

THE PIONEERS

Vol. 18

Year of Upheavals

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Nuptials

6 Prusménu/26 November 631/13

Melita High School's auditorium was cool and a bit damp for Jordan and Tiamaté's wedding, but it was festively decorated with flowers and streamers. The couple exchanged their wedding vows—"verily, we will all abide by the will of God"—then after applause and a closing prayer chanted by Kekanu, everyone came forward to congratulate them, their parents, and their grandparents.

"I can't believe this gathering," said Aryéstu to Thornton and Randu, as they watched the reception line.

"The only people missing are the queen and prince," said Thornton. "We didn't know Princess Awster and Duke Kandékwes planned to attend until yesterday afternoon."

"That must have caused a scramble!" said Randu.

"Major Aisendru almost had a heart attack, to think the princess was attending his daughter's wedding. There were security issues, the tables had to be rearranged, and it all had to happen fast. I'm glad I wasn't involved."

"Who invited her? Your dad?" asked Randu.

Thornton nodded. "There was no plan to make this a big wedding, originally, but dad was talking to General Roktekester and he asked about the wedding, so dad invited him, then he invited Kandékwes without thinking he'd accept and he suddenly did. Same with Werétrakester. I think dad went overboard."

“But surely Aisendru was put out, since he’s paying for the wedding!” said Aryéstu.

“They have a difficult relationship,” conceded Thornton. “But needless to say, we’re helping with the wedding costs.”

“Where are Jordan and Tiamaté planning to live?” asked Randu.

“In the house in Melwika. Amos and May are around very rarely, so their area has been remodeled.”

“And the wedding was supposed to be outside, in the Melita rose garden?” asked Aryéstu.

“Well, first it was supposed to be in Endraidha, but that didn’t work out. Then the Melita rose garden was chosen; it was created so people could have weddings and things in a pretty outdoor space. And usually Melita has lovely weather this time of year. But who would have thought there’d be frost in Melita in late Prusménu? Even Melwika doesn’t have frost now!”

“I was amazed, driving down from Mæddoakwés,” said Aryéstu. “I figured I’d get south of the frost zone, but everything has been killed all the way to here. How much farther south did the frost go?”

“I don’t know, but dad said all of Melita was frosted. The southern half of the township is usually frost free all winter, and here it is, not even winter yet! It’s worrisome.”

“The price of fresh fruits and vegetables has already gone up,” agreed Aryéstu. “Sumilara and the Long Valley will make a lot of money this winter. Any idea what’s going on?”

Thornton shook his head. “In the last decade there have been very severe winters and very mild ones. This might be a trend, or not. I asked Gwiweru about it yesterday. He said that if a cooling trend gets started, it is reinforced for a while because the sea is warm, so the cool air blowing over the sea picks up moisture and makes clouds, and the clouds reflect sunlight into space and cool the world further. That happens, though, only if there’s a strong west wind blowing the cloudiness over the eastern shore; if there’s an east wind the cloudiness gets blown over the mountains west of the sea and the moisture is wrung out as rain or snow. We have a strong east wind right now and a strong cold gyre from the north and south poles.”

“Does he think it’s caused by falling carbon dioxide levels?”

“He’s backing away from that speculation. We really don’t have reliable data for the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere more than three years ago. It makes sense that CO₂ levels should be falling. The drowned forests around and north of Sumilara are rotting and releasing carbon dioxide slowly into the atmosphere, but huge arid and semiarid areas have become prairie or even forest land and are pulling the gas out of the atmosphere. We know so little about these things, we can only guess about the results.”

“That’s good to know. If we have a severe winter and a long, cold spring, it could be very disruptive to the economy. That’s what I worry about.”

“It seems to me that inflation has surged in the last year,” said Randu. “The cost of everything went up. Arjdhura Génadema is spending almost ten percent more.”

“That’s about right,” agreed Aryéstu. “The development program has caused a lot of shortages, including labor, and that has pushed up the cost of wages as well as goods. But at least we have nearly full employment. I never would have thought that was

possible. And economic growth has continued to average close to ten percent per year after inflation. I thought for sure it would be about seven percent this year, but no, it has been ten percent. We discovered that declining transportation costs, by themselves, are causing about three percent a year of economic growth! People are still discovering the advantages of buying something from another province and are saving money because of roads and trucks.”

“Really?” Randu laughed at that.

“Sumilara’s one of the big beneficiaries, too; economic output there’s up twenty-two percent and prices are up only seven percent. The new ferry run to Sipadananga has cut shipping costs, the newly concreted main road has helped, and the new phone line has improved communication; almost a third of the increase has occurred in the last two months, and there were no price increases during that time! On the other hand, Kërda has nothing to sell and the annual pilgrimage has grown only ten percent per year lately, so its economy is up only six percent. Arjakwés, Lewésipa, and Rudhisér are strongest. Most tribal areas are growing slowly.”

