremely embarrassing to me."

Maria smiled weakly, not totally hiding her disappointment.

"God be with you till we meet again Maria. I hope it's real soon."

"Thanks for a wonderful evening Ronic. I do hope things work out all right for you tonight."

"You're a great person Maria. I have to go now. Thanks for being so understanding."

As Ronic parted from Maria she added, "God go with you Ronic."

As soon as Ronic appeared at the restaurant door Bruno started the car.

"Sorry I took so long Bruno." Ronic got into the car and stared blankly at the darkness through the window as Bruno drove down the street. As the car sped through the night Bruno checked in on his radio. More shots had been fired. Police reinforcements were beginning to arrive. Bruno increased his speed. "We can't let this mob get their way Bruno," Ronic instructed seriously. "If they do, it could be the end of the rule of law and the beginning of the rule of anarchy."

The car was rapidly approaching Gouvernave. Bruno strained to see what was happening but the buildings blocked his view. At last they were at the scene, and he drove the car to a spot where they could clearly see the government complex from a relatively safe distance. Police cars were scattered in front of them. A hundred fifty meters away was Gouvernave. In front of the building was a crowd

of about 1500 people angrily shouting slogans and obscenities, throwing stones at the windows and occasionally firing shots at the police vehicles.

"Face all cars directly towards the scene and turn on your lights," Bruno commanded via the radio. As the lights came on one by one he flipped the switch on his radio to "PA", picked up his microphone and announced slowly and distinctly, *"Your attention please!"* The powerfully amplified voice boomed toward the crowd. *"In his majesty's royal name. You must disperse immediately. Be advised that your government did not, I repeat, did **not** destroy the telephone company building. This act was done by the criminal element to discredit your new king. Do not support that crime. His royal majesty calls upon you to disperse immediately and go to your homes in peace."*

The mob appeared to converge closer together as if some were considering what kind of response to offer. Soon, a barrage of shots was fired toward the lights of the police cars.

"Give them one last chance," Ronic said as he looked at the crowd through Bruno's binoculars. "I see the women and children you mentioned. Tell them to let the women and children go."

As soon as the shots died down Bruno took the microphone again.

*"Attention! This is your last chance! I repeat, this is your last chance! Do not risk the lives of the women and children. Mothers, take your children and run **NOW!** Otherwise they may be killed!"*

"Ronic looked intently through the binoculars. "Thank God! Some of the women are running with their children."

At that moment three shots were fired by someone in the mob. "Oh no!" shouted Ronic excitedly. "They shot them!"

"Shot the women?" Bruno demanded.

"One or two women are down, and, yes one is a child."

"Bruno switched his microphone back to the police band and gave the order, "Secure your masks! Acknowledge when ready!"

One by one police units reported when their gas masks were in place.

"Fire tear gas charges!"

A barrage of tear gas grenades was fired into the crowd.

"Block escape routes, move in, but hold fire unless absolutely necessary."

The police moved in among the gasping crowd as a unit. Bruno had trained them well in the preceding months. Soon the weapons were confiscated. Some who were not utterly incapacitated by the gas attempted to flee, coughing and gagging as they did so, but the police net was too dense. All were forced to lay down in a group while a crew went to each hacking rioter tying their hands behind them. Long ropes then joined groups of about 25. Those women and children who did not flee were placed in custody to be interrogated later. The police, under the skillful guidance of Bruno, had not used their weapons, but the shots of the mob had seriously wounded two women. One child was dead. The medics were on their way.

As the gas dispersed, the police removed their masks. Only then did they see the crates filled with explosives and cans of gasoline, enough to level all government buildings twice over.

"Will your jails hold all these?" Ronic asked Bruno.

"No way sir. I think we're going to have to set up some kind of temporary facility outside the city."

"Where are Seiss and Leonardo?"

Bruno picked up the microphone. "Unit FIVE SUGAR and unit FOUR LOVE from unit ONE."

A few moments later the responses came, "FIVE SUGAR." It was Seiss. "FOUR LOVE" came the response from Leonardo.

"Report to this unit immediately."

When the two arrived they got into the rear seat of the unmarked cruiser.

Without formal greeting Ronic barked the orders in a way that surprised everyone including himself. "Make sure this is thoroughly investigated. I want to know who is behind this, and I want to know it **'yesterday'**. And I want to know who fired the shots that resulted in injury and death. Leonardo, determine the criminal history of each person -- man, woman or child. I want each speedily brought to justice according to the new law. By now you know some of the honest judges. Use them. Seiss, we've got to prevent a second wave. If Trumbore's paper comes out tomorrow with its inflammatory lies we may have a repeat of tonight, or even worse."

"What do you suggest sir?" Seiss inquired. "Close the paper down?"

"I honestly don't know what to suggest," Ronic answered, his tone beginning to mellow as mental exhaustion began to take its toll. "Think about it. That's your job."

"What if I publish a true account of what really happened and distribute it free on the streets?"

"Then get going with Heinz on it now. It needs to be distributed at the break of dawn before public opinion is galvanized against us. I'm sorry to lose my cool. It's just that things are not going the way I hoped they might. This 'king' business is not all it's cracked up to be."

"Sir," Ronic's friend Leonardo counseled, "it is not working out as we all hoped, but, if you recall our many planning sessions, it is working out as we expected. It's just that we are not achieving our goal of tranquility sooner than we had planned for."

Leonardo always called Ronic 'sir' when in company of the others even though in private he was his closest friend.

"Why don't you be the 'king' for awhile Leonardo. Let me just go back to being a lowly bookseller."

Leonardo chuckled. It was the first relief in the evening's tension. "Sorry sir, but the will of God and the commission of Ampli are not that easily transferable."

Ronic forced a slight smile, which came out more like a grimace on the left side of his face. "I've got to go see Maria to try to explain my rude departure somehow. What time is it?"

"It's nearly 11:30 PM sir," Bruno replied. "What would you tell her that would not give you away?"

"It's that late? Guess I'll have to see her tomorrow. What to tell her? Anyone have any suggestions?"

"I do hope you don't intend to tell her who you really are sir. At least, not yet," Leonardo offered.

"Not 'yet'?"

"Well, er, I guess I mean that you have only known her a short while. It would neither be wise for the kingdom nor fair to her to give her that information until, if it should ever come to that, you are ready for full commitment to her and she to

you."

"Do you want me to tell her there was a sudden illness in the family, or some lie like that?"

"Now sir, you of course should not lie. Perhaps the less said the better. If this girl...."

"Her name is Maria," Ronic interrupted.

"If Maria is a true 'woman of worth' (Proverbs 31), and I have, you will pardon me sir, made inquiry as to her and have received a very good report...." Leonardo looked at Seiss as he said this. "Then she will understand. She will trust you. For the time being, however, I recommend that you tell her as little as possible, and make it up to her with another dinner date, or, better yet, many, dinner dates."

"I like that idea Leonardo. Yes, I am sure, very sure, she is a true woman of worth. And I would like to have many, many, many, dinner dates with her. Only I'm not going to tell Bruno where I'm taking her the next time."

All laughed approvingly, knowing Ronic was not serious.

"Leonardo, please take me home."

Ronic got out of the car and into unit FOUR, the unmarked cruiser he had come from. As soon as the door was closed the king was on his way home.

CHAPTER 20 - BAD PRESS

Ronic decided to see Maria at the newspaper office before going to work. Ascending the memorable steps of the Rekord Times the thought crossed his mind about all the falsehoods printed by the paper, and the utter immorality of its chief publisher Hugh Trumbore. Inside the building he could see the hallway leading to Trumbore's office. "The hall of iniquity" he muttered under his breath. But the hall he chose to walk down had a far happier thought for him. And there she was working hard on some project. Hearing footsteps she turned around to see Ronic and met him with a pleasant smile.

"I take it you are at least not utterly displeased with me?" Ronic said with a cautious smile.

"Your ice cream cake was delicious. Especially that warm chocolate syrup which lusciously flavored the rich cake and delicate home made ice cream."

"I guess I really deserve your teasing." Ronic sensed his mouth was beginning to water. "Bet you actually wanted me to leave just so you could have my dessert."

"Your timing was superb Ronic."

"You know, Maria," Ronic lowered his voice and began in a more serious tone, "it's not everyone who would react as nicely as you did. I left that restaurant last night with a very good feeling about the kind of person you are. I'd better let you get back to work, but just wanted to stop by and say 'thanks for being the kind of woman you are.'"

Maria blushed, and added, "It's easy, because of the kind of man you are."

"How about another, hopefully, uninterrupted, dinner date next Friday evening?"

Maria smiled, "I'm all set. But how about you joining our family for dinner after the meeting tomorrow. Mom is a great cook."

Ronic looked at Maria and the two of them smiled. After a few seconds Ronic responded, "I'll plan to be at the Northside meeting tomorrow. Take care Maria."

"You too Ronic."

Ronic turned to go and spotted a copy of today's edition of the paper on the table next to Maria's desk. He had been so intent on making sure all was well with Maria after his ill-mannered performance last night that he had forgotten to buy a paper to see how Trumbore treated the story of the riot. The headline:

**POLICE FIRE INTO CROWD OF
DEFENSELESS WOMEN AND CHILDREN
7 KILLED, DOZENS WOUNDED**

Ronic felt both anger and satisfaction. "It's too bad your boss never learned the meaning of truth," he said in a hushed voice.

Maria somberly shook her head as if to say, "I'm afraid so," then looked at Ronic and stated matter-of-factly, "You were there!."

There was a long pause in which Ronic tried to guess how much Maria might know. Finally he said softly, "Maria, I would appreciate it if you would not tell anyone we had this conversation."

Maria studied his face. "I promise," she added with a reassuring smile."

Ronic reached out and put his hand on Maria's. "God be with you."

"And with you too," came Maria's sincere response.

The telephones were still out of order on the north side of the city, but 1:00 PM had been decided upon for a meeting of the Royal Counsel, and soon the meeting was in progress. Leonardo gave the report.

"Sir, both saboteurs have now confessed and have independently implicated the same instigator, a certain Juan Lopez. We suspect Lopez is a hit man for Hugh Trumbore. We're checking that out. In the meantime, we have uncovered definite evidence of connections between Trumbore and several of the judges."

"Buying favorable decisions?"

"Precisely sir, and for substantial sums of money, and on very important cases. We are drawing up a list of charges and expect to have a roundup in a week or two."

"When will you have enough solid evidence to put Trumbore out of operation for, say 150 years or so?"

The counsel smiled at their king's query.

"We already have about half that number of years in possible charges, but we need a few more weeks to piece together new evidence. It seems each new fragment of evidence uncovers several new leads, and we want to get the whole network rather than a chunk."

"Bruno, some people seem to believe the press reports about the rioters, that they are

being tortured. Please level with me."

"Sir, that is pure fabrication. The mob was transported to North River where they were given the task of building a fenced-in enclosure and facilities."

"A concentration camp Bruno? That's what both the foreign and local press call it."

"By no means. A concentration camp is a camp in which hostile civilians are collected to prevent them from giving aid or information to an external enemy. The people we have collected are known lawbreakers by the standards of any reasonable court of law. Some of these are murderers, who have been officially charged with their crime. They will be given due process of our law. True, they are in a prison, an outdoor prison. We will be happy to welcome the ICRC for an inspection of the prison at any time. By the way," Bruno continued, "we are beginning the process of interrogating each one of these people very thoroughly. We already have several who independently admit to having been paid by some individual unknown to them to participate in the riot."

"Are you showing these people photographs of known mobsters so they can identify particular individuals?" Leonardo asked.

"We are collecting photos and will be starting to do that tomorrow."

"You mentioned the charges being formulated against the corrupt judges," Ronic said, glancing at Leonardo. "What about honest judges? Have you been able to find *any* honest judges? And are they in any danger from the element?"

"There seem to be a few judges who have resisted corruption. And, yes, I am very concerned they could easily become victims the instant the rotten apples are arrested."

"Bruno, do you have any way of protecting them?"

"Hmmm. That could be rather difficult. Retribution could be directed against their wives, children, parents. Who knows?"

"This is what I think," Ronic began. "If we do this thing piecemeal it could develop into a never ending war of nerves. We arrest this judge, the other side knocks off a good judge. We arrest the hit man, they plant a car bomb in a police car or they kidnap the child of a police officer. It could go on and on and on. Look at what happened in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, --."

"I'm beginning to see your point sir, " Seiss interjected. "What if we continue our undercover investigation. Then, when we have enough hard evidence we have a sudden comprehensive roundup which takes care of most who would create that sort

of mischief."

"That's what I had in mind," the king answered.

Bruno and Leonardo also liked the idea.

"By the way, Seiss," the king said, glancing toward the propagandist, "What have you done in the way of countering the bad press we are getting?"

"Well sir, we distributed several thousand copies of our pamphlet this morning. I have also sent several articles to the Times and to the TV news center requesting their help in making known the law of the land. As expected, their response has been to simply write articles of their own referring to the new statutes as 'barbaric interdicts' and to issue a call for widespread civil disobedience. Because I've gotten nowhere with the press I have started a house to house flier distribution campaign. I am making use of my budget to hire some jobless people to do this. We did find one person who took our pamphlets and got paid for handing them out. We discovered that he had dumped the material in a dumpster, and that's the last we saw of him. But, in general, the campaign seems to be going well."

"How is the response?"

"It's a bit early to tell. These people had heard only one side of this and now they are hearing the other side for the very first time. I hope that once the big roundup takes place the tide of the war of truth against darkness will prevail."

"We all knew from the beginning," Leonardo reminded, "that this would be the roughest period. As I've said before, we've just got to hang in there somehow. If we do I am confident we will see a dim light way out there at the end of the tunnel, and the light will get brighter and brighter."

Musing on that word the king and his counsel ended their session. The three departed by way of the passageway, and Ronic returned to the bookstore for a brief appearance.

"Someone stopped by the store to see you," Sarah reported when Ronic approached the sales counter. "He didn't say who he was though. He did mention that he attends Northside chapel and knows of you."

Ronic acknowledged her message, but his mind had not completely disengaged from the somewhat unsettling meeting with the counsel.

On the first day of the week, called Domineek, Ronic attended the Northside meeting and went for dinner with Maria's family. The entire Schulte family liked Ronic and he got along well with them. Herman Schulte had been the person who had stopped by

the bookstore to see Ronic when he was absent.

The following Friday found Maria and Ronic enjoying one another's company at El Toro, the quaint Mexican restaurant just a few blocks from Maria's home. After the order was taken by the waiter the two of them settled back in their chairs for an evening of quiet conversation and relaxed dining, something Ronic sorely needed to offset his hectic schedule.

"I'll try my best to stay to the end tonight," he told Maria with a smile.

"I understand that the fried ice cream is rather good. You wouldn't want to miss it like you did the chocolate ice cream cake last week," she quipped.

"You would have to mention that mouth watering thing. Tell you what. Sometime let's go back there just for dessert. We'll each order two servings."

Maria laughed. "You must not forget a balanced low fat, low cholesterol, low sodium, low sugar diet."

"But just once?" he pleaded.

"I guess it would be fun."

Ronic dipped his corn chip in the salsa. Suddenly the potency of the sauce found its mark as he was seized by a coughing attack. Maria, concerned at first, smiled when Ronic came up for air and eventually recovered his composure. "They say one is supposed to mix just a tiny bit of that one with a lot of this mild one."

"I guess I got the hot shot tonight," he replied in a hoarse whisper.

"It's a wonder you have any throat left Ronic."

"I probably won't after tonight."

"I think I'll just stick to the chips with mild sauce," Maria joked.

"By the way, Maria. Did you really eat both desserts last week?"

Maria laughed, and left the question unanswered. "By the way," she said after a few moments. "Dad visited your store again yesterday and was disappointed that you weren't around again."

Ronic didn't know how to answer that. He obviously didn't want to say, "Oh I was probably in my Royal Conference Room meeting with the three members of my Royal Commission." He finally came out with, "Oh, that's really too bad that I missed him

again."

"He was quite disappointed."

"I would have liked to have seen him too, and shown him the store. Well, hopefully there will be a next time. Have you ever visited the store?"

"No, but it's the first place I intend to go shopping... but only if you will be there."

"No promises these days I'm afraid. But if you will tell me when you're coming I'll make it a point to be there. Or we can walk over on your lunch break. I'll let you buy out the whole store if you wish. This way you'll make me rich and I can retire in my easy chair."

"Then I wouldn't have any money, just a lot of books."

"But books are storehouses of treasure, more so than the money used to buy them."

"Ronic, you would almost make a good book seller."

"I'll have to try it some time. Right now I wouldn't mind some of that fried ice cream."

As the evening wore on both young people enjoyed the friendship and fellowship of one another's company. And when it came time for Ronic to drop Maria at her house that evening, both of them, without saying it, recognized that each had become a comfortable part of the other's life.

CHAPTER 21 - BEAUVOIR OVERLOOK

Hugh Trumbore's bad press had spilled over to the international news wires and the infamy of the new scene in Androck had taken root in foreign soil. Knowledgeable sounding editorials were written about the "Ruthless Reign" of the new despot by correspondents who had never set foot on the island. Many of these respected members of the media did not even know where Androck was located on the map. Good news is often not newsworthy. But a good mass murder, a natural disaster, or even a coup d'etat on an insignificant island could excite the public, especially if brutality and tyranny are part of the news spin. After all, a good juicy story translates into a windfall of cash in terms of sales of newspapers, magazines and television time. Make the money now, and check on the true facts later, if at all.

At any rate, a very few foreign journalists, attracted perhaps by the colorful editorials appearing in competitive papers, finally managed to set foot on Androck. They were busily looking for dirt to expose, and because not much else seemed to be happening elsewhere in the world they decided to concentrate on the little tropical island. Seiss had handled the journalists very well, but most were not really interested in hearing about the lofty goals of the new regime. They were looking for people who felt repressed, and, of course, they found them, particularly among members of that large network known as the 'element.' And they found them in the outdoor prison, which was described by one reporter as "The King's Unconscionable Concentration Camp."

One of the journalists seemed to be different, however. He was from a large foreign news magazine. After carefully and objectively interviewing Seiss through an Androckian interpreter he made an unusual request. "I would very much like to interview your king, King Andrae the First."

At first Seiss replied that granting such a request would be totally out of the question. But the journalist persisted. "From what you have told me," he went on, "your government claims to espouse many noble principles. Would it not help the success of your effort if the stature of my magazine were to give a clear unbiased report on it? I would agree to certain reasonable restrictions as long as the facts in the article are not suppressed or falsified in any way."

Seiss thought about it. The idea of an interview with the king had its merits. This was an internationally known and respected weekly news magazine, and an internationally respected reporter would be conducting the interview. In addition, the journalist's stipulation about not allowing the officials of Androck to massage the facts to make them appear favorable somehow put Seiss on notice that if the interview was denied it could be construed that the new regime had something to hide. An interview would also have its serious risks. The correspondent might write a negative article. Or, the king's secret identity might be compromised.

Seiss sat in contemplative silence for several seconds. Finally, he lifted his eyes from the table and answered, "Let me discuss this with others and I will get back to you."

As soon as the journalist left the office Seiss was on the telephone with Leonardo relaying the request. Leonardo had the same thoughts as Seiss as to the potential value and risks of such an interview. "Let's bring it up at the session this afternoon."

At the session, code word for a meeting with the king, Seiss presented the request. All agreed about the potential value of such an interview, as well as its risks. Two foreign governments, with widely differing ideologies, had made Androck the focal point of their rhetoric. Each had made veiled threats to "put down this problem" in order "to prevent the disruption of world peace." Each, of course, had its own idea as to how to accomplish this objective. One government suggested it might send troops. Another talked about a naval blockade to initiate a trade embargo that would "starve" the Androckian government into "submitting to international standards of human rights." Obviously, the grave concern was not with Androck and its admittedly serious troubles. This tiny island nation only served to provide an excuse for various nations to engage in an international power struggle between themselves. The object of the posturing was not to solve true human rights abuses, but to use the very visible situation to put a spin on each power's particular ideologies in order to achieve their pet political demagoguery. Instead of preventing the 'disruption of world peace' such international power struggles were actually creating this disruption. An interview followed by a hopefully favorable editorial by this respected magazine could help diffuse the international situation and, thus, mitigate the desire of foreign powers to intervene. Androck already had a badly out-of-kilter foreign trade deficit, and the last thing she needed was a foreign naval siege.

So, in spite of the risks the interview was a "go." The big problem was how to maintain the secrecy of the king's identity in a face-to-face interview. Should the king appear behind a partition, or with his face masked?

It was agreed that this reporter was probably trustworthy. But strict precautions must be agreed to. There must be no cameras or tape recorders. The reporter must promise to make no sketches now or at any future time. No description of the age, physical characteristics or appearance of the king could be made. Seiss would review the reporter's initial draft for accuracy, although he would not "edit" it, only make suggestions. Finally, the correspondent, on behalf of the news weekly, would grant permission to allow the article to be translated into Androckie and distributed without charge throughout the island.

One hour later both Seiss and Leonardo went back to Seiss' office at Gouvernave. His interpreter called the journalist at his hotel and invited him back to the office to discuss the proposed interview with the king. When he arrived the Journalist readily agreed to the stipulations and signed a legal agreement drawn up by Leonardo in the Androckian language with an English translation made by the interpreter. Once the

document was signed Seiss asked through the interpreter, "All right, are you ready for the interview?"

"You mean now? You Androckians surely are efficient," the journalist replied. "Well I'm ready at any time."

"Then bring your note pad. There is a car and driver waiting for you."

"Correction! I mean, you Androckians are super efficient."

Seiss escorted the journalist to a small somewhat dented car parked in front of the government complex. As soon as the two approached the automobile, a uniformed chauffeur opened the rear door for the journalist. "You know where to take him," Seiss said to the driver.

Soon the journalist was being whisked through the city heading north toward the airport while the journalist busied himself making notes. Occasionally he would momentarily glance out the window but then return to his notebook. As they approached the airport the journalist spoke. "I do hope you are not putting me on an airplane," he said to the driver. As soon as he said this he felt a bit foolish because there was no one in the car to translate his words for the driver.

"Oh no sir," came the chauffeur's immediate reply in an oddly accented English. "We are headed for Beauvoir Overlook."

Surprised that the driver spoke English the journalist took a greater interest in him. "Have you lived in this country all your life?" he asked.

"Oh yes, except for my university degree abroad. There are no universities on Androck. Just a junior college."

"Tell me, how bad is the crime here? Really!"

"Very bad indeed! I have been robbed on the street twice already this year alone. Last year I was injured during a mugging and could not work for two weeks. Our house has been broken into three times in the last five years. Most vendors make frequent visits to the bank to avoid having a lot of cash on hand. Many many people are addicted to drugs and will do virtually anything from robbery, to prostitution to murder to get their supply. Yes, the crime rate, up until now has been very bad."

The journalist made notes as the driver spoke. Looking up from his note pad he asked, "Then why did you return to this island. Why did you not try to stay overseas?"

"All my family and friends are on Androck. That too is where my heart is. When the

backbone of crime is broken this beautiful island will be at peace with itself. At that time visitors like yourself will not ask what attracts us back, because they themselves will find it difficult to return to their own homelands after spending just a few days here."

"And when do you think the backbone of crime will be broken?"

"Soon, I hope and pray. Come back to us in just a few months. You will see the change. And right now do you see that cliff? That is Beauvoir Overlook, 'Beautiful View Overlook' you would say in English. Just another minute and we'll be there."

The road turned to the right as they approached their destination. As they made their way the driver slowed as the car approached a small group of security personnel along with the Police Principal, Bruno. "You will have to get out for a moment sir," the chauffeur said as one of the security officers opened the rear door.

After he had stepped out one of the security officers, under the watchful eye of Bruno, searched the journalist and his portfolio case. Finding no weapons or tape recorders Bruno motioned him back to the car, and sat himself alongside the journalist in the back seat. Leaving the security personnel behind to prevent any traffic from entering the Overlook the car wound its way up the cliff. Soon they came to a large mostly flat area that had a stunning panoramic view of the sea and of the seashore. As the driver came to a stop he said, "Here we are."

The chauffeur got out of the car along with Bruno and the journalist. The chauffeur opened the trunk and Bruno helped him remove a portable table and three chairs. These were quickly set up on the Overlook. Bruno said to the driver in Androckian, "Tell him to have a seat and wait here." The driver relayed this in English. Bruno and the driver then drove on behind a large rocky rise and got out of the car.

"Well we made it this far Bruno."

"Let's hope it goes well sir," Bruno answered the driver. "Let me help you get into these," he continued, pointing to the official uniform of King Andrae the First.

In a few minutes Ronic was ready, having shed his chauffeur's uniform for his royal uniform. Bruno appeared to be stunned as he saw Ronic for the first time all decked out in royal splendor. The two of them then left the car behind the rise and walked the short distance to the table where the journalist had been waiting. Seeing the two approaching, the journalist arose to meet the king. The king held out his hand to the journalist, and as they were shaking hands the journalist became speechless, recognizing the king as being the driver.

"Oh, I changed my clothing," King Andrae said smiling, "so you would know who I am."

The journalist, King Andrae and the Police Principal sat down at the table and the interview began. The journalist asked the king about a wide variety of subjects, but whenever topics such as the king's hobbies, family life and other personal matters came up the king would simply say, "Sorry, I'm not free to answer that just now. Let's go on to another topic."

The main thrust of the interview, however, dealt with topics having to do with the attitude of the king toward crime and human rights. Was the reign oppressive, were prisoners being ill treated, was the government suppressing the news. On the latter point the king made a convincing case that quite the opposite was true. The island's only newspaper had time and again distorted the news to undermine the king's support. Why had they done this? The king was not able to explain the motives of others. What was the king going to do about it? The king reaffirmed that he believed in the freedom of the press per se with its right to criticize the government, but should the press ever advocate the violent overthrow of the legitimate government its editors could conceivably be subject to prosecution under the law. What about abusive police powers and were the rights of the accused being denied? The king answered, "I recently heard of a case in a foreign country where the police had entered a house with a search warrant to conduct a drug raid. During this raid, they happened to see some expensive stereo equipment they surmised might be stolen. So they looked at the back of the equipment to get the serial numbers. Sure enough, a computer check at headquarters showed the equipment had been stolen, but the courts threw out the charges on the grounds that in examining the back of the equipment, an area not normally in plain view, the police had performed a search that went far beyond the warrant. On this technicality all charges against the criminals were dropped. Let me say up front that Androckians do not understand that kind of legalistic nonsense. Yes, we firmly believe everyone, including a criminal, has certain rights, but a thief is a thief and a murderer is a murderer in Androck, and no 'legal technicality' will convert a murderer into a 'respected citizen' free to commit another offense against society."

"What happens if the Police have gone too far in gathering evidence against a criminal?" the journalist asked.

"The evidence remains valid and the criminal is still guilty, but the policeman has a strict obligation to follow the letter of the law. If he fails to abide by it he will be prosecuted for his action. If a policeman threatens a criminal to get information we still are able to use the information, but the policeman has broken the law which says it is a crime to threaten someone. And he will be punished according to the law for this infraction. This system, by the way, is very effective in preventing gross police abuse. At the same time, an inadvertent legal slip by someone gathering evidence does not prevent that evidence from being used in court. I personally know of one case where an accused person signed a confession. A detective then made some penned notes on the back side of the signed confession. A smart lawyer hired by the defendant was able to get the confession thrown out of court because of this. We Androckians take a dim view of such things. We go out of our way to favor the victim

of crime, not the perpetrator, and not the lawyers.

"What about the reported lack of rehabilitation facilities in your prison system, and, in particular, in the open air facility which is called a concentration camp by some?"

I personally invite you to visit our small prison and our open-air house of detention. Each of them has proper sanitary facilities and healthful meals. We have no gold plated bars in our jails, no spas, no TV, no freedom to vote. There are no ridiculous frivolous lawsuits paid for by the public. Our jails are meant to be places of confinement and punishment, not rehabilitation. May I be so bold as to say that your own country has extensive facilities for the so-called rehabilitation of your prisoners -- libraries, woodworking shops, classes, stereo music and television and much much more at a cost to your people of several times the salary of the average wage earner. And while the murderer is enjoying all these benefits, the family of the murder victim receives no relief money from the government. It is all so one sided, in favor of the murderer, not the victim. Here in Androck, a person convicted for first degree murder may, after a fair trial, be executed, his assets seized and given to the family of the victim. If he had no assets our government takes care of the victim's family. In the case of a non-violent thief, we don't put him in jail. He works to restore to his victim twice as much as he had stolen. That is his rehabilitation. He learns very realistically that crime does not pay, that it costs him. Let me tell you, criminals get 'rehabilitated' very quickly with our system, and, become productive members of society. At the same time, victims of crime are realistically recompensed. And, many such rehabilitated criminals on Androck are thankful at becoming productive members of society. Crime for many had simply become a way of life. They knew nothing else. Now, they have learned respect for others and for themselves, all through the principles of 'restoration' and 'compassion to the victim' which our law espouses."

After his interview had traversed many other topics the journalist stated, "I marvel at the possibilities of your experiment. If it works you will, in the end, save yourselves a great deal of money in prison facilities, and I can see where the incidence of crime could be reduced, as long as you do not use detainees as slaves or infringe upon their rights."

"Our experiment?" the king replied. "No, the principle of requiring the criminal to restore what he has wrongly taken from the victim is as old as the Bible itself. It's just that modern man has invented a 'better way,' a way that costs untold amounts and is totally ineffective in crime prevention and in caring for its victims. Which way is fairer to the victim, and to the criminal? Which way compensates the victim for his loss and, at the same time, gets the criminal out of his devastating hopelessness, trains him, and gives him a real chance for hope and respectfulness?"

"I might add," the king continued, "that in spite of the false reports to the contrary generated by the one and only newspaper on the island, not one life was lost when I assumed the throne, and our police have never -- never been the cause of any death

of our citizenry. Please check out that fact. To cite one example of the false reports, our police suffered two tragic deaths when an uncontrolled mob rioted in front of our government building. A huge amount of explosives was about to be detonated there. The organizers of this riot actually shot two women and one child who had been forced to participate in that riot, and who had attempted to leave the mob and return home when requested to do so by our police. I know, because I was there. This fact has also been established by our court system. But the paper, of course, blames the police for this. They claim police fired into a crowd of defenseless women and children. It simply didn't happen. They said our police killed seven and wounded dozens. It simply didn't happen, and no families grieve these seven because they are still alive. And no wounded required treatment, because this report was pure fiction. But the two *actual* deaths, of our brave policemen, have never been acknowledged by that newspaper."

The king concluded by saying, "I admit that our system of laws is different from those in your country, but I am glad that is the case. Our laws are different because they are better."

When the journalist had finished with his interview he politely thanked the king for his candidness, and wished success to his reign. The king walked back to the car hidden behind the bluff and changed into his usual street clothing. Bruno, remained with the journalist and called on his hand held radio for his car to be brought up the hill. The journalist was then whisked back to the city by the island security while Bruno drove Ronic back to a place in the city where he could be let out unobserved.

While Ronic, or rather King Andrae I, had been at Beauvoir Overlook Maria's Dad had once again visited the bookstore in search of his daughter's suitor. Dismayed by the repeated absence of Ronic he questioned Sarah closely, and determined that in recent weeks Ronic had spent very little time at the store. Mr. Schulte pondered this revelation.

When he returned to his house he mentioned the matter to Mrs. Schulte. "There is something I just don't understand. I have been to Ronic's store four times recently, and not once has he been there."

"Perhaps he may have been on an errand," Mrs. Schulte replied.

"Four times? No, I just have the feeling that there is more here than meets the eye."

"What do you have in mind?" she replied, discerning a negativity in her husband's musings.

"I don't know, exactly, but a person who runs a business usually takes interest enough in that business to oversee it closely."

"Why don't you ask him about it the next time he is over for dinner? It is Rosa's birthday next week. Let's invite him over."

"Could it be he has other things going on? I just don't know. But yes. Ask him. Maria seems awfully sold on this Ronic fellow. I need to be sure of him myself before that relationship develops further."

"Surely you are not implying that Ronic is up to no good. After all, he has a very good report from the brethren at Eastside. You should be careful not to let your distrust for the people of the world spill over to those in the fellowship."

"I don't know what to think. All I'm saying right now is that it doesn't completely add up."

"Like I say, I think you ought to talk to him and alleviate your suspicions before a good boy is wrongly denigrated. I don't understand why you missed him those four times, but I think Ronic is a fine Christian young man. He is good for Maria and Maria is right for him. I think once you talk it over with him he will set your mind at ease." With that said, Maria's Mom turned back to a project she was in the middle of, leaving her husband to ponder his suspicions.

CHAPTER 22 - TRAGIC VISIT

Maria had become more and more troubled because of the increasingly rabid tone and content of the paper for which she worked. Her own "House and Garden" column kept her busy, usually too busy, to concentrate on the rest of the paper, and the distorted news it printed. Nevertheless, it had become apparent to her that something was very amiss. Hugh Trumbore had always been a foul mouthed, egotistical and inconsiderate boss. This fact lessened her enjoyment of certain aspects of her work but it did not prevent her from working there. "After all," she told her sister Rosa, "It would be nice to have a boss who is a believer, but it is not mandatory." Recently, however, the situation at work bothered her more than ever. And, it seemed to get worse with every issue of the Rekorda Times, and with every innuendo which slandered the new reign.

Finally, the whole thing got to her, like the proverbial 'straw that broke the camel's back.' She could take it no longer.

Hugh Trumbore was in his office when Maria knocked on his door.

"Yeah," he grunted, with his nasty smelling cigar stuffed into one corner of his face.

"I need to speak with you for a few moments," She returned."

"So?" he grunted, without looking up from his work.

Maria looked at the disgusting individual behind the desk. "Mr. Trumbore," she began somewhat nervously. "I've reached the point of no return in my job here."

Trumbore continued to look at his paperwork as if to convey the impression that he was not the slightest bit interested in what she had to say.

"I have enjoyed my job at your paper but I now have other, higher, considerations," she went on.

"Like what?" Trumbore snorted still looking at his work.

"Like the truth. Like virtue. Like integrity," she replied with increasing boldness. "Things which this paper appears not to be acquainted with."

Maria had finally gotten Trumbore's attention. A sour face looked up to see who it was who dared to challenge him. "Truth eh? Well blast the truth!"

"Then you admit that your paper has lied and distorted the truth?" Maria countered.

"Truth is whatever you think. And I print the truth MY way! Like *I* think."

"Mr. Trumbore, Truth emanates from God. It is absolute. It is the standard by which all things must be weighed. It is not one thing to one person and something else to another."

"Get off it. You sound like a mentally sick Sunday school teacher, or like one of those ridiculous articles this fanatical bookseller buys space for in my paper. I hate those articles, and the way you talk I hate you too. I wish your readers hated you, because then I would fire you."

"Mr. Trumbore, you very well know that a substantial number of people buy your paper mainly to read my articles on home and gardening. The mailbag is quite clear about that."

"Sad but true! And that doesn't say much for the intelligence of the readers."

"At least you know 'the truth' in this case."

"Shut up lady and get out of here. Get back to your desk and write your garbage articles."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Trumbore, I've come to inform you that I am resigning my position with your paper."

Trumbore spit his cigar onto his desk and his face turned a bright red. "Can't take the heat, eh? Like they say, 'If you can't take the heat get out of the sun.'"