“That’s not a surprise,” said Thornton, growing bored of economic analysis, which Aryéstu was inclined to offer any time and place. “It looks like the couple is on their way to their table, so I guess the rest of us can find our places.” Randu nodded and the three of them headed to their tables.

Jordan and Tiamaté stood at their seats before sitting. “I think we had better let Princess Awster sit first,” Jordan whispered.

“Yes, I agree.” Tiamaté looked out over the room, which was filled with folding chairs and tables. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many tables and chairs!”

“It is amazing; room for four hundred people. So, how much of this gathering will we remember in a few years?”

“I don’t know, it’s all a blur to me! And think, we have another day of reception after this!”

“Though that’s only for family, at least!” Jordan looked at Awster and Kandékwes, who were standing four seats away. His father, Lua, Chris, and Liz were in between. “We don’t want to sit before you do,” he explained, speaking loudly enough for them to hear him above the crowd.

“Please, you’re the bride and groom,” replied Awster.

“Let’s all sit at the same time, then,” replied Tiamaté. She looked at Awster and Kandékwes, and the four of them carefully sat simultaneously.

Awster smiled at that. “She’s charming,” she said to Chris and Liz.

“Yes, we’re pleased,” agreed Chris.

“Were you surprised when Jordan decided to marry someone without aristocratic blood, and part Sumi besides?” asked Kandékwes.

“Not really,” replied Chris. “It is not the Bahá’í way to arrange marriages. This has surprised some people and occasioned several newspaper articles about their wedding, but it is our standard practice.”

“I think that’s probably wise, in an ideal world,” agreed Awster. “Arranged marriages can be loveless and tense.”

“Well, our’s isn’t!” injected Kandékwes.

“Indeed, my dear, we are blessed, but not everyone is.”

“Many non-arranged marriages on Gædhéma are loveless and tense as well,” replied Liz. “Both types of marriage can work well, but in an ideal world the couple should make the decision to marry, and then the parents should approve or disapprove.”

“Many arranged marriages are really strategic alliances,” said Awster. “That may produce a poor or weak marriage.”

“We’re moving into a world where families are struggling much less for survival,” agreed Chris. “Under those circumstances, marriage for love is a luxury humanity can afford. The result overall will be better, though even marriages based on love will fail sometimes.”

At that moment a waiter stopped by to deliver bread to everyone, so the conversation paused for a moment. “Now, what was the vow they exchanged?” asked Awster. “*Wéri, we tuto enbédhérmé gwétom Estoí?*”

“Correct; ‘verily, we will all abide by the will of God,’” replied Liz. “In Bahá’í marriage, the woman does not promise to obey the husband or vice versa; they promise to obey God. The ‘we all’ presumably implies the entire family—their children—as well, so it is a family covenant with Esto.”

“What a perfect vow,” said Awster, nodding. “I must say, I am impressed by your religion, Lord Chris and Lady Liz. One prays every day, studies the divine guidance daily, and sacrifices—sacrifices for Esto directly by fasting every spring and sacrifices for others through acts of service.”

“No drinking alcohol—that’s an unfortunate law, though,” quipped Kandékwes. He looked around. “Come to think of it, where’s the wine?”

“There won’t be any; the couple requested it because they are Bahá’ís,” replied Chris. He didn’t mention the fact that Aisendru was quite upset by the decision.

“Don’t worry, you’ll have a good time,” chided Awster. She put her bread down and picked up the wedding program. “I really like this prayer.” She held up the program so Liz could see it.

“That’s the ‘remover of difficulties,’ and it is popular with Bahá’ís.”

“I can see why.” She moved the booklet far enough from her eyes so that the text was in focus without glasses and read several prayers. “These must be from Esto.”

“Not here,” cautioned Kandékwes.

Awster ignored him. “Lord Chris, how are the village development efforts?”

“We sent out three youth teams this summer; Jordan led one and met Tiamaté on it. The teams have helped about thirty local Bahá’í communities organize themselves better, plus they brought about a thousand people into the Faith. The four conferences were remarkably successful also; about six thousand people attended at least one class that related to development, such as health, agriculture, handicrafts, or organizing a business. That doesn’t include classes on specifically Bahá’í subjects.”

“Have any projects resulted from the conferences yet?”

“We know of a project to raise turkeys in Rudharudha, a village north of Néfa, and an adult literacy effort in Mædhpéla. We keep hearing of little, personal projects as well.”

“It’s a start.”