Maria ignored Trumbore's words. "I will supply your paper with fourteen more columns if you wish. Otherwise, I will be gone today. It's your decision."

If you're going to be gone in two weeks you might as well be gone now," Trumbore snorted. "I'll have no trouble whatsoever replacing you. None at all! Good riddance to you."

"Under the circumstances that's my preference also," Maria added. "But I hope for the day when the Rekorda Times will print truth, unbiased news, facts."

"Hah, Truth! Meaningless fables! Facts? Like a chain on your puny brain. You would make a prisoner out of us all, just like you are bound up with the handcuffs of your so-called 'Truth.'"

"On the contrary, Mr. Trumbore, truth is freedom because Christ is 'the Truth.' 'For freedom Christ has set us free' (Gal. 5:1). The truth could also make you free, Mr. Trumbore, if you could believe on the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life."

"Enough of that religious rubbish. Don't try to infect me with that putrid virus. Just get out of here and take your goodie-goodie philosophy with you."

Trumbore followed Maria to the door of his office and slammed it after her.

Maria walked thoughtfully to her cubical and sat down. She was fighting to suppress the tears which were already in her eyes. She had loved her job. Now it had ended. But she had no regrets. She had stood firm in her convictions, and was now willing to pay the price. That is what really mattered. Trumbore might be in control now, but what of his future? And what of his eternal destiny?

"The wicked...are as the chaff which the wind driveth away...the way of the wicked shall perish" (Psalm 1:4,6).

Seiss was walking toward Gouvernave that breezy Wednesday morning. As he passed store after store he thought about the rapid-fire events which had taken place during the days and weeks following the death of King Ampli. Surely that period had resulted in a press of activity for Ronic, Leonardo, Bruno and himself. Ronic had been overwhelmed with counsel meetings, running a bookstore, dinner dates with Maria and weekly Sunday dinners at her home. The times with Maria and her family had been a welcome respite, like a vacation in a far away paradise. Bruno had recruited a sizable number of new security police and had been busily training them in routine crime prevention techniques, sting operations and in the important business of maintaining good public relations. Leonardo was making unbelievable progress in investigating the crime tree of Androck, and Seiss knew he was doing his best to get his message across to the people in an attempt to convince them to support the kingdom. Unfortunately he was having only limited success. "People tend to believe what they read in a newspaper and hear on television more than what they read in a political pamphlet published by the government," he thought.

The foreign journalist who had interviewed the king actually published a rather favorable article in the foreign news magazine and his commentary was translated into Androckie and distributed by Seiss on the streets of the city. Many of the other reporters, however, wrote unfavorable articles, based on their interviews with Hugh Trumbore, who cast himself as a lone voice crying in the wilderness for freedom in an oppressive dictatorship. Photographs of the so-called 'concentration camp' accompanied some of those articles.

Because of his rather limited success in getting the people behind the new government Seiss had decided to have a face to face meeting with Hugh Trumbore, owner of Comm-Centrale, the gigantic radio, television and, of course, Rekorda Times complex. He did not expect success in convincing this corrupt crime king pin to cooperate, but perhaps an interview would provide some useful information which Bruno and Leonardo could use in their investigation against Trumbore. It might even turn out that money-hungry Trumbore would sell space in his paper to publish

government propaganda.

Seiss climbed the impressive steps of the building at Rekorda square. Unbeknown to him, Ronic was at that very moment at the Times advertising desk placing his weekly advertisement and Scriptural article. Somehow Trumbore had never rejected these inserts in spite of his personal disdain for them. It is possible he had never read them and did not consider them a threat to his money centered interests.

As Seiss entered the door he spotted Ronic leaning over a counter across the spacious corridor. Not wishing to be seen together he quickly made his way to the reception area outside Trumbore's office. He was a few minutes early for his appointment and was told by the receptionist to wait until the appointed time.

Meanwhile, Ronic finished paying for the series of articles and walked down the now familiar aisle which led to the one to whom he was now quite devoted.

"Mr. Trumbore will see you now," the receptionist said at last, motioning Seiss toward a door with a translucent glass panel. Seiss walked into the office, the door automatically closing behind him. Sitting behind an untidy desk was the grotesque form of Hugh Trumbore. Seiss was awed by the fact that here, sitting in front of him was one of the kingpins of crime, and enemy of enemies, one completely at odds with the purposes of his beloved king. Seiss seated himself across the room some distance from the desk as if to distance himself from the despicable hulk before him. And then the exchange began.

In another part of the building, Ronic, unaware that Seiss was under the same roof, had in mind to conduct his own interview of sorts. Maria had never brought up the subject of why Ronic had left his dinner date with her, including a delicious dessert. Ronic knew that Maria, being the perceptive person that she was, had correctly guessed that he had been present to witness the riot at Gouvernave Square. She had possibly put more together than was good for her, or for the new dominion. Up until now she had kept this mystery in her heart. Ronic knew she was in no way naive. On the contrary, she had a highly sophisticated sense of perception. But she was also a very practical and sensible woman, and knew that somehow Ronic was not free to discuss the matter. He knew that within her heart she was very curious about the incident, but she seemed to trust Ronic and seemed content to abide by her friend's wish to drop the subject. Such is the nature of friendship, or was it becoming more than friendship? Ronic's impromptu visit with his Maria had to be kept short. After all, he knew that she was paid to do a job, and Ronic himself had no time to waste what with his many clandestine and open activities.

In spite of the unsettling interchange with Trumbore a few minutes earlier Maria smiled when she saw Ronic approach her cubical. She had learned to thoroughly enjoy the security and peace which came to her when her friend was by her side. But her smile could not fully hide the tense events which were revolving in her mind.

Ronic could see it in her eyes.

"Maria," he asked gently, "are you all right?"

She paused briefly, looking into his eyes. "I'm afraid I'm out of a job. I resigned, or was fired, or both. I just could not take the lies anymore."

Ronic smiled sympathetically and put his hand upon hers. "I'm proud of you Maria. You did the right thing."

The two of them chatted briefly, then he left her alone so she could finish getting her desk in order for the last time. As he strolled down the hallway he knew indeed that Maria was not a brainless wishy-washy person who could be blown by the wind. Here was someone who knew who she was, where she was going, and how she was going to get there. "A true 'woman of worth,'" he thought. (Proverbs 31). He was becoming more and more certain as to what his lifelong relationship with his beloved Maria should be. "If only I was merely an ordinary bookseller," he mused. "It would be so tempting, so easy to ask"

At that instant a sudden loud popping noise reverberated throughout the mezzanine by the main doorway to the building. Some of the staff were looking in the direction of Trumbore's office. Out of curiosity he walked that way. A couple of people entered Trumbore's reception area and Ronic followed. Through the translucent panel he could see an indistinct form quickly move across the room. Ronic moved closer to the glass panel in the door. Through a defect in the plastic translucent spray coating he could see the indistinct outline of a large man bend down over a form on the floor, then quickly retreat to the other side of the room. Ronic knew something was very wrong. Putting his eye closer to the glass he could now make out the form of someone lying on the floor. Something about the form was unpleasantly familiar. He moved his eye to get a better look through the scratch in the glass. Ronic was horrified. It was Seiss!

Instinctively, Ronic ran to Maria's desk. "Call 51865," he barked in a nervous raspy voice. "Specify 'code X-ray, Rekorda Times.'" He then ran from her.

Maria could see that Ronic was terribly upset, and made the call.

"Security police" was the answer on the other end of the phone.

"I was told to say 'code X-ray, Rekorda Times,'" she replied.

"Thank you," and 'click' was the only response to that information from the other end. Bewildered by this Maria made her way quickly to the front and saw a crowd gathering in front of the entrance to Trumbore's office. Ronic was nowhere in sight. He had pushed his way through the crowd which had begun to filter into the office.

"He . . . he tried to shoot me," Trumbore explained nervously to the gathering crowd as he fingered a still smoking gun.

Ronic pushed his way to the form of Seiss, face down on the floor, a pistol under his right hand. Ronic remembered that Seiss was left-handed. He noticed that the gun was in an unnatural position. He also knew Seiss did not own a gun. With the aid of a bystander he rolled the limp form onto its back. It was evident from the stains on his shirt that Seiss had suffered a chest wound. He could see that his good friend was still alive, struggling valiantly to breath. With one snap Ronic stripped the clothing from the victim's chest exposing a severe sucking chest wound. Quickly putting his hand directly over the wound he called for a sheet of rubber or plastic. Trumbore watched uneasily but did nothing because of the growing crowd.

Someone found a plastic file folder and Ronic quickly took a pair of scissors from Trumbore's desk, cut a piece from the plastic, and placed it over the horrible wound keeping it pressed tightly to Seiss' chest.

"Somebody probably ought to call the ambulance," one of the bystanders offered limply, glancing toward Trumbore to see if the suggestion would meet with his approval. Trumbore said nothing, but the noticeable tightening of his forehead muscles signaled his displeasure. Besides, the ambulance would take at least a half hour to arrive, and by that time Trumbore's would-be 'assassin' would be dead.

But although no one called an ambulance, just moments later a large commanding figure suddenly burst through the doorway pushing aside the crowd, followed by two men in white carrying a stretcher. It was Bruno. Maria, bless her, had made the call. Bruno looked at the familiar form on the floor struggling for life, and at the form bending over him attempting to save that life. King Andrae the First, sovereign of Androck, applying his rudimentary knowledge of first aid to the stricken Seiss. Ronic looked up at Bruno, then cast a telling glance at Trumbore, then back down at Seiss. The two men in white moved to take up where Ronic had begun.

Surmising what had happened because of Ronic's look and the still warm pistol on Trumbore's desk Bruno instinctively pressed Trumbore over the top of his desk and snapped handcuffs on him. Bruno knew this was not supposed to happen for a few more weeks, but now there was no other choice.

A crew of Bruno's security men had moved in behind the two men in white and efficiently removed all spectators from the office including Ronic, for they did not know who he was. A contingent of security police surrounded the building, preventing anyone from exiting. Within the building everyone was quickly herded into the mezzanine so outside phone calls could not be made. Simultaneously another detachment moved into the radio and TV complex and saw to it that no news of this event was broadcast.

Ronic looked around the crowded mezzanine, and spotting Maria to his left made his way to her. Maria looked pale as she saw Ronic's blood-stained clothing.

"Don't worry about me my hon. I'm all right," he said in an exhausted voice. "Trumbore shot someone," he whispered to her. "I tried to help."

Uneasily at first, Maria put her smooth hand into Ronic's stained hand. They clasped hands tightly, as Maria looked nervously and sympathetically into Ronic's haggard face. "Let's let that business of 'code X-ray' be our little secret," he whispered. She looked deeply into his eyes and acknowledged with a hint of a smile and a nod of her head.

"By the way," Ronic whispered sadly, "I believe you know the man who was shot. It was Seiss Timnar of Northside meeting."

"Oh no!" Maria gasped. "Is it bad?"

"It looks very bad. A chest wound."

"Oh, Seiss Timnar. I hope and pray he will be all right."

There was new action at the door to the office. The security police were clearing a way for the men in white who had Seiss on the litter. Ronic maneuvered Maria to a position near the main doorway. The guard motioned them to keep their distance. The stretcher passed through the door and down the steps to the waiting ambulance. Ronic again edged closer to the door. Bruno, who had followed the men in white, ordered, "This man," motioning to Ronic, "must go with them in the ambulance. He gave first aid to the victim and can give information to the doctors to help them save his life." Ronic responded, "Thank you sir," and began to escort Maria toward the door.

"Only you, not the young lady," Bruno commanded.

Ronic was in no position to argue with his subordinate, and knew Bruno had issued his command to alleviate any suspicion as to the political connection between the two of them.

Ronic squeezed Maria's hand firmly to convey to her what words could not and quickly left the building. Speedily descending the steps he entered the security police car which escorted the ambulance to the hospital.

Maria watched her dear friend disappear down the steps in front of the complex. The words, "Let's let that business of 'code X-ray' be our little secret," ran confusingly through her mind. And the words, "And, by the way, I would just as soon you didn't mention this to anyone. It is all extremely embarrassing to me." "What does all this

mean?" she thought. It was becoming obvious to her that her Ronic had some link with the government, a link he was reluctant to publicize. An ordinary citizen calling for an ambulance would not know to say 'code X-ray' into the telephone. Nor would the security police or ambulance respond that quickly should an ordinary citizen request them. But, of course, that was the way it was under the old regime. She had not had the occasion to call them recently. Perhaps things had gotten better. But why the secrecy? Maria trusted Ronic implicitly, but was puzzled as to how or why an ordinary bookseller might have such mysterious connections.

Just then Maria's pondering was interrupted. The impressive stern man who seemed to be in charge of the security police came briskly from Trumbore's office, followed by Trumbore himself, handcuffed to two security officers and followed by two others. There was a mumble of voices as Trumbore was whisked out the door.

A few minutes later she saw the stern man return and go back into Trumbore's office. Soon a group of nine or ten men dressed in plain clothing entered the building, showed identification to the guards at the entrance, and were ushered into the office. A few minutes later each of those men emerged from the office, with a security guard at his side, and entered one of the side offices. Each of the security guards then returned to the crowded mezzanine and randomly picked people from the crowd to be brought to an office for interrogation. Maria noticed that following their interrogation some of the employees were placed under arrest, mainly editors and confidants of Trumbore.

Eventually it was Maria's turn to be interviewed. As she was escorted into one of the offices the interrogator politely said, "Please be seated," waiting until she was seated before seating himself. "I am going to ask you to fill out a short form, present some identification and answer a few questions. The man handed her a piece of paper which asked for name, address, telephone, age, position at the paper, government tax number and a few other statistics. When she had completed the form and presented several forms of identification to the man, he asked her how well she knew Mr. Trumbore, what her impressions were of him, what she thought of the editorial slant of the paper, and several other questions designed to assess her character. The man then informed her that it was possible the paper might not publish for one or more days depending on whether sufficient editorial staff would be available to run it.

"Technically," he continued, "Mr. Trumbore's assets, including the paper, are being impounded by the government under the law which provides that anyone who commits murder or other violent crime may have his assets seized until the court decides the guilt or innocence of the person. If a person is judged innocent, the assets are returned to him with interest, but if guilty they are retained by the state, until distributed to the victims of crime. Insofar as Comm-Centrale is concerned, the kingdom is forbidden by law from controlling the press. The king believes the media must be free to criticize or support the government in a legitimate fashion. He also believes the citizens of Androck, not the government, should run businesses. In the

case of the TV, radio and publication business the government would attempt to recruit provisional publishers, news directors, etc. so the enterprise does not fail, until Mr. Trumbore's case is resolved. At that point the assets will either be returned to him or sold to the highest bidder. By the way," he continued, "if you know of anyone who might be a temporary editor, or who might possibly fill another position in Comm-Centrale, please tell me now."

Maria thought for a moment and a man from Northside chapel came to mind. "I know a very capable person, a Mr. Heinz Truker, who once published Vox Pop, a fine newspaper, until he was forced to abandon it. Now he runs a small company which does business printing."

After Maria had given the particulars as to where Heinz Truker could be located the man thanked her for her cooperation, issued her a pass and told her she was free to leave.

Similar interrogations took place in the radio and TV sections of Comm-Centrale, with several arrests being made. After everyone had been interviewed and either freed or arrested the interrogators left Comm-Centrale and met with Leonardo to pool their information. Because of the former popularity of Vox Pop three people besides Maria had suggested Heinz Truker as a possible temporary editor. On hearing this Leonardo temporarily excused himself from the meeting, went to a side office and called Mr. Truker.

"Heinz, this is Leonardo, from Eastside."

"Yes Leonardo, it is so nice to hear your voice again. What prompts your call?"

"Heinz, there has been an important development. You used to publish Vox Pop did you not?"

"Yes indeed. For three months Vox Pop told the truth, and was forced to close when hooligans threatened to blow it up if I continued to publish. I could not take the chance that my family or any of my employees might be injured."

"What would you say if you could publish again?"

"It would be so wonderful I would not know what to say."

"Only, the paper you will be publishing will not be Vox Pop, with its small circulation. How would you like to be chief editor and publisher of the Rekorda Times?"

"Now Leonardo, don't tease me with a joke."

"I want you to close your print shop right now, and meet me immediately at my office."

CHAPTER 23 - ROUNDUP

When Maria's telephone message "code X-ray, Rekorda Times" was received, the dispatcher had quietly notified Bruno and a secretly trained detachment. Only those specifically trained to respond to that code would be aware of what was happening. Code X-ray had been reserved for highest priority emergency medical purposes with security backup. As soon as Bruno received the message he shot out of the post like a bullet, accompanied by a car full of special security men. On the way to the scene he had radioed for even more help to appear at the Rekorda Times and Comm-Centrale scene.

"I wonder what that was all about?" one of those remaining at headquarters questioned after Bruno's hasty departure.

Several guesses were ventured, but no news had been received. One of the security guards turned the radio up a little in case some news might be heard on it. The radio continued to play its normal music, and the hourly Comm-Centrale newscast contained no special information. Another guard went to the window to look in the general direction of Comm-Centrale to see if an explosion might have taken place. Seeing no smoke he went to the wall with the city map and studied it for a few moments. Presently he looked around the room. Things were the same as they had been for the past twenty minutes. The clock was humming, the fan was squeaking, the police radio squelch would break from time to time with some routine traffic. "Maybe it was a false alarm," he finally said.

One of them, Lieutenant Arsineo, said, "Don't be so edgy. The captain will have things under control in short order. Or haven't you noticed how he usually gets his way?"

A look of amusement flashed across the faces of the men.

Just then the telephone rang. Arsineo answered. "Yes sir. Immediately sir." Hanging up the telephone he picked up the radio microphone himself, instead of letting the regular dispatcher make the call. "Unit 7 and Unit 8, plan BRAVO. I repeat. Plan BRAVO. Acknowledge."

"Unit 7 acknowledges plan BRAVO." "Unit 8 acknowledges."

Arsineo continued, "Unit 3 and unit 4, plan CHARLIE, acknowledge."

"Unit 3 acknowledges CHARLIE." "Unit 4 acknowledges plan CHARLIE."

The men at headquarters looked at one another. "What are plans B and C?" one of them asked another officer standing nearby in a hushed voice. The other shrugged

his shoulders in ignorance.

Arsineo spoke to the dispatcher. "Alert all off duty officers to report for duty immediately. All security personnel are to assume status 'red alert.' It's time to put plan TANGO into effect. Those of you involved in plan TANGO, let's go. The rest of you men know that during an alert no information is to go out of this room."

"Plan T?" one of the men remarked as they quickly headed for the door. "I thought that plan was to be delayed a few weeks."

"It was," Arsineo replied. "But we were told it could come at any time, and that time has come now."

Piling into four cars lieutenant Arsineo and fifteen other specially trained men sped away in the direction of Hugh Trumbore's mansion. Plan T. Plan TANGO. Plan TRUMBORE. The time had come to raid Trumbore's mansion for evidence of any kind. In what seemed like mere moments the cars arrived at Trumbore's mansion. Bruno had arrived seconds before. The men quickly surrounded the house. Losing no time they quickly forced their way into several doors simultaneously.

The raid had come as a complete surprise to those inside the house. One of the servants came to investigate the sound made by Bruno's men and was apprehended. "How many are in the house?" the lieutenant demanded.

When he saw that security police were pouring into the house through all the entrances he decided he had better cooperate. "Four others."

"Take me to them. Quietly!"

The servant led them up the stairs to a large room to the left of the staircase. Bruno suddenly flung open the door. Inside were four surprised men wearing dust masks caught in the act of busily packaging a white powder that Bruno suspected was some form of narcotic. Each of the four was arrested and taken to separate rooms within the house to undergo interrogation. Bruno went to one of the rooms to conduct one of the interrogations.

"How many people are in the house besides yourself?"

The man studied Bruno and saw a stern overbearing man who appeared to be the type who gets his way. He then looked at the four security police and noticed that they were totally unlike the island police he had been used to. These men appeared to be clean cut, extremely well trained, totally able to handle themselves and their prisoners.

"When I ask a question I want an answer and I want it now," Bruno demanded, as he

momentarily glanced at one of his officers.

"Only four others," the man finally replied.

"What narcotics do you handle in this house?"

"All," came the answer after a very brief delay.

"Name them," commanded Bruno.

"Cocaine, crack, heroine, marijuana, hookie shots and trip takers."

"Who is your boss?"

The man hesitated.

"Are you hard of hearing?" Bruno roared.

"Mr. Trumbore."

"Mr. Trumbore is in charge of this narcotics operation?"

"That is correct."

"Who does Mr. Trumbore report to?"

The man looked apprehensively at Bruno, and coughed nervously.

"I haven't heard your answer yet Buster."

The color drained from the man's face. "Del... Del Bene. Carmine Del Bene," he said in a raspy, barely audible voice.

"The furniture company owner?"

"Yes."

"How do I know you are telling the truth?"

"The record books. They are in Mr. Trumbore's office."

"Show me," Bruno commanded.

The man got up and walked to a room on the other end of the mansion, accompanied by Bruno and his men. In the room were a desk, several chairs, and a bookcase.

The bookcase contained several individually numbered loose-leaf record books. The man pointed in the direction of the bookshelf.

"Show me Del Bene's name," Bruno insisted.

The man selected record book number one and quickly found a series of sizable monetary transactions, each of which contained the name Carmine Del Bene. The amount of money transacted in each entry was astounding.

"And who distributes the narcotics?"

The man pointed to the rest of the record books.

"Show me the names," Bruno ordered.

The man took books number two, three and four from the shelf and put them on Trumbore's desk. Opening book number two he pointed to an index of perhaps 75 names, some of which Bruno instantly recognized in connection with other investigations currently being conducted.

"Show me a transaction for that name, Van Leider," he said, pointing to the index.

The man turned to the volume and page referenced in the index and an enviable record of narcotics purchases and sales unveiled itself.

Bruno had finally struck pay dirt. He now knew it would be a very long night. Leaving his men to guard the prisoner, Bruno checked briefly with the three other interrogators. Two had been largely unsuccessful in eliciting information from their prisoners but one had confirmed the name Carmine Del Bene as being the actual chief of the 'element.'

Collecting the record books Bruno ordered the men to be jailed, the evidence uncovered thus far to be carefully labeled and seized. The house was then sealed and guarded so a meticulous search could be made at a later time. Before leaving the mansion he made a telephone call to headquarters ordering all available members of the security police to meet him at the assembly room at headquarters in thirty minutes. This is what they had trained for these many months. In groups of four they would go to the homes of every individual listed in the record books, seize evidence and make arrests. But first, there was a particularly important mission to accomplish.

Ronic's Dad had returned to work, and was laboring as usual at his automatic sanding machine at the furniture factory. Suddenly a solidly built man accompanied by four island security police passed his machine on their way to the main offices. "Wonder what they are up to?" he thought, watching them disappear down the aisle and into

the main office. Approximately fifteen minutes later the same men came from the office. Ronic's Dad was astonished to see accompanying them Mr. Del Bene, in handcuffs. "What is happening?" he thought. "Why have they arrested Mr. Del Bene, of all people?"

He pretended to be hard at work at the automatic sanding machine as the entourage passed by. "Mr. Del Bene arrested? Why would they do that to such a kindly man as he?"

Following Del Bene's arrest Bruno drove to headquarters and set in motion the sting operation that would take place that night. As soon as that was done the sixteen who had entered Trumbore's house went with Bruno to Del Bene's mansion. Dusk had overtaken the island and Bruno thought that to be to their advantage. However, as soon as he and his men began to converge on the house the area was suddenly illuminated with powerful floodlights shining in their eyes. Men appeared at two of the upstairs windows with rifles. When they saw the uniforms of the security police one opened fire. The sixteen men quickly took cover behind the various objects in the garden. Fortunately no one was hit.

"This one is going to be a bit more difficult than I had thought," Bruno muttered under his breath. "You four, back to the cars, bring the tear gas and shine our search lights on the windows. And you," he continued, pointing to four other men in the raiding party, "make sure no one escapes at the rear. And, I want no one injured or killed tonight, either you or anyone in that house."

The powerful lights were soon trained onto the windows and tear gas grenades were fired through the windows. But the men at the windows continued to fire their rifles. "They must have gas masks," one of the officers shouted.

Bruno retreated to one of the cars and over its PA system ordered the occupants of the house to surrender. Their response? More rifle fire.

"I have no choice," Bruno said to his men. I won't have you all killed. Get the two machine guns."

In a few minutes the weapons were in place, one on either side of the house. The rifle fire from the window continued, hitting one of the police searchlights.

"Fire a warning burst into the side of the house to the left of that upstairs window."

The deafening hammer of machine gun fire rang through the night blasting through the siding and penetrating the room. A few seconds later a second blast splintered wood and shattered glass from the other side of the house.

There was no more firing from the house.

Bruno commanded over the loudspeakers, "Everyone come out the front door with your hands on top of your heads. A few moments later six men with gas masks filed out the front door one by one. "Lay face down on the ground," Bruno commanded. Four security men then advanced to bind them while the others covered them.

Once they were searched and bound they were taken to the police cars and secured in the back seats. Two men were left to guard the prisoners while the rest cautiously entered the house. A middle age lady, who proved to be Mrs. Del Bene was shaking from fright in the bedroom. There appeared to be no one else in the house, but on the second floor the men found a huge cash of rifles and handguns of every description. In another room was found a tremendous quantity of narcotics. "I thought Trumbore's supply was big," Arsineo remarked to Bruno. But another room contained a frightening surprise. "Almost enough explosives to blow the island from the map," Bruno remarked. "If these guns and explosives had ever been used...." Then he thought of the machine gun fire. "We're fortunate the warning blasts didn't hit this ammo magazine. Pieces of this house would have been blown to the four winds."

But Bruno and his men had no time to philosophize. Mrs. Del Bene was arrested and all the prisoners were interrogated. Two of the detainees confirmed that Del Bene was chief of the element. But there was another surprise. Hugh Trumbore was not the only second-in-command. There was one other subordinate, a man named Julio El Toro, owner of El Toro's, the island's best Mexican Restaurant. No one had suspected him.

Backups had arrived to seal and guard Del Bene's mansion and take charge of the prisoners just as they had done at Trumbore's residence. Bruno and his men raced to El Toro's restaurant. Julio El Toro was not there. Off to his home they raced. The house was dark. Forcing their way into the large but modest home they cautiously searched it from top to bottom. No one was there.

Thinking about the vacant house Arsineo remarked to Bruno, "He could have been forewarned. Someone at Del Bene's could have telephoned."

Suddenly Bruno had a sickening feeling. Plan TANGO, T for Trumbore, did not envision an organization large enough to also include a Del Bene and an El Toro. "We forgot to guard the airport!" Making a quick call to headquarters to have El Toro's house sealed and guarded, the men rushed to their cars and sped to the airport north of the city.

"Regardless of whether we find El Toro, we've got to make sure of the airport passenger lists in the future, and have a permanent detail assigned to check this so no hoodlum gets out that way."

When they arrived at the small island airport Bruno said to his men, "Wait here and watch me through the glass."

Bruno, dressed in plain clothes, slowly strolled into the airport waiting room and went nonchalantly to the counter.

"May I help you?" the attendant asked.

"When did the last plane leave?"

"At two this afternoon. The next one boards in about fifteen minutes."

"Please do me a favor," Bruno asked, showing her his police badge in an inconspicuous manner. "Do you have an El Toro on your passenger list?"

"No, I'm sorry, he is not on the list. But there is a Mr. El Toro on the standby list. He's the restaurant owner, you know. He and his wife and friend decided to make a last minute vacation trip abroad but the reservation list was booked up."

"I'm going to wander away from the counter," Bruno instructed. "In one minute I want you to call the party to your desk and discuss with them the status of the standby reservations. All right?"

"Very well," the attendant confirmed, looking a bit apprehensive.

Bruno wandered off apparently killing time as if waiting for the flight. Exactly one minute later, the flight attendant announced over the loudspeaker, "The El Toro party, would you please come to the counter."

Bruno seemed to pay no attention to the announcement, but out of the corner of his eye watched two men and a woman get up from their seats and approach the counter. The three were dressed in their everyday tropical island clothing. Not very appropriate garb for a flight to a foreign land engulfed in the depths of winter. Bruno glanced at his men outside the glass and discretely motioned them to come inside. At the same time he silently approached the three members of the El Toro party from behind. Bruno's men spread out behind him.

"And so, Mr. El Toro," the attendant was saying, "If you wait just five more minutes, there may be room for you, since there are five people who have reservations who have not as yet arrived at the airport."

"Gentlemen, and lady," announced Bruno, "you're under arrest."

CHAPTER 24 - A LITTLE FOLDING OF THE HANDS TO SLEEP

Ronic had joined the Schulte family to celebrate Rosa's 19th birthday. The happy occasion was marked by a good solid meal of Androckian style duck, followed by cake and homemade ice cream. Grace Schulte did not routinely serve an excess of desserts but this was an exception.

After the meal Maria and her mom did the dishes and tidied up the kitchen while Rosa, Ronic and Mr. Schulte gravitated to the living room. Ronic sunk into the soft chair while Herman procured a portable cassette recorder from the closet. "I want to play a tape of the fellowship meeting a few months ago where that brother from Nordlac chapel gave the interesting ministry on the parable of the Lost Coin."

"I remember that one," Ronic remarked as he relaxed in his chair. "I especially enjoyed that meeting and would love to hear a replay."

The past week or so had been extremely difficult and trying for him and it was so refreshing for him to be able to withdraw from the world of kings to the quietness and serenity of the Schulte household. He could hear dishes being washed in the kitchen as Herman loaded the cassette and adjusted the volume on the player. Soon the kitchen work would be done and Maria would take the chair directly beside him.

He pressed his head onto the back of the comfortable chair as he relaxed and listened to the tape. As the speaker began his message Ronic remembered points of the helpful ministry. As the message progressed, the heavy meal, the atrocious hours he had kept the past few days, the relaxed atmosphere in the house, the soft armchair and the somewhat monotone recorded voice combined to make his eyes grow heavy. He thought he would close them for just a brief moment to relieve their heaviness, then immediately reopen them in hopes the drowsiness would vanish.

As he briefly rested his eyes the pleasantness of his relaxation became stronger, enhanced by the hypnotic effect of the recorded tape. Soon his thoughts drifted away from the recorded meeting to a visualization of Maria and himself strolling hand in hand along a sunny Androckian beach lined with graceful palm trees. The surf rolled onto the sandy shore, then withdrew, only to gather its strength again for another surge. Maria and Ronic walked at its edge to let the warm refreshment circulate through their toes. As they walked they picked up shells and bits of driftwood to take as decorations. As the gentle waves retreated to the blue ocean they washed through their feet, undermining the sand supporting their feet and causing them to sink deeper in the sand as each wave retreated back to the sea. The gulls gracefully floated in the sea breeze just a few feet above their heads, while the same cool breeze sifted through their hair as the warmth of the sun bathed their youthful faces. Soon they found themselves swimming in the tropical waters, enjoying the soothing gentle motion of the tepid blue water. Up the gentle waves they rose, and down again. Up the crest and down the trough they floated. Then underwater they swam,

hand in hand, down to the coral castles, encircled by a school of friendly multicolored tropical fish. Like them there was no need to return to the surface for air because they were now perfectly adapted to the shimmering water. On and on they effortlessly moved, joined by a school of inquisitive dolphins. From the coral fortress to a group of sea vegetation, past the sea clams, the rock formations, the sandy bottom, the periwinkles and sea urchins, and all the seascapes and creatures of the deep great and small. Then up they swam from the bottom toward the shimmering blue waves at the surface. Upward and upward they were propelled, still hand in hand, through the surface and into the air, gliding over the waves, with the gulls as their airborne companions. Up they sailed, over the white sandy beach, over the palms, rising higher and higher until the island took the form of a brightly colored map. Northward they flew, past the soft fluffy clouds, past the airport and over Beauvoir Overlook. Then northward along the coast, and over the three hills on the island's north hook. Southward they flew along the west coast, over the three islands offshore from the west heel. Then eastward past Augry and along the south side of the heel, over the royal reservation. Southward and southeastward along the south fork to the tip. Lower they swooped as they rounded the picturesque island off the southern tip, and then back up again as they traveled back northwestward along the south fork. "Look! Down there is Sarah's house in Sur Lac, and over there is Ronic's house." Over the big city they flew. Then they swooped down gently as they approached Maria's house. Still hand in hand, they flew into the house, passing easily through the walls of the abode, and into the soft armchair, with Maria in the chair beside him, her hand still gently laid on his arm.

Opening his eyes he looked around the living room. The recorded message was no longer playing. Grace and Herman were on the sofa reading and Rosa had gone to her room. Maria sat on the chair to his left, her hand gently resting on his arm. Noticing that he had awakened she said with a smile, "Welcome back. We thought we had lost you."

Ronic, embarrassed that he had fallen asleep replied, "Oh, I surely didn't intend to be so rude."

"You must have been very tired," Grace added good-naturedly.

"Burning the candle at both ends, perhaps?" Herman questioned.

"I guess I must be guilty of that," Ronic replied.

Herman then asked, "I've had in mind to ask you about your work, Ronic. I am curious as to how you can run a bookstore in absentia! It seems that each time I have visited the store, and it is five times now, you haven't been there."

Grace momentarily closed her eyes in embarrassment, fearing the nagging suspicions her husband had previously voiced to her might overcome her husband's

better judgment.

Ronic detected a hint of impatience, or possibly even annoyance, in Mr. Schulte's voice. He replied, "I wish I had not chanced to be away when you visited. I would have been absolutely delighted to show you around the store. But Sarah, who is from Southside Chapel is so capable it gives me greater freedom."

"What do you do with your time when you are not at the store?" Herman quizzed.

Ronic could see that Maria's Dad was beginning to press the subject, and it made him feel a bit ill at ease. Hoping to pass it off as nothing he made the excuse, "There is certainly more to running a bookstore than selling books."

Schulte was not deterred. "Like what, for instance?"

"Well, I have to make arrangements for printing, I still do a lot of translation work, I place advertisements in the newspaper...."

"That doesn't sound like it would take much time," Herman interrupted. "What activities are you involved in besides the bookstore?"

Mrs. Schulte was becoming uncomfortable with her husband's suspicions, and Maria was embarrassed. "Dad, please....," she quietly pleaded.

Ronic did not know how to take this pointed questioning. If he answered directly it could prove disastrous. All who knew his identity, plus friends and relatives, might have to be forcibly moved to the royal estate for an extended period for their own protection. He knew that when Trumbore, Del Bene and El Toro were arrested only a fraction of the known members of the element had been taken into custody. Many others, some of them desperate criminals, remained at large or had disappeared into the population.

Finally he answered, hoping against hope that Herman would give up. "I do have a number of activities, as I am sure most people have. Of course, my main non-bookstore activity is the meeting."

"And besides that?"

"Maria," Mrs. Schulte suggested conspicuously, "Why don't the two of us go out to the kitchen for a few minutes?"

After the two of them left the room Maria asked her mother with pain in her voice, "But Mom, what is Dad driving at? I find it hard to believe, but he is actually being extremely inhospitable to Ronic."