Chris nodded. “It’s a bit slow, but the Central Spiritual Assembly is looking into a big literacy project with volunteer teachers, mostly génadema students. As you know,

from the beginning of time, villages have been set up to make the inhabitants fairly passive. They aren't used to the idea that they can get together, choose leaders through a process of spiritual voting, and work on projects for their common betterment. The Central Spiritual Assembly is encouraging such projects by providing up to a third of the funding, assuming the village provides another third as money and a third as labor. We're now looking at ways to change that formula because it isn't stimulating enough of a response."

"Where's all the money coming from; your family?" asked Kandékwes.

"We contribute, of course, but so do other Bahá'í businessmen and professionals, and thousands of Bahá'ís make small contributions as well."

"Sacrifice," agreed Awster. "I'm sure you wish it were going faster, Lord Chris, and I share that wish as well, but compared to everyone else, it's miraculous! Half the grants of the development corps are wasted, as you know. The problem is that we never know what half will prove to be the waste. The regional tomis are struggling."

"Some are doing better than others," corrected Kandékwes, for the Jérdomais Tomi in that area was doing fairly well.

"Development is not done efficiently by money alone," replied Chris.

"Development requires changes in attitudes. People will develop themselves if the right set of conditions is created."

"And what conditions are those?" asked Kandékwes.

"If the environment is predictable, the people are trustworthy, and everyone is encouraged to think of ways to improve the world around them, people will progress. Take any of those three things away and add money as an incentive and you will get

some development, but it will be inefficient. Money added to an environment where all three of those conditions are poor will produce nothing at all. Too much money where all three conditions are strong will ruin everything because selfishness will arise.”

“And religion is needed to strengthen all three,” said Awster.

“Government can do a lot, but the right combination of values is the key,” replied Chris.

“And Bahá'u'lláh has brought those,” said Awster.

“I believe that is true,” agreed Chris. He glanced at Liz, who looked calm but was amazed that Awster had, in effect, declared her faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Even Kandékwe, ever practical, even Machiavellian in outlook, looked pensive.

The next course of dishes arrived just then and they began to eat. Chris looked across the room at four hundred guests, all sitting on chairs at tables with tablecloths, fancy china, and silverware, guests wearing almost western-style manufactured clothing, and marveled at the vast changes that Éra had seen in almost thirteen years, mostly because of his family. A third of the guests were royalty, military officers, or members of the aristocracy, and all of them had printed wedding programs filled with Bahá'í scripture. Many were seated next to Bahá'í guests, who were doctors, college professors, businessmen, or students. The wedding no doubt would have some important long-term results.

The reception went until 10 that evening, when the guests began to depart. Jordan and Tiamaté went to the new Melita Palace Hotel for the night; the Mennea clan retired to their relatively new house a few blocks away. Aisendru and family took a taxi back to

their new home in Endraidha but returned the next morning for a second day of wedding celebrations at the Mennea house.

The Melita mansion, which had been finished two months earlier, was a large brick structure with two large rooms on the first floor capable of seating over one hundred guests. A large, advanced kitchen adjoined the public spaces, as did a smaller family room where the family was gathered at that moment. The rest of the house had four large bedrooms with private bathrooms and four more bedrooms that shared a bathroom, filling the upstairs of the main part of the house and both floors of a wing. It had cost Chris Mennea 40,000 dhanay, money he had very reluctantly spent but now was glad he had.

“Have the kids arrived from the hotel yet?” asked Aisendru, as he entered.

“No, not yet, but it’s early,” replied Chris. “So, you had a safe trip home last night?”

“Yes, the taxi was very fast; so was the one this morning. We’re glad to be here. Our house in Endraidha has no interior heating and was very cold this morning! We had frost last night!”

“Frost in Endraidha!?” said Chris. The army base was built almost exactly on the equator. “I don’t think that’s ever happened before.”

“It hasn’t. Did you see the article in the *Royal Standard*?” Aisendru held up the latest issue, which had come out just that morning. “The priests in Kerda made a pronouncement three days ago that the unseasonably cold weather is an expression of Esto’s displeasure because so many people are converting to the Bahá’í Faith.”

“Really?” Chris reached out and took the weekly paper. He read the article, Liz, Lua, and Behruz crowding around to read it as well.

“I doubt very many people will be persuaded,” said Sarédaté, as they read. “Their credibility is at a low point.”

“Still, another wave of cold makes them look right,” replied Chris, concerned.

“This is terrible,” said Behruz, looking at another article with the headline “Army Tests New Weapon.” He began to read and tears came to his eyes.

“Which article?” Aisendru couldn’t see Behruz’s tears behind the paper, but heard the upset in his voice.

“The article about the army testing rifles and pistols,” replied Lua.

“Terrible? What’s terrible about that?”