With a tone of despair in her voice she answered, "Unfortunately, my dear I must agree with you. Your father has had a growing suspicion that he has somehow got to get out of his system. Maybe it's best to let him do what he thinks he has to do to satisfy himself that Ronic is a fine young man. I told him the other day that Ronic is a good boy and that he is good for you and you for him. But your father has got to satisfy himself of this in his own way."

Back in the living room, Herman Schulte became even more direct now that he and Ronic were alone. "Ronic," he continued, "let me say that it is quite clear to me that you have more things going on than just running a bookstore."

"Why do you think that?" Ronic asked, trying not to display his defensiveness.

"Are you telling me, before God, that you don't?"

"I work very hard at a number of things," he answered. "But please tell me what is causing an uneasiness in your soul regarding this?"

"Because you and Maria seem to have a developing relationship, and, as Maria's father I feel I have a duty to know exactly what you do. I could not bear to see her get hurt. I want to know what you do moment by moment."

"Mr. Schulte, I understand your great concern for Maria. I really do. If you can believe it I too could not bear to see her hurt in any way. By the same token there is absolutely nothing, I repeat, nothing that I am involved in, that I am aware of, that would ever hurt Maria, or you, or Mrs. Schulte, or Rosa, or the Testimony or anything else that is good and righteous and true. All of my activities are one hundred percent legal, and, to my knowledge, thoroughly moral."

"Fine! Then you have nothing to hide? So tell me then. What exactly do you do? Why won't you tell me?"

Ronic was fully aware that he was in the midst of an extremely serious confrontation, one which could have dire consequences. "I understand your concerns, brother Schulte. Let me try and put it in this way. If you were an engineer working for a company, there might be certain proprietary information you would be unable to freely share with people outside that company. Information which, by contractual agreement, was not to be discussed outside of work. To do that would be a violation of trust, and might even cause financial or even personal harm to certain parties."

"Yes," Herman countered, "But I would not hesitate to reveal the fact that I was an engineer working for such and such company."

Ronic had been beaten in his battle of logic. "All right," he said hesitatingly, "I will tell you this. In addition to my bookstore business I do something akin to consulting work."

I offer advice. I make suggestions for improving various kinds of things, et cetera. And my work includes an understanding that requires strict confidentiality. Although informing you of the minute details covered by this agreement would put your mind at ease in two seconds or less, I am sorry, but I cannot break my agreement, nor do I think you would want me to."

"Hmmm. Something akin to a consulting business! For whom do you consult?"

Ronic's options were dwindling fast and Schulte seemed not to be listening to his explanations. He had already said far too much, especially to a deeply perceptive person like Herman Schulte. He simply could not reveal more than this without placing himself and the entire Schulte family in great physical danger should they ever leak the truth.

"Well? For whom do you consult? For the furniture factory? For the government? For the element? Ronic, I need to know?"

Both Maria and her mother could hear what was going on from where they were. Maria was very upset and asked her mother, "Why is Dad being so disrespectful, so rude? I can't believe that he even hinted Ronic might be consulting for the element. Of all things!"

Ronic thought about Herman Schulte's last question. He realized one question was leading to another. That Schulte would never be satisfied until he knew every last detail. At that point he gave the only answer he could possibly give under the circumstance. "I am sorry sir, but I am simply not at liberty to discuss the matter in more detail at this time. I have made commitments to that effect and cannot honorably break those agreements. Please do not ask me to dishonor myself to do this for you. I have stated that I am only involved in honorable, moral, honest endeavors, and you will simply have to take me at my word as a fellow Christian brother."

Taken aback by Ronic's candid refusal to answer, Herman Schulte observed, "Commitments! You provide no assurance at all to me. Let me put it succinctly to you Ronic. If I do not know exactly what you do and for whom you do it then you fail to assure me that you are a suitable companion for my daughter Maria. I think you know exactly what that means."

At this threat a dreadful sinking feeling swept through Ronic's heart. "This man is being totally irrational and extremely disrespectful," he thought to himself. "In order to satisfy his paranoid suspicions would he hurt his own daughter by denying her fondest wishes? Ronic could not believe his ears. For a moment he wanted to blast out at him, but he realized such a display would only harden his heart even more, and, of course, lower himself in the eyes of Maria and the entire Schulte family. But suddenly, a sense of peace and self-control flowed into his soul, and Ronic knew

there was someone greater than himself who was observing the situation.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen Maria was in tears, as was her mother. Her mother gently and lovingly put her arms around her and together they shared the hurtful moment.

Finally Ronic said firmly, but compassionately, "Mr. Schulte, you said you need assurance. Well and good. I applaud that. If I had lied to you about my activities would this lie have provided assurance to you? Of course not. Yet, I have consistently told you the truth yet this truth does not provide assurance to you." Then, with moist eyes he continued. "Sir, is it right to demand absolute court certified proof to satisfy one's assurances, instead of simple Christian faith and trust?" Then he said slowly and quietly, "Do you not trust your own daughter's good judgment? After all, that good judgment is a product of all the decent and Christian values both you and Mrs. Schulte have tried to instill in her from the day she was born."

But while Ronic's exhortation was delivered in a deliberate friendly tone Herman was visibly angered by it. "I have said what I have said," he replied curtly.

"My brother," Ronic said quietly, "I feel very hurt that you won't accept me for what I am, a simple servant of Jesus Christ. I think it is best I go now so you can meditate on all that has transpired tonight."

Rising from his chair he went to the kitchen where Maria and her mother were blinded by their tears. Putting his arms around the two of them he said softly, "God bless you Mrs. Schulte. God bless you my dearest Maria. Let me assure you of my sincere love for both of you, and of my honesty and of my honorableness. I feel bad beyond measure about this because I am responsible for hurting you. Please don't cry Maria. Things will work out the way they should. Do the Scriptures not say, "No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11)? God be with you both, and with dear Rosa, and especially may He grant His wisdom and a spirit of understanding to Mr. Schulte."

"Please stay," Maria pleaded.

"I must go now," he answered sadly. "But we will be together again soon You'll see. Very soon."

CHAPTER 25 - LICKING WOUNDS

Sleep did not come easy for Ronic that night, and what little he experienced came in fits and spurts. Neither did sleep grace the Schulte household. Maria's Mom had gone into Maria's bedroom for several hours to try to console her. Rosa heard what had happened and put her arms around Maria to give her all the support she could. Even Herman Schulte did not sleep well that night because of his awareness that his family was highly displeased with him. But because he knew he was 'right' he passed it all off believing it would all blow over in a day or so.

Near lunchtime the next day a tired and forlorn Ronic visited an equally sleep deprived Maria at the newspaper office. Several of the employees had been arrested at the roundup a few days ago and had not yet been replaced. Heinz Trucker was trying hard to learn the job from which Hugh Trumbore had been evicted. For these reasons the remaining employees had been asked to cover the jobs which had been vacated, and Maria was plodding through her extra workload as well as could be expected under the circumstances.

Maria, engrossed as she was in her work, did not hear her friend approach. "Maria," he said softly. "Oh Ronic" she said somewhat startled, as she arose from her desk and put her head on his shirt. A flood of tears welled up in her eyes. "I . . . I have to talk with you."

"And I with you. How about that little park by the creek?"

"I can get away in just a few minutes," she answered.

When the clock said 'twelve noon' she and Ronic left the building and began the short walk to the park.

"Last night started out to be such a happy occasion with Rosa's birthday celebration," he began as they walked toward the park. "But it ended so unhappily for you and for me."

"And for Mother and for Rosa," she added. "I don't know ---. I just do not know what ails Dad. The thought has even crossed my mind to just pack up and leave."

"Would you do that?"

Maria looked at the ground and slowly shook her head. "I don't know. I don't want to hurt Mom, or Dad for that matter. Maybe he will get over it. I know that Mom is horrified because of what he did and she has told him so. But I don't want to pit one of my parents against the other in order to get my way."

"You would have to live with it the rest of your life," Ronic added as they passed by

the stocks. "That criminal over there," he said, pointing to one of the men fettered with chains, "will have to live the rest of his life knowing that thousands of people have seen him disgraced in this manner and have read the description of his unlawful acts displayed beside him. If he has any conscience left he will have a tough time living that down."

"That's exactly what I don't want. I consider that our relationship is precious. I don't want to cheapen it. I would like to feel good about it the rest of my life."

"I'm really glad you feel that way Maria. I know that both of us feel very bad about what happened. But think about it. Can we really blame your Dad? After all, he loves you very much and does not want you to be hurt. And I made it obvious that I was simply not going to answer his pointed questions."

"But you wouldn't hurt me Ronic. Why can't he understand?"

"He doesn't know that I wouldn't intentionally hurt or disgrace you. Think about it. You have witnessed a couple of things when you were with me which I suspect even you are confused about. Things which I have asked you to share with no one else."

"And I haven't told a soul, but I'll admit I'm very curious and puzzled about them."

"But aren't you suspicious that I might be involved in some illegal activity? Maybe, for all you know, I am a secret member of the element as your Dad inferred. Maybe some day I'll be placed in the stocks alongside those rogues we just passed."

"Ronic, no. I know you. I have faith in you. I know that you would never be caught up in that type of thing."

"What you say is the truth, Maria. I hope never to be caught up in that kind of thing, but your Dad does not know me like you do. He is definitely on to something, and knows it, just like you know something but you are not exactly sure what it is. The difference is that you trust me, whereas your Dad does not know me well enough to know whether he *can* trust me."

"I hear what you say with my ears, but when he acts like that one side of my heart tells me to pack up my belongings and move out."

"To elope?"

Maria thought for a moment. "Like I said before, I certainly would not want to do that. It would greatly disappoint the whole family. But I guess I'm so frustrated by the unreasonable restrictions Dad has placed upon us."

The walk to the park was over and the two of them sat on a new gleaming park bench.

"I know it is very hard for you Maria. Believe me, it is just as hard for me. But we should not be tempted to do God's work for Him. If you were to leave home and marry without your father's blessing you would dishonor not only your father, but your mother and yourself, and I suppose me as well. Your whole family would think less of you, and of me, for it. The same goes for my own parents. In spite of the intensity of our love for one another Maria, we must not even think about leaving the pathway."

"I know what you say is right, but it is also hard to bear. So hard."

"Indeed it is. But once we both see how God works this mess out we will be ever so thankful we chose the honorable way. I know it in my heart."

Ronic heard himself saying all the right things, but somehow it seemed as if the voice he heard was not his, but a hollow voice somewhere in the distance. The doubts in his own mind were not erased by his words. And the desire to take Maria from her stubborn father had not vanished. After all, he reasoned, were they not meant for one another? But, then another thought came to mind. "Maria, I remember translating some short messages a while ago where the author said something like this: "If we mortals could but see a billionth part of God's eternal purpose we would be content to wait for Him to work it out."

Maria shook her head and smiled as she said hesitatingly, "I know Ronic. I really believe He will work it out some way. But not being allowed to keep company with you will be so difficult for me. I constantly look forward to each new time I see you."

"As do I, my dearest Maria." A tear came to Ronic's eyes as he gently placed his hand in hers. "But I am confident, I just believe God will soon work His way in your Dad's heart, and you and I will be together once again, and that our love and respect for one another will be all the more strengthened by this trial."

Maria clasped Ronic's hand tightly as if to show she could not bear to let him go.

"Did you notice what you are sitting on?"

Maria looked at the bench and commented, "I guess I didn't until now."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, I do like it, and I thank the king for thinking of us enough to install one here, just for the two of us."

Ronic smiled, "Maria, I'm sure, very sure, that the king put it here just for you and for me." He knew the words he had spoken were true and hoped that Maria's observation was no more than a witty remark.

Maria looked again at the bench and commented, "I know what you're trying to tell me. Just like you predicted there would be a bench here, and it happened, the same will be true for us."

"Just so. I really do think that one day soon your Dad will give his blessing to the two of us."

"I know Mom has talked to him, but without any visible success so far. I guess we'll just have to be patient for a while."

"A little while," he said.

"A little while," she replied hopefully.

"By the way, I understand the man who was injured in the telephone company blast is out of the woods now and is recovering nicely. And Seiss Timnar is doing much better and should be home from the hospital any day now."

"I am so glad. That whole Timnar family is just the nicest. Susie Timnar gave me a kitten from a liter a few months ago, just before we had our first date. And I am happy to know the other injured man is doing better. I know the Timnars were very worried."

"Worried about her kitten or our first date?"

"Oh Ronic, you're terrible. Her Dad, of course."

"And well she should have worried. The doctors nearly lost him several times that first day. It was really tough on the emotions of that whole family."

"I guess that awful incident is an example of God working all things for good, for those who love him."

"How do you mean, Maria?"

"Well, Mr. Timnar got shot, but it resulted in Hugh Trumbore's arrest. It resulted in the discovery that he was in organized crime, and it helped to rid the island of a lot of his dope distributors."

"And," Ronic added, "it resulted in a job for Heinz Truker, and in a promotion and much better working conditions for you."

"You spent quite a bit of time at the hospital didn't you Ronic?"

"It was a heart wrenching wait for me. It was so frustrating being there and not being able to do a thing to help him. I guess I did my share of pacing the hallways. But,

thankfully, he is starting to do fine. By the way, he told me he thinks the world of you, and thinks that you are the best thing that ever happened to me."

The two of them continued their conversation while they watched the ducks and ducklings swim in the brook.

"I've been asked to speak at Northside's family hour this coming Domineek. I expect you to be in the first row!" Ronic said jokingly.

"If I'm allowed to attend at all," she replied pessimistically.

"Do you think this might somehow help to soften your dad's attitude?"

"We just have to hope and pray," she replied.

But although both Ronic and Maria did hope and pray, when Domineek came, and Ronic spoke at the morning family hour, the Schulte family was nowhere to be seen. They had not even attended the meeting for worship and celebration which took place before the family hour. It was quite evident to Ronic that Herman Schulte's personal paranoia was not just a fleeting loss of temper. It had become a far more serious paranoia, and it was beginning to affect his whole family, and even the Christian testimony at Northside.

CHAPTER 26 - MASSACRE DAY

Ronic had dreaded the arrival of Massacre Day, the traditional remembrance of the native Androckians. On that day the king would be expected to appear and deliver a speech at the balcony of the government complex at number one Gouvernave. Neither Bruno, Seiss or Leonardo could come up with a plausible excuse for King Andrae's absence, so Ronic made plans to put in a brief appearance using a disguise.

The use of a disguise did not particularly worry him, because a transparent bullet proof enclosure would be erected at the balcony. What did concern him was the fact that he would be expected to read a speech. As soon as the speech would begin all of his family, friends and acquaintances would immediately recognize his voice and know the true identity of the king.

In private, using a tape recorder, he had experimented with disguising his voice, but he was not at all pleased with the results he had obtained. Finally, as the day approached, Bruno brought a piece of electronic equipment through the tunnel to Ronic's basement conference room.

"Excellency, I have something I believe will interest you."

"What kind of gadget is that, Bruno?" he asked.

"A gadget to be sure, sir. But much more than a gadget."

Bruno set the instrument on the table and proceeded to connect a plug from the box to a tape recorder. Finally he connected a microphone to the box and commented, "There we are, that should do it."

Ronic looked with both curiosity and amusement at the equipment. Bruno handed him a typewritten sheet of paper and said, "All right, read this while I record your voice. Try your normal voice, and also a somewhat higher pitch like you might use if you were making a speech."

When Bruno started the recorder the king read the paragraph from the sheet of paper. When he had finished, Bruno rewound the cassette and said, "Now let's play this back and see what you think."

When the cassette was played Ronic chuckled and said, "You can't fool me with that, Bruno. You got someone else to read the same paragraph onto this cassette."

Bruno laughed, "You think so? Then let's try again, only this time you say what you want to into the microphone."

When Bruno started the recorder Ronic spoke, "And as the Commoner King of Androck I say to you that crime has completely and utterly vanished from the face of the earth. How's that Bruno?"

Bruno smiled as he rewound the tape. When he played it back the same voice issued forth from the speakers as before, but the message was the impromptu sentence, "And as the Commoner King of Androck I say to you that crime has completely and utterly vanished from the face of the earth. How's that Bruno?"

"Are you telling me that voice is really me?" Ronic asked in astonishment.

"Not really," Bruno replied. "That voice is your digitally processed voice. This instrument contains a special microprocessor to convert your speech into the ones and zeros of digital electronics. It modifies certain tonal qualities which characterize your particular voice. Because of this it sounds like someone else talking, but with your words."

Overjoyed, Ronic said, "I'll bet I can think of a good use for one of these gadgets."

"I'm sure you could."

On Massacre Day a huge crowd assembled in Gouvernave Square. A powerful public address system had been set up so every ear would be able to hear the voice of the new king. Finally, the digital voice modifier was put in place in the enclosed balcony. The crowd would hear only the voice from the public address horns and would be unaware that the vocal characteristics of their king had been altered to preserve his secret identity.

Ronic traveled through the tunnel to the king's chamber in the government complex, and donned the full ceremonial costume of the king. Bruno fitted the king with a mustache and goatee as a disguise, and sprayed his hair with gray overtones to transport him into his mid sixties. When Bruno was finally satisfied with the result Ronic looked at himself in the mirror.

"If I didn't know that was me I wouldn't know that was me," he said, obviously pleased with the disguise.

"I'm glad you like it sir. Much less painful than plastic surgery. And I see that it's nearly time for your appearance. Do you have the copy of your speech?"

"Right here."

Bruno and Ronic walked toward the door leading to the large hallway in the building. Bruno opened it and locked it after them. Four of the most highly trusted security guards escorted them through the vacated lobby, up two flights of stairs and to the

audience room opening onto the balcony.

A band had been assembled on the pavement outside the balcony. Someone whom Ronic had never seen before went to the balcony and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, let us remember our spiritual forefathers with the singing of 'Anthem gar Massacre'."

At once there was a great silence in the crowd. In a few seconds the band began to play, and the crowd to sing, the moving anthem which had been written as a tribute to the extinct Androckians. While it is practically impossible to reproduce either the rhythm or the beauty of the Androckian lyrics in English, the sense goes something like this:

**The golden sun shines brightly
On this island blessed with green.
Its happy people, once many
No longer can be seen.
Sad was their plight,
Sadder still their end.
Our hearts bow with repentance
Our knees now to them do bend.**

(At this point in the anthem it is traditional that everyone bows the knee to the remembrance of the natives for several seconds before the final stanzas begin).

**As God's mercy rains on us
And on the children He has given,
As we cherish and count the blessings
Which He has offered us,**

Let us never forget what might have been.

**Even in death their souls
Were not embittered against us
Life, love and happiness
They ever wished us.**

May their remembrance mark what shall be.

When the anthem was completed the Master of Ceremonies announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my profound privilege to present to you for his first public appearance, his Majesty Royal, King Andrae the First, Exalted Ruler of all Androck."

As the Master of Ceremonies withdrew, King Andrae moved to the balcony, in sight of all, and was greeted by a deafening cheer and roar from the thousands assembled in

the square. Andrae had never seen a huge crowd from such a vantage point, and the expression "sea of humanity" took on fresh meaning for him.

As the crowd continued to cheer, Bruno turned on the switch to the digital voice processor. After several minutes of adulation the king raised his arms in a gesture to halt the cheering, but it continued unabated for several more minutes.

Finally the king spoke, and as soon as the, unbeknown to them, electronically reprocessed voice echoed forth over the powerful public address system a great silence once again fell upon the crowd.

"Androkas felous, ivru ga mechain, isba lo runchva pzutaiv..." began the king. "Fellow Androckians, today we remember, and tomorrow we must not forget, the suffering and evil which our forefathers inflicted upon an innocent generation of beautiful people, a people whose hopes were much like our own. They sought happiness for themselves and for their children; so do we. They sought freedom to express their ideals and make their lives a little better, and so do we. They enjoyed the health and beauty of this island, and so do we. But, quite unexpectedly, for them it all came to an abrupt end. Their hopes were dashed upon the rocks. A people with greedy hearts first took their land, then their happiness and freedom, then extinguished the lamps of their very lives.

My countrymen, if such a thing happened to them, could not similar misfortunes befall us, their spiritual descendants? Are there not among us those who have inflicted upon us a prolonged siege of turmoil, crime, danger and insecurity? All of us who have assembled on this great day of remembrance have suffered because of the insatiable greed and crass ruthlessness of the element. Some, who are no longer with us, have suffered the ultimate deprivation at the hand of the greedy, the loss of their very lives.

Now what is it that causes one human being to take that which belongs to another human being? What motivates someone to take your money, your goods, your livelihood, your life? What defect in the heart causes one to stop at nothing in order to satisfy its relentless hunger for greed, even if it causes deprivation, injury or even death to its victim? Is it not the same irreparable fault in human nature that caused the demise of those we respectfully remember today? What is this gross fault in our human nature that caused so drastic a tragedy both to our spiritual ancestors and to ourselves?

The Almighty God, the King of kings, calls this fault of the human heart 'sin.' Furthermore, He states that all of us, not just those who perform gross misdeeds, have natural hearts indelibly marked by the taint of sin. He says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That means that each of us has a heart fully capable of extinguishing the lamp of his neighbor, just as our forefathers did in their merciless exercise of greed...."

At that point in the king's speech a shot rang out from somewhere in the crowd. It's object, the king himself. A loud snap hit the bulletproof enclosure about a meter (3 feet) to the left of the king. The king was so stunned by this event that he momentarily froze in place. Bruno sprang into action to remove the king from the balcony, but King Andrae forbade him. He had noticed activity in one particular area of the crowd. The people had wrestled someone to the ground and security police were pressing their way to that spot. King Andrae stretched out his hands to once again get the attention of the crowd.

Departing from his written speech the king continued: "You now see first hand what I said before, that the corrupt hearts which totally extinguished the lives of those dear ones we remember today, have not changed with the passage of years, and would, for a mere mess of pottage, extinguish the very life of your king. Does not this incident which you have all witnessed prove that our generation is not superior to that of our forefathers who took the land and the lives of the inhabitants of this island? Indeed, it is truly the same corrupt human nature that has been taking the possessions and the lives of our families and friends for the last several years.

"God tells us that no one who has an unrepentant and unforgiven heart will ever abide in his eternal presence. 'The wages of sin is death.' How do we obtain release from this terrible eternal sentence? How do we obtain forgiveness of our sins, so that we may enjoy life eternal in His holy presence? Is it by simply ceasing to do evil and, instead, doing good? Do you make a piece of spoiled meat edible by masking its foul odor with fragrant Androckian spices? You see, 'doing good' does not cure the sin-tainted heart. Whether a piece of rotten meat is covered with spices, or with flies, its nature remains essentially unchanged. It is still unsuitable for ingestion. And, apart from a special act of forgiveness initiated entirely by God Himself, and not by us, not through good works or some merit on our part, we remain unforgiven, lost, totally unsuitable for His eternal presence.

"Then how can we be forgiven? Eternal forgiveness for sin lies in first recognizing its fatal grip on you. Recognize it, and then repent of it. You must totally realize that there is absolutely nothing you can do to make God forgive you. There is nothing you can do to make you acceptable for His holy presence. But God is a merciful God, and has made available a wonderful forgiveness of your sins through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, when He died as a sacrifice for sin on the awful Roman instrument of torture, the cross. Every person who casts himself on Jesus Christ, in full reliance on His mercy alone, not relying at all on our good deeds will be forgiven. The Holy Scriptures say,

'The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 6:23).

Avail yourself of His free gift and you will soon notice that he has already created a new spirit within you and that you have become part of a new creation, destined for

eternal life. And that you have become part of God's family.

The greatest honor you could possibly pay to our spiritual ancestors would be to make your own personal commitment of complete trust in Christ Jesus for deliverance from the penalty of sin and for eternal life. I personally ask that you make this genuine commitment right now, before this great gathering disperses.

And now, as we prepare to depart, let me personally thank those of you who supported the faltering first steps to restore law and order during the early dark and uncertain days of my reign. In spite of highly misleading media reports many of you chose to align yourselves with truth and justice. Because of your support I am able to make a very happy announcement today.

Early in my reign we decided to make it extremely uncomfortable to be a criminal on this little island. Laws were established which severely punished criminal acts and offered restitution to victims of crime. As a result, I am able to report to you today that we have removed a substantial number of hoodlums from our streets whose uninhibited criminal activities have long since saddened the hearts of our people. In the short period of time that I have been raised up by Almighty God to be your earthly king, drug use has dropped to less than 3 percent of its original level. Addicts are thronging to our treatment and counseling center. So too, drug related crimes, (theft, robbery, mugging), have dropped immensely. Murders, beatings, and injurious encounters have dropped precipitously. Many of us for the first time in our memories dare go for a walk at night. Others who have begun to be freed from the fear of crime, and the economic burden it causes, have for the first time thought of establishing productive businesses.

With your help and the working of Almighty God we have made great progress in so very short a time. But much more needs to be done, and I humbly ask for your help and for your prayers as we pursue the goal to make our island a peaceful and enjoyable place to live and rear our children. Many known, and many more unknown, criminals are still at large, lurking in the shadows, ready to consume the unwary should the opportunity arise.

Finally, let no one be confused. Tough laws, while they can modify human behavior, do not change the essential nature of humanity's heart. Laws may temporarily modify things somewhat, but evil lurks within the heart, impatiently awaiting its opportunity to surge forth and pounce upon its victim. The Scripture says '...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (II Corinthians 5:17). May God grant many of you the faith to believe and trust. Amen.

It is the Androckian custom not to interrupt a respected speaker with cheering or clapping, but, now that the king's speech was complete the crowd gave him an extended ovation.

Scattered in various parts of the crowd were Ronic's parents, Leonardo and Jannie, Sarah Verngladt, Seiss and Millie along with Susie and Jimmy, Heinz and Hilda Truker, and Herman, Grace, Rosa and Maria.

When the Massacre Day festivities were over the crowd began to disperse toward their respective homes.

As the Schulte's slowly began to weave their way through the crowd Herman commented on the speech. "I'm really surprised by that speech. It sounded almost like one of our gospel meetings. I'll have to hand it to the new king, coming right out, calling a spade a spade, with a subject that dignitaries usually pay only political lip service to."

"It seems quite evident that the king is a believer," Grace added. "His speech was certainly an unexpected and very pleasant surprise."

"I wonder where he attends services?" Rosa questioned.

"The only really sound work on the island that I am aware of is our fellowship of eight meetings," Mrs. Schulte replied.

"True, but I didn't recognize his voice," Herman responded. "I know virtually everyone who ministers and he was definitely not one of them. I would certainly like to know more about him."

"Then where else would he be from?" Maria asked. "Could it be that he is someone just beginning to minister the word? Someone who is not well known throughout the eight gatherings?"

"You may be right," Herman Schulte returned. "Parts of the speech sounded like a condensation of one of our gatherings. It may be that some new brother in our midst is really the king. After all, very little is known of King Andrae the First. If he is from one of the eight meetings on the island who gather in the Lord's name we may someday be privileged to meet him. What do you think of that?"

"I would love to meet the king," Maria replied. "I have never met anyone really important like that, or have even seen them at close range."

"I think our prayers have been answered," Mr. Schulte said. "We have hoped for relief from the element for so many years, and I think God has raised up someone who, in the short time he has been king, has made tremendous progress. And, the fact that he appears to be a Christian makes me very happy."

Because of the density of the crowd Rosa and her dad decided to walk together, while Maria and her Mom followed behind them.

"I am so glad that Heinz Truker is editor of the newspaper," Grace observed as they continued their walk amid the dispersing crowd. "I wonder how Hugh Trumbore would have covered the events of today?"

"I don't even want to think about it," Maria replied. "I had to quit my job because of all the lies he came out with."

"I remember you were quite unhappy with the situation at work at one point."

"It was right after the new king began to crack down on crime," Maria reminded her mother. "The editors invented all kinds of horrible lies to erode his popular support. Quite frankly, at the beginning I wasn't sure just what to believe."

"Wasn't it Ronic who talked to you about your position with the paper?"

Maria looked up ahead of her to see if her father heard Ronic's name being mentioned, but she decided that the noise of the crowd had drowned it out.

"Yes it was. He got me thinking about Trumbore's ethics, or the lack of them. He also felt the situation would take care of itself very soon. Interestingly, the very day that I notified him of my resignation Mr. Trumbore was arrested and all the problems I had with the job vanished overnight. Quite a coincidence."

"Maybe Ronic was able to foretell the future," Mrs. Schulte said humorously.

Maria smiled in return, but within her heart she wondered whether Ronic might indeed have had some inside knowledge of things to come, or, possibly Could it be he knew something of things he actually helped plan? After all, he admitted he was some kind of consultant, offering suggestions to improve things, and he had some connection with the government that he wanted her to keep strictly to herself. She thought deeply on all those things, trying to piece them together while they walked from Gouvernave. As they passed by the little park where she and Ronic had once enjoyed one another's company from time to time, she again noticed the sparkling new park bench. "Maria, I'm sure," she could hear Ronic say, "very sure, that the king put it here just for you and for me."

CHAPTER 27 - RESOLUTION

The following week Ronic decided to pay a surprise visit to Northside Christian Chapel. Seiss had been released from the hospital a few days before, and Ronic went over to the Timnar's to help Millie's recovering husband get to the meeting on Domineek. Susie and Jimmy were too young to steady him.

When Ronic and the Timnar's arrived at the meeting nearly everyone had taken their seats, including Maria and the other Schulte's. Ronic helped steady Seiss as he made his way to his seat. Millie and Susie sat next to their dad, while Jimmy sat next to his mom. Ronic sat next to Susie.

The chairs were arranged in an extended square, all of them facing the center for the worship and praise meeting since that seating arrangement conveyed the idea of unity and mutual fellowship. The Schulte family was seated to the left. Maria and Ronic exchanged wistful smiles. Mrs. Schulte and Rosa also smiled at him, but Herman avoided looking his way and squirmed in his seat. Ronic wondered how Mr. Schulte could possibly participate in the fellowship and partnership of worship when his heart was at enmity with someone in the group. After all, the idea of gathering to the Name of the Lord was not that each person in the group individually worships in his own way. The New Testament looks at worship in a corporate sense. When one prays or praises, all join in joyful partnership with that expression of worship, as an assembly, as joined together, "one loaf, one body" (I Corinthians 10:17).

"But now God has set the members, each one of them in the body, according as it has pleased him But now the members are many, and the body one . . . that there might be no division in the body, but that the members might have the same concern one for another Now you are Christ's body, and members in particular" (I Corinthians 12:18,20,25,27).

This is why, on the other side of the coin, if there is in the assembly "one called brother" who is known to be immoral and unrepentant of that immorality, that person can not participate in the fellowship (I Corinthians 5:11-13).

"In a large house there are not only articles of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (II Timothy 2:20-21).

As soon as the meeting was over Mr. Schulte instantly arose and whisked his family out of the room. Maria and her mom and Rosa tried to delay, so they could see both Ronic and Seiss, but Herman put his arms out, like a closed gate, and herded them quickly to the door.

Susie had tried to make her way across the room to Maria to find out how the kitten had behaved the week before, but the Schulte family had departed before she got there.

Everyone at the meeting, with the exception of the Schulte's, gathered around Seiss and his family to greet him and to wish him continued speedy recovery. Finally, Millie said to some standing beside them, "I think we probably ought to go. He gets tired very quickly. The doctor didn't even want him to attend the meeting today, but they don't know my husband. Once he makes up his mind"

A few minutes later Millie, Seiss, Susie, Jimmy and Ronic were on their way.

"How did you feel during the meeting," Ronic asked.

"I made out quite well, thank you. Like Millie said, I tire easily, but I'm really glad I went. All of the people who came over to greet me were a real inspiration."

"That's great. I was afraid you might have to leave prematurely."

"Not me! You know better than that Ronic."

"Dad is rather strong willed when he wants to be," Susie chimed in.

"By the way, Ronic. Aren't you still interested in Maria?" Millie asked.

Ronic looked at Millie. After a long pause he answered slowly, "Extremely so." Ronic looked toward the floor in an attempt to avoid looking at Millie.

"I noticed that the Schulte's left right after the meeting."

"You're very perceptive, Millie," he replied.

"Is something wrong Sir, er, ah Ronic?" Seiss' fatigue had brought about a slip of the tongue that Ronic hoped no one in the car had noticed.

"I guess you might say that," Ronic replied evasively.

Seiss looked at his wife. Millie, sensing that Ronic was troubled and might not want to talk about the problem in front of the children, turned toward Ronic and suggested, "Why don't you stay for dinner? I'm sure you and Seiss would like to visit together and he would love that."

"That's right Millie. I need to talk over a number of things with our Eastside brother," Seiss chimed in.

"Well, if you don't think I would be a bother."

"Certainly no bother at all."

"Is it true that you saved Dad's life?" Jimmy asked.

"Well, Jimmy, when your dad got hurt I happened to be in the building because I had just placed my weekly advertisement in the paper. I gave what little first aid I knew. That's all. The ambulance came and took him to the hospital, and with the doctors' help and the prayers of a lot of saints he eventually began to get better, Jimmy."

"Millie tells me you spent two whole days at the hospital waiting on my condition."

"You were very seriously hurt, my friend. I'll have to admit it was a long and arduous wait for me."

"I guess it was almost more difficult for you than for me. Anyway, I'm really thankful, Ronic, that you thought enough of me to spend your time and emotional energy like you did."

"Anyway, I learned, as if I didn't know before, that God answers prayers," Ronic replied.

The car at last pulled into the driveway and Ronic carefully helped Seiss negotiate his way into the house and into the large easy chair. In a few minutes the two of them were alone, because Millie had herded Susie and Jimmy into the kitchen to help her prepare the meal.

At length, after looking toward the kitchen to assure himself that his wife and children were preoccupied with their culinary tasks, Seiss said to his friend and king, "So tell me about it."

Ronic looked despairingly at the floor and replied, "Herman has forbidden me to date Maria any more."

Seiss was stunned. If he had had false teeth they would have fallen to the floor. "Really? I can't believe that! But why?"

Ronic looked toward the kitchen door and said softly, "He's on to something. He knows that I'm not at the bookstore much. He knows I have other activities. He is all the more suspicious because I have done my best to avoid giving him direct answers to his probing questions about what I do, whom I work for and why. I think he suspects I'm a member of the element or something."

"How much does he know?" Both of them glanced in the direction of the kitchen to

make sure no one was dragging their ear toward their conversation.

"Not much right now. But now that his suspicions are fully primed I'm fearful that his incessant inquisitiveness will draw too much attention, eventually reaching the wrong people."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I had several interests, all of which were completely legal and thoroughly moral."

"And?"

"He wanted to know specifically about each of my activities. When I offered general information he pushed very hard for specifics. He finally got out of me that I am in something akin to consulting, where I make suggestions to improve things, et cetera. In other words, 'advice for a price'. That tantalizer simply made him push harder. I simply could not say very much more without telling him the whole story. So he made a business offer; 'You no speak, you no see.' If I did not reveal every detail of my activities to his complete satisfaction I could forever forget about including Maria in any future plans for my life. What could I do, Seiss? Do I sacrifice the hopes and aspirations of tens of thousands to satisfy the paranoia of one man, and receive his blessing once again? Believe me, my love for Maria is unquenchable, and I may yet dump the whole kingdom for her, but I'm somehow hoping Schulte will soften before the situation gets completely out of hand and he unwittingly dumps it for me and for everyone on the island."

"Oh no! This sounds like an awfully serious situation Ronic. It is rapidly coming to a head. I know Herman well. Mind you, I know it doesn't look like it but deep down under he is an awfully good man. He does have a problem in that he is awfully stubborn and never rests until he has gotten his way. But for the good of the cause we've simply got to stop this and fast."

"But how?" Ronic asked. "I'll not think of harming him or having him arrested or anything like that to keep him under control."

"I meant, we have to resolve the problem."

"Do you want me to reveal my identity to him and hope he will keep quiet?"

"That would be one way, but I don't know how good he is at keeping secrets. If he were to spill the beans it could result in an invitation to disaster for him and his family, for you and your family, and for the whole effort we have all worked toward. We've discussed all those things many times."

"How did you handle your position with Millie and the kids?"

"I'm a government writer. Documents and other things."

"Well that's certainly true," he chuckled. "And, I might add, policy maker, and chief propagandist, and trusted personal adviser to the king."

The two of them smiled quietly.

"I have an idea," Seiss said at length. "Don't you think this has become a matter potentially affecting all eight gatherings on the island?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, after all, Northside recognizes you as being fully accredited for both fellowship and ministry. Your Eastside meeting of Christians has sent a letter of commendation to all the other meetings of Christians indicating those facts. We all accept that letter. At least most of us accept it. But I know of someone who may have declined to attend a meeting because you were scheduled to preach, the same someone who seemed to evade you at the meeting today. Is this person taking it upon himself to reject the written commendation of Eastside? If so, his own brethren at Northside would be rather interested to know if this gentleman has specific information which would negate the now accepted letter of commendation. I think it is time to nip this thing in the bud before it spreads to the point where all eight meetings have to unhappily become involved."

"I suppose you're right. I've been feeling so sorry for myself and for Maria I guess I didn't think of that. Anyway, if the matter went before one of the local meetings it would draw an unwanted amount of attention."

"You're right on that. But let me have a talk with one of our elders and see if he can get through to Herman."

"Are you going to tell this elder who I am?"

Seiss smiled. "Of course not, I will be very discrete. How about Heinz Truker?"

"Heinz would be perfect. He's Maria's new boss, and a very fair and sympathetic gentleman."

"Besides, he knows the Schulte's very well and the two families have had dinner at one another's houses many times."

Seiss wasted no time in calling Heinz Truker. Although Heinz was unaware that Ronic was actually King Andrae, Seiss did tell him about Herman's unwarranted

suspicions, and that Ronic was unable to satisfy him because of preexisting agreements. Seiss added that he personally knew the details of those commitments, vouching to Heinz that they were perfectly moral and that Herman was out of line in rejecting Ronic's good name and in breaking up what God apparently intended to bring together. He also stressed that, if at all possible, the matter should not be extended to the assembly level.

After he hung up the phone Heinz explained the situation to his wife Hilda and both agreed it would be better to approach the matter in the context of a social call rather than as the formal visit of an elder. That afternoon Hilda called Grace Schulte and, after chatting for a few minutes, invited the family for dinner later on in the week.

"Tell you what," Grace responded, "we were over to your house the last time. Suppose you and Heinz come over to our place. We will have Androckian Turkey and there will be plenty for all."

CHAPTER 28 - RAIN OF TEARS

It was raining heavily the day of the Truker's visit to the Schulte's. Hilda had tried her best to avoid getting wet but her husband's umbrella had been caught in a gust of wind a few weeks ago and an inside-out umbrella is not adequate protection against the especially wet Androckian rain. "You'll just have to run between the raindrops, my dear," Heinz said as the two of them moved briskly toward the Schulte home.

Rosa already had the door open for them as the two drenched visitors escaped from the rainstorm. "My, our weather had no mercy on you two," she observed.

"It surely didn't," Hilda agreed. "That settles it Heinz, I'm going to insist that you buy a new umbrella. You've been going to fix the old one for weeks now."

"You needn't do that, Hilda. It's not my birthday or anything."

"No, but it's 'prevent your wife from getting wet month.'"

When they had wiped the rain from their eyes Grace, Herman, Maria and Rosa all welcomed their guests. Rosa gave them two face towels so they could dry themselves. She and Maria then went with their mom to the kitchen to put the finishing touches on the meal while Herman entertained the guests.

When dinner was ready all six sat down at the big dining room table. The combined culinary skills of Grace and her two daughters had created a very appetizing dinner, replete with fancy trimmings, and the Truker's wasted no time complementing them on it. The relaxed atmosphere was indeed refreshing to all, including those who had worked hard to prepare the feast.

During the meal Rosa asked Hilda, "Did you ever finish that dress you were working on a few weeks ago?"

"Yes I did, Rosa. As a mater of fact I wore it to the meeting last Domineek."

"Oh that was the one?" Rosa exclaimed. "It looked beautiful."

"Thank you for the complement. I'll have to admit it came out a bit better than I had expected."

Grace added, "It did look very nice. By the way, have you noticed that there are quite a few people who are making some of those traditional island designs. I wish I had the skill and the patience to do that. Some of the work is quite detailed."

"It sure is. The natives who created the basic concepts must have been real artisans. I wish I had known some of them."

"By the way," Grace asked, "did either of you get to see Seiss last Sunday? We were disappointed that we didn't see him after the meeting," she added, as she avoided looking at Herman.

"Yes we did. It was so good to see him again."

"How was he feeling?"

"He seemed to be in very good spirits, but he looked awfully haggard. They say he was so close to death for several days."

"I can't imagine why anyone would want to hurt him. He is such a nice man. I wonder why he was visiting with Mr. Trumbore at the Times?"

"I don't know, but Millie told me that if it hadn't been for the first aid Brother Ronic administered in the newspaper office there would have been a funeral instead of a long hospital stay."

Herman looked up in surprise but said nothing. He had not heard about Ronic's involvement with the incident. Maria looked down at the food on her plate as her thoughts centered on the love of her life, and how he was involved during that horrible day at the office. She could almost hear Ronic repeat, "Let's let that business of 'code X-ray' be our little secret."

Heinz studied Maria and could tell she was troubled. Looking toward her he said, "You are very fortunate indeed, Maria, to have as a friend someone like Ronic." Then with a smile he asked, "How are the two of you progressing these days?"

Maria's feelings had begun building up since the first mention of Ronic's name, but now, with Heinz's question she could hide her tears no longer. Putting a napkin to her face she said in a broken voice, "Please excuse me," and quickly went to her room where a stream of salty tears poured forth.

As Maria disappeared into the confines of her room the Trukers looked at Grace, who quickly looked down at her nearly empty plate. They then looked at Rosa who, likewise, looked down, with more than a hint of moisture in her own eyes. Then they looked at Herman who had turned his head in the direction Maria had gone, with a puzzled look on his face.

Grace momentarily put her napkin to her eyes to quickly blot a forming tear, but said nothing.

"I hope I didn't say something which offended Maria," Heinz said sympathetically. "Is there a problem between Ronic and Maria?" he continued, looking at Herman and knowing more than he was letting on.

Herman floundered for words, then said, "Well They are not going together anymore."

"Oh I see. What is the problem? I thought the two of them were as compatible and inseparable as any couple I have known."

"Well, ah I forbade her from seeing him."

Heinz was silent for a few moments. The tension at the table had become so intense it was impossible to hide.

"Really?" Heinz said at last, looking at Rosa and Grace, and finally at Herman. Heinz knew he was purposefully creating an uncomfortable atmosphere for the Schulte family, but this was the only way to get the matter resolved. "Perhaps the two of us ought to retire to the living room to talk about this. It is rather obvious that this has become a serious matter."

Now that the sore subject had been exposed no one was any longer interested in having dessert, so the two men retired to the living room while Grace went to Maria's room and put her arms around her. Rosa and Hilda somberly worked in the kitchen to clean up the dishes and put away the leftovers.

"How did all this come about Herman?" Heinz asked once they were alone in the living room.

"I had the distinct feeling Ronic was up to something no good. He was never in his store. Anyone who owns a store normally takes an interest in it and makes sure he keeps close tabs on it."

"What 'no good' was he up to? What else do you have to go on other than that he is not at the store as often as you think he should be?"

"I can't say for sure. I asked him what other activities he was involved in but he flatly refused to tell me!"

"Why didn't he tell you?"

"I suppose he was ashamed of it. Maybe he is part of the element, who knows? Why else wouldn't he tell me? I don't know! After all I might have been his future father-in-law, and I would certainly expect a son-in-law to confide everything to me."

"Herman, I don't think you have ever seriously analyzed what you are telling me. You are making a very, very, *very* serious charge against a brother. I want to know what you have in the way of definite evidence. Not suspicions, not guesses, not paranoia, but definite, hard evidence!"

After a long silence, in which Herman appeared to be trying to formulate an answer in his mind, Heinz spoke again. "You are quite aware, I am sure, Herman, that Ronic is fully commended by the Eastside meeting, and, in addition, is recognized throughout all eight local Christian gatherings as being a very devoted valuable and outstanding minister of the gospel. If you have something concrete against him that the Lord has brought to light then we need to bring this to the attention of the Eastside brethren. But if not, and this is a very serious 'But if not,' consider that you might be taken to be independently discrediting credentials which the whole Eastside assembly has prayerfully agreed on, in the presence of the Lord.

Herman Schulte remained silent, but Heinz could see that wheels had finally begun to turn inside his head.

"Northside fully recognizes the fellowship of Eastside," he continued. While each local church is distinct from one another they all recognize each other's commitment to the Lord. "God has only one church, you know, and our fellowship down here is based on the one body which exists in heaven. None of our local gatherings claim to be the church, because the church of Christ embodies all who have placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior, regardless of where they might attend. But each of us has a connection with every other Christian. When we meet together we meet in Christ's name, as having in mind the one body. We do not gather as so many individuals without any connection to one another. That means that it doesn't matter who a person is, what business he is in, or even whether he chooses to tell you every detail of his business or his life. A person is worthy of the right hand of fellowship if he professes to be a member of Christ's body and is not known to be involved with immorality. He must not hold doctrinal error of a type that affects the truth of the Godhead, or affects the truth of the person and work of the Lord. That determination was made of Ronic years ago by the Eastside brethren, and has been confirmed over and over by Ronic's excellent, profitable ministry and manner of life exhibited throughout the island. Frankly, Herman, unless you have tangible evidence to the contrary which you would be willing to present to the saints at Eastside, you are seriously in error.

Herman Schulte continued to ponder Heinz's words.

"Don't you see, brother Herman, you, as one man, are tossing out the binding decision which took place in a prayerful assembly of God's people. This is overt failure to submit to the authority of the saints in your own meeting, because your own meeting read and accepted the letter from Eastside. It is substituting your own personal wishes for the decision of a group of godly saints arrived at after extended prayer and discussion. Your Northside brethren would definitely not support you in this. Why, I suppose if you were to continue in this path you could conceivably be disciplined, censured, or eventually even put out of the fellowship altogether. Your meeting might find you guilty of stirring up trouble where no trouble exists."

Herman thought about all that his friend had said. At last he said very quietly, "Yes, I understand what you say Heinz, but why wouldn't he tell me what he is involved with. He told me, and I'm quoting as nearly as I can remember, 'I'm sorry sir, but at the present time I am not at liberty to discuss the matter in more detail. I have stated that this is an honorable, moral, honest endeavor and you will simply have to take me at my word as a Christian brother.' You see, what was I to think?"

"Had you ever considered accepting what he told you as being the truth? Really, there could be many reasons why he did not feel free to tell you all the details of his activities. I myself do not know what those activities might be, but brother Seiss Timnar has told me that he is aware of Ronic's commitments and vouches for their uprightness."

"Seiss told you that?" Herman asked.

"Yes he did. But would you believe Seiss more than you would believe Ronic? You see Herman, you have allowed some hidden suspicions to run away with your good German better judgment. I admonish you, brother Herman, to put away your unwarranted suspicions and trust Ronic. I myself know for a fact Ronic is a very sincere and honest young man. I know he hurts very badly because of your decision to break up the relationship between Maria and himself. In fact, he was almost devastated by it. On the other hand, I have never heard that he has ever said one word against you, in spite of the fact your actions have hurt both him and the one he holds dear to his heart. Yes Herman, I could see today that you have a very charming daughter who happens to have a terribly broken heart, one that only you can mend."

Herman Schulte looked at the floor in a troubled manner while Heinz continued.

"You know, Herman, so many girls would have left home without your blessing over much less than this in order to marry their sweethearts. You happen to have one very worthy daughter and one very honorable future son-in-law, who are both so concerned with honoring father and mother that they both chose to accept a severe inner hurt rather than turn that honor into dishonor. Their faith is being sorely tested, and although they are incalculably hurt, they both have passed the test with honor and integrity. I was told by Seiss that Ronic is very distraught, very overwhelmed by this. Yet, in spite of this he has told Maria not to leave the pathway but to obey her father's wishes, believing that God will work this out in His own way. To me, this says an awful lot for his character and integrity. Now Herman, have you not noticed the sword which has pierced through your lovely daughter's very heart?"

For the last few minutes Herman had been on the verge of breaking, but Heinz's last word was too much. Tears came to his embarrassed eyes. "I love my daughter," he began, "and just didn't want to see her hurt by anyone. But I can see now that I, her own father, have hurt her, terribly." Putting his head down into his hands he moaned, "What have I done? What have I done? I hurt the very one I love, and I hurt the one

she loves. What made me do this? How could either of them ever forgive me?"

"You are a good man Herman. Your daughter loves you very much. Why don't you go to see her? She would like that very much."

A few minutes later, after he had regained his composure and washed his face, Herman knocked on the door to Maria's bedroom.

"Come in," came Maria's barely audible response from within.

Maria's dad opened the door quietly and could see his daughter sitting at her small desk facing the open window. Grace could tell that her husband had a heavy heart and wanted to speak with Maria alone. Leaving her she started for the door, pausing to briefly place her hand on her husband's arm as she left.

Maria's dad walked over to the desk and placed his hand on her arm momentarily. "Maria, I've been a fool. A blind, no good, suspicious, proud old German fool."

Maria looked toward her father and could see tears of sorrow and repentance in his eyes.

"I have deeply wounded you my darling. I have terribly hurt the one I love, the one I wanted never to hurt. And I have hurt, without cause, the one you love"

Herman had to stop. His voice choked up and he could continue no longer.

Maria's tears came afresh, but they were no longer tears of hurt. "Ronic told me you were a good man, Dad. He told me that God was testing both of us. He urged me not to leave the pathway but to honor your requests, and to pray. It has been so hard for me, but now I know he was right, and my weak faith has been made strong."

"Please try to forgive me my darling. My stubborn pride got in the way. I know Ronic is a good boy. I've always known it. It's just that when he declined to tell me everything about himself I imagined the worst, that he was"

"Dad, I forgive you." Throwing her arms around him she added, "And I'll always love you."

The next day Herman Schulte drove his rusty old automobile to the bookstore, getting there early, before either Sarah or Ronic arrived. Parking the car he waited in it across the street. He recalled how he had missed Ronic several times in the past, which was what created the problem in the first place, and he wondered whether he would be as unsuccessful today. It wasn't long, however, before he saw Ronic's motor bike making its way along the city street toward him. Ronic drove the bike to the side of the store, unlocked the door of a small shed attached to the store and put it

inside. Schulte then watched him walk to the front door, unlock it and disappear inside.

Herman got out of his car and walked across the street to the store. Trying the door he found that Ronic had locked it behind him, but looking down the sidewalk he recognized Sarah approaching the store from the bus stop near Gouvernave Square. Recognizing Mr. Schulte, Sarah greeted him and opened the door for him. "You're first in line for all the new releases," she joked.

Ronic was just about to disappear into the basement, to the royal conference room, when Sarah and Herman walked through the door. Seeing both of them he said, "Good morning Sarah. How are you this morning?" Then he added, somewhat ill at ease, "And good morning Mr. Schulte, how nice of you to drop by."

"Good morning, Ronic," Herman replied. "Could I trouble you to speak with you for a few moments?"

Ronic could see that Maria's dad was not in the happiest of moods, but answered as if he had not noticed this. "Why certainly. Why don't we go into the kitchen in back of the store?"

The two of them went up a short rise of stairs at the rear of the store and passed through the door that led to the living quarters of the house proper. As they walked through the living room on the way to the kitchen Herman noticed that it contained no furniture, but that the house, nevertheless, had good living potential. The kitchen, on the other hand, had a table and chairs for four.

"Please have a seat," Ronic offered as he gestured toward one of the chairs and proceeded to sit down himself.

When they were both seated there was a long pause during which Herman Schulte's face appeared to pass through several stages of agony and metamorphosis as he tried to find the right word to start his message. Eventually he spoke.

"Ronic, you're looking at an old fool."

Ronic looked at Herman Schulte in surprise and replied, "I don't understand, sir."

With that beginning, Mr. Schulte agonizingly presented his admission of unwarranted suspicion toward Ronic and humbly asked for his forgiveness. The prayers of Ronic, Maria, Grace, Rosa and several others had at long last been answered.

When Herman had finished, Ronic said at last, "I guess it's time for a tour of the bookstore."

Herman Schulte smiled, as if a heavy load had at last been lifted from his heart. "It's time, my son.... It's time."

CHAPTER 29 - UNVEILING

Several months had passed during which the problems on the island showed improvement, although not at the rapid pace observed initially. Several trials had taken place, not the least of which were those of Hugh Trumbore and Carmine Del Bene. Both of these men were convicted on multiple counts of first degree murder and other capital crimes and were awaiting final sentencing by the judge. The penal code included, amongst other options, lengthy prison time at hard labor, and even public execution. Many of these Androckian laws had been on the books from the inception of the kingdom and most of them reflected the judgments from the days of the original inhabitants of the island. But recently enacted laws also provided that businesses owned by them might also be seized at the time of their arrest and placed in the care of trustees who would continue to operate them. In the case of Trumbore's Comm-Centrale, which included the Rekorda Times, Heinz Trucker had been the caretaker-trustee-editor. Other parts of the Comm-Centrale complex, and of Del Bene's furniture factory, were being operated on a temporary basis by individuals who were responsible to the court system.

Now that the cases of these criminals had been finalized, each of the enterprises and other properties owned by them would be sold on a competitive bid basis. A tax on the proceeds would go to the government and the remainder used to recompense victims of crimes, provide treatment for victims of chemical abuse, and educate and train the unemployed in a number of vocations. Heinz Trucker, with the financial backing of several friends, successfully acquired the Rekorda Times, and Maria had become a full editor, fulfilling one of her fond ambitions.

Ronic had steadily gained the trust of Herman Schulte while, at the same time, he and Maria continued their deepening relationship. Although busy with the clandestine affairs of state Ronic tried hard to find time to be with the object of his affection, and today was one of those all too infrequent days.

It was Domineek afternoon, and Maria had been a dinner guest of Ronic's parents. After dinner the two of them decided to go for an old-fashioned stroll, very old-fashioned, because Androckians had long ago abandoned that practice when the influx of crime put a damper on it. Now that the streets were safer, however, many people were rediscovering the long lost pleasure of the old fashioned walk.

Ronic's home was not far from the beach, and it was not long before the beauty of the sandy beach and rolling waves lured them. Ronic remembered his wild dream and was thankful that today it was no dream. Maria was here walking barefoot in the sand beside him. For real they experienced the pleasure of the tepid tropical waters bathing their feet, the shrill calls of the gulls gliding above their heads, and the comfort of the cooling trade winds blowing through their hair. The scene could not have been more beautiful with the light sandy beach contrasting with the azure sky and the puffy white clouds, and especially the seemingly endless white capped deep

blue ocean meeting the light blue sky at the horizon, a forever away.

At that moment, with only God and nature to see them, they both knew in their hearts that it was time, time to make the commitment of a life long relationship. It was so obvious to both of them. It was, happily, so evident to the families of each, even to Herman Schulte. There simply could be no other alternative.

Ronic knew within himself that the age-old question must be asked of Maria. Maria was waiting for it. Ronic could see that her whole being was at this very moment primed for it. He knew that there would be an immediate and unquestioning acceptance of that commitment of love. It was as if her soul radiated the words, "Speak Ronic, that my life, my joy, my love for you, my desperate longing for you, and my obedience and commitment to you might be satisfied."

And Maria knew that Ronic was at the point of no return, that his love for her, his adoration for her could not be quenched, and that it could only be fulfilled in the divinely honored relationship known as marriage. Both knew in their hearts that they must, they unquestionably must, be husband and wife together forever. Both of the youths knew that the time to settle the question was now. Maria keenly hoped that she would hear Ronic speak those words of commitment to her this afternoon, right now.

"Maria, my dear," Ronic began, "it is time."

Maria's heart beat faster.

"The time for you to know everything has come. Knowing the love I have for you, and the love you have for me, it is imperative that you know everything about me, all the things which, until this moment, have been kept from you. I want you to know the truth, the whole truth."

Maria was somewhat puzzled, and a trifle disappointed. She had expected a marriage proposal, but she thought this a somewhat different way to approach the subject. "The truth, my love? Ronic, you have never lied to me," she said uncertainly.

"Never. But there are certain things you have never been told, things you have a right to know, things that you must know. Come with me to the bookstore. In a relationship of love, the kind of relationship we both contemplate, there cannot be worldly secrets. Our commitment must be based upon both love and trust and knowledge."

Maria smiled, secure in her trust for Ronic. As he gently led her back to civilization she knew that now was the time when Ronic's little secrets were to be revealed, 'secrets' she thought she could practically guess after many months of piecing together bits of information. As they approached the new public telephone on Shore Boulevard, where they would call for a taxi, she pondered these mysteries once

again. It had become rather obvious to her that he had some link with certain people in the government. She knew Leonardo from her visits to the Southside meeting, knew that he was an attorney for the government, and knew that he and Ronic were good friends. She anticipated that Ronic might tell her he was a spiritual consultant for those who had framed the new laws of the land, so certain moral and spiritual precepts might be incorporated into those laws. Or perhaps he was even a prison chaplain, or... whatever. In any case why didn't Ronic simply tell her whatever was on his mind instead of telephoning for a taxi to take them to the bookstore. But that was one thing she liked about Ronic. She never knew what to expect of him and that always made things more interesting.

In the taxi the two of them lightheartedly talked about the little things they shared together and the enjoyable experiences that added to the cement bonding them together.

Soon they were at the store. Ronic paid the driver and they walked hand in hand toward the door. Ronic unlocked it and they both entered the store. He led her up the short flight of stairs at the back of the store leading to the residential part of the small building. Maria had seen it once before. She assumed that if, or rather, *when* she and Ronic married this would be their own little home. It would certainly need some decorating, but with a little work it could be made into a cozy abode for the two of them.

Ronic motioned toward the bare dinner table and pulled out a chair for her. When they were both seated the two of them looked at one another and smiled. After a few seconds Ronic spoke softly.

"Maria, my dear. I have brought you here to show you some things about myself, things which are important for you to know. Some of these things you may already have guessed."

Maria smiled, "I am quite sure you have some kind of connection with the powers that be, but I could never figure out exactly how it all fits together."

"Maria." Ronic spoke slowly and deliberately, his smile fading to seriousness, "I need to tell you that you may not like what you will discover this afternoon. It is possible... that after you learn certain things you may even decide to go your own way . . . without me."

Maria was stunned by the thought. "No . . . no Ronic," she pleaded.

"But," Ronic continued, "whatever happens between us, and I dearly know in my own heart what I want to happen . . . , I want to ask you a personal and very serious favor."

Maria was extremely puzzled. "A favor? Ronic, you know that I would do anything I

could for you."

"I want you to promise, that whatever you hear and see, from this moment until the moment you leave this house, will remain sealed in your heart and in your soul."

A chill, whether of excitement or uneasiness, went through Maria. She looked at Ronic, and he at her. She detected ever so slight a smile in Ronic's otherwise serious face. It was all she needed to put her at ease once again. "I trust you Ronic. Of course I will agree to keep the secret, so long as the thing is good and proper."

"Then come with me."

Ronic led his beloved to the stairs at the side of the living room. Turning on the lights he preceded her down the stairs to the basement. He showed her the basement office where he did the translations, pointing to the papers and books on his desk and explaining where he was in his latest translation.

Maria took it all in eagerly, but while she failed to see anything worthy of high secrecy in the office she kept that opinion to herself.

As if reading her thoughts he said with a smile, "This part is not secret." After explaining one of the problems he had experienced expressing a particular English phrase in the local dialect, Ronic put his arm lightly around Maria's shoulders and led her to a metal door at the back of the office. Unlocking the heavy door he led her in, locking the door behind them.

In the room she could see a conference table surrounded by several comfortable looking chairs. The well-lit room was attractively paneled. There was a telephone on the table, some blank pads of paper and a few pens. In one corner of the room was what looked to her like a television set or computer monitor. Above it was a panel with several mysterious green lights glowing brightly. At the end of the room was a solidly built door with what looked like a combination lock and a heavy security bar.

"We must be getting to the reason for all the secrecy," Maria thought to herself as she looked around the room, and particularly at the panel of green lamps.

Surprisingly, Ronic did not explain anything about the paneled room, or the green lights. Instead, he led her toward the security door. After pressing a button on the panel he pushed some of the buttons on the door and, turning a small knob, pushed the door open. She could see a short dimly illuminated hallway beyond the door.

Ronic looked at Maria, smiled reassuringly, and the two of them ventured into the hallway. Going down a short flight of stairs they came to a second metal door. When that was opened she could see that they had entered a very long hallway, or tunnel. Maria was stunned by the sight and a chill swept through her body. "What is this?"

she asked wonderingly. "Where are we?" her voice echoing disturbingly.

Ronic looked at her and smiled, "You'll see shortly."

Together they walked hand-in-hand. The click of their heels echoed back and forth through the hollow passageway. Maria was amazed at what she was seeing but her faith in Ronic swept away her fears. He did not speak during the trek, and she thought it best not to ask any more questions at that time. The only sound was the resonant clicking as they journeyed onward.

The walk through the tunnel was like a walk on a treadmill. They seemed to be going nowhere. As they continued to walk, more of the same and more of that same greeted their view. Eventually, however a door could be seen in the distance, a door at the end of the tunnel. As they walked, the door seemed to grow larger and larger, until eventually they were there. The sound of the clicking heels ceased. Ronic broke his tunnel silence. "Shall we go in?" he asked.

"Whatever you say," she replied cautiously, happy to exit the unappealing tunnel.

As they entered, Maria was relieved to see an ordinary looking room, not unlike a doctor's waiting room, only larger. The room had three doors, one straight ahead on the far wall, one to the right, and the one leading to the tunnel.

Ronic motioned toward the chairs. "Please have a seat," he requested. "Are you OK?"

Maria looked at Ronic and replied somewhat uneasily, "Sure, I'm all right."

"Let me leave you for about ten minutes. You are perfectly safe here, and I will be right in the next room," Ronic smiled reassuringly.

"This is quite a surprise Ronic," she answered with a touch of humor, "to discover after all this time that you are a 'tunnelman.'"

Ronic laughed quietly. "I'll see you in about ten minutes."

Maria watched as Ronic walked across the room toward the door to the right of the tunnel entrance. He quickly opened the door and quietly closed it behind him.

As her beloved disappeared into the next room her thoughts drifted through the facts she knew about the mysterious side of Ronic. There was the interrupted dinner date, the fact that Ronic admitted observing the antigovernment riot at Gouvernave, and his secrecy which created such severe suspicion in her father that she was almost forced to give up her beloved forever. Then there was the vow of secrecy he required of her, the special room in his basement, and, of course, the long tunnel. "After all," she

chuckled, "not everyone has a tunnel connected to the back of their house."

"Oh how terrifying that tunnel would have been," she thought, "if Ronic had not been there to accompany me through it."

She thought of a book she had read on so called 'near death' experiences of some critically ill people, how, upon recovery some of them recalled having passed through a long tunnel and found themselves in a strange place of beauty beyond the tunnel.

"At least that was not the case with this tunnel," she thought. "I wonder what Ronic is doing in the next room? Why that tunnel anyway? What does all this mean? Where am I?" she reasoned confusedly.

"Maria?" It was Ronic finally calling from the next room. "Come into the room and join me."

Maria instinctively got up from her chair and walked toward the door through which he had disappeared a few minutes earlier. Opening the door she was instantly stunned by the glorious sights which suddenly met her eyes. In front of her was a very large room ablaze with brilliant colors lining floor, ceiling and walls. Stunning decorations adorned the room, the richness and beauty of which she had never before witnessed. Special lamps cast their discrete glows upon the extravagant luxury. Her eyes slowly drifted from one side of the room to the other trying to absorb the glory of the color and furnishings that presented themselves to her sight.

"What do you think of it, Maria?"

She had been so utterly captivated by the overwhelming luxury of the chamber that she had at first failed to see Ronic.

"Do you like it, Maria?" Ronic's voice came from the far side of the large chamber as he stepped into view from behind a large statue.

Maria looked at him across the large chamber and saw him in the far corner. She froze in her tracks. It was Ronic's voice, and the face was Ronic's, but the strange and beautiful clothing he wore Was she dreaming? Or was she having a 'near death' experience? This all couldn't possibly be real. Yet it was real -- Ronic, facing her from the far side of this lavishly decorated room, dressed in expensive, beautiful, strange and magnificent clothing.

"Come to me Maria," Ronic spoke from across the room.

Maria was utterly speechless. All of her strength felt like it had been drained from her. Here, standing in luxury across this room was her beloved Ronic, himself clothed in luxury. Her Ronic! "What was he doing here?" she wondered. "Why? Why has he

put on these magnificent garments? Garments fit only for...."

And suddenly it hit her. "Garments fit for a king. A king. Ronic has on the vestments of...the king."

With that realization Maria's mouth dropped open in utter disbelief and wonder. Although Ronic had called her, her feet remained immobilized, frozen to the floor.

"Maria," Ronic spoke gently, "please come to me my darling."

Slowly a small amount of strength returned to her feet and she was finally able to inch one foot forward toward him, then, a few seconds later, the other. As she continued to inch laboriously toward him she somehow found the strength and courage to speak.

"R... Ronic," she said hesitatingly. "What... what does all of this mean? ... Why are you dressed.... Ronic..., is it not forbidden by the ancient laws of Androck to dress in..., to clothe one's self in the garments of..., of the king?"

"Unless," Ronic suggested gently, "unless you are the king."

A chill of wonder and astonishment flashed through her body. Slowly, ever so slowly, it was beginning to dawn on her. "Ronic is the king? My Ronic?" The realization of the truth had begun to sweep over her as she looked face to face toward him. Was it no longer her beloved looking at her from a few steps away? Was it instead her 'king'? What should she say to her king. She recalled the many happy times she and Ronic had experienced together; the joking, the tender smiles, the hand in hand walks of two in love. But this was not that kind of Ronic. This man in front of her was her king. Or was it her beloved? She was so confused. Her mind raced like a whirlwind.

"Maria, my love, it is me, Ronic. Come to me."

Slowly her confidence returned and she found strength to approach him. But now that she was directly before him she knew not what to say. Whether to speak to him as her king, or as her beloved.

Ronic looked down into her eyes, and she up into his. As she looked, she slowly began to see the eyes and features of her beloved again. He smiled at her, and she at him. Her eyes flowed with tears.

Ronic placed one arm around her and blotted her tears with a royal handkerchief. She closed her eyes, shutting out the lavish scene, and once again the warmth and security and closeness of her beloved were joyously familiar to her as she lay her head against his shoulder. Ronic hugged her close to himself. He knew that she needed time to absorb what had just now been disclosed to her, and she needed to

do that with the feeling of security that his gentle arms provided.

After several minutes Maria broke the silence. "I expected that you might be chaplain of the king's servants, but I guess I missed a clue or two somewhere."

Ronic smiled, then gently escorted her to the side of the room, to a dressing room filled with magnificent clothing. He picked up a beautiful robe and put it over her shoulders. She looked in the large mirror.

"It's ... so beautiful," she said in a voice that had scarcely regained its strength after the multiple shocks minutes ago.

"It is yours... if you want it. It is the queen's robe."

"I'm just not used to this," she answered awkwardly. "It's just that we have always been plain people."

"Like the Amish in North America?"

"No, but I'm used to inexpensive clothing, small houses, simple furniture. It's all we've ever been able to afford. This is a totally different world. I . . . well, it would be difficult for me to get used to it all at once."

"We think alike, Maria. That is one reason why I don't want the public to know that I am their king. It would isolate me, and all associated with me, from everything and everyone whom I know. It would be like wealth in a vacuum. Being a billionaire on a desert island with only a palm tree to share your money with. Tell you what. Why don't you wander around in the big room for a couple of minutes while I go into my dressing room and get back into my 'human' clothes."

Maria went back into the royal room. Everything was so beautiful it was difficult to concentrate on the theme of the room. But eventually she began to decipher it. On one side of the room she saw carvings representing the native inhabitants, and more carvings representing the Europeans who arrived. Then there were the instruments of death and certain tools, symbols of burial. Then there were carvings of men and women who were struck with grief and sorrow over what had happened. Then, men, women and children looking to a happy future. Inlaid with precious stones was the message spelled out in the local dialect,

"MAY THEIR MEMORIES ALWAYS BE CHERISHED IN OUR HEARTS."

Then there was the inscription,

"ΒΑΣΙΛΕΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΝΔΡΟΚΟΥ"

Maria puzzled over those unfamiliar characters.

"Have you figured it all out yet?" Ronic said as he rejoined Maria.

"Some of it, but I don't know what to make of those words over that big chair."

"That 'big chair' is the king's throne. And the words are, 'Basileia tou Androkou,'" he said distinctly. "Greek for 'Kingdom of Androck.' And you, my dear, are still adorned in the robe of the 'basilissa,' the queen.

Maria looked down realizing she had been walking around clothed with the royal robe all that time.

"See how easy it is to get used to?" Ronic chided as he removed the garment from her shoulders. "Let's go back to the store, to reality. You have a lot to think about. A lot to sort over in your mind."

As the two of them returned through the tunnel Ronic told the story of the strange old man, the summons to the royal residence, and the plans made with Leonardo, Bruno and Seiss.

"Then it was God's will for this to happen to you," she said matter-of-factly after he had finished with the story. "How difficult it must have been for you to accept the mandate. And how you did it without having any experience as a king."

"It wasn't..., isn't easy."

"And when I remember the difficult time Dad gave you. Think of it, Dad giving the King of Androck a hard time."

Both had a hearty laugh that eased the long-standing tension of the moment.

"How I would like to tell Dad that he cast the King of Androck out of his house and forbade him the company of his daughter."

"But you must not tell him Maria. That must remain a secret for at least several more months, perhaps even several more years. To reveal it would mean danger for your whole family, for you and for me, and force us into isolation."

"I know that now Ronic. It will remain our secret."

"Maria," Ronic said seriously, as they finally entered the basement of the store, "I want to take you to your home now so you can think about all that you now know, and what it all means insofar as the two of us are concerned. Think about whether you could really be happy in this particular situation, as you now know it to be.

"But Ronic, just having you is all I"

"I want you to go home," Ronic interrupted gently but firmly, "and think it all through. Tomorrow...."

"But I know the answer tonight Ronic."

"Tomorrow! Not tonight. Tomorrow."

Ronic smiled, as Maria resigned herself to the fact that she did not get her way -- this time.

"Tomorrow," she answered with a resigned smile.