“You have no idea the anguish you are bringing into the world!” replied Behruz strongly, looking at the army major. Aisendru was speechless by the outburst, uncertain where it came from. Behruz crumpled back onto the couch near him and Lua sat with him to comfort him.

“Behruz’s father was killed with a gun by robbers when Behruz was just a boy,” explained Chris quietly. “The army thinks it’s developing a weapon for its own use, but guns will leak out, artisans will figure out how to make them, and pretty soon they’ll be widely available. When that happens they will be used by criminals and trouble makers, so the police will have to have them as well. The result will be a more violent world and the army won’t have any more of an advantage than it has now.”

“I’m sure the army command and the palace have considered those factors when they decided to manufacture guns,” replied Aisendru defensively. “I’ve seen both the rifle and the pistol in action; they’re very effective.”

“Of course; that’s why everyone will want one.”

“You’ve let loose a terrible evil on the world!” Behruz wailed.

“And your family hasn’t?” retorted Aisendru, angry.

“Let’s not do that,” said Sarédaté.

“This world is changing in many ways and we’re trying to make the changes as positive as possible,” replied Chris calmly. “But the last thirteen years have been very disruptive for many.”

“The army has changed beyond recognition,” exclaimed Aisendru. “It isn’t just the reading, the courses, the armored vehicles, and the explosives; soldiers are ignoring Endro or even Esto and Widumaj, and their loyalty to the crown seems compromised. But I can’t blame that on your family, and I apologize if I offended you.”

“That’s alright, no offense taken,” replied Chris, glancing at Behruz. “Education does that; if you teach people to think they may become better soldiers and citizens, but they may also become less loyal, unless one teaches loyalty in a new way.”

Just then the front door opened and the servants greeted Jordan and Tiamaté. Everyone stopped talking and listened to the footsteps as the newlyweds made their way back to the family room. As they entered, everyone rose to greet them. The two of them seemed to glow in a way only newly weds could.

“Welcome,” said Chris and Aisendru mouthed the same words, even though he wasn’t the host.

“Thank you,” replied Jordan.

“Are you rested?” asked Aisendru.

“Yes, father, though that was quite a party last night!” replied Tiamaté.

“We’ll recover in a few days,” added Jordan. “So, we have three hours before the big dinner?”

“Yes; are you hungry?” asked Lua.

“No, the hotel delivered breakfast to our door!” said Tiamaté. “It was very nice.”

“Where are you going tomorrow?” asked Aisendru.

“Melwika,” replied Jordan. “We have a week before the next term starts at the génadema, so I plan to show her around town, and we’ll buy a few things for our place.”

“And you’ll be going to génadema?” asked Sarédaté, trying not to look excited by the answer she anticipated. Sarédaté was illiterate; Aisendru had discouraged her from learning to read.

Tiamaté nodded. “Yes, there’s a place for me.”

“You have a scholarship, right?” asked Aisendru, sounding disinterested.

“I did, but now I’ve married into a family that can pay the tuition, so I have to pay.”

“If she gets a scholarship now, it’ll look like favoritism, so we’ll just pay,” explained Chris.

Aisendru nodded. “Well, then, get a good education and do something important for this world.”

Tiamaté was surprised by her father’s supportive comment. “Thank you, father, I will!”

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323.

Power

Prusménu 13/621

“What is going on?” asked Chris, rhetorically. He tossed the *Melwika Nues* down on the floor in frustration.

“Meméjékwu’s Prime Minister as well as Prince,” replied Amos, sitting in an easy chair next to him. “He can appoint or fire provincial governors.”

“He can; but should he, when they’re doing a good job? Déolu’s devoted to the North Shore province. He’s seen the economy almost double and has overseen Bellédha’s turnaround. Gugéndu’s cleaned up his act fairly well and Tripola’s doing well.”

“What about Yusbéru? Kerda’s struggling.”

“True, but he’s the hereditary Duke! He hasn’t done anything wrong. His problem is that the priests are opposed to factories, they’re opposed to a second high school for the province, they’re opposed to any expansion of the génadema, they were against improvement of the western road into the valley, and they are constantly pressing for a larger fraction of the taxes. He has no garrison to support him, either. And the men appointed as governors; I’ve barely heard of them! They’re yes men surrounding the Prince.”

“Klusanu Klusunu is on the Board of South Shore Province’s tomi, right?”

“He’s the only one I know. His father is Lord of Bakagras, a rather small and obscure village with no industry. He has a year of business training and didn’t do well; I investigated his school records before interviewing him for the tomi board. The prince

wanted him on the board, so there really wasn't much need to interview him. He didn't strike me as very capable."

"I've met Yimu Manuagras. He's an ambitious son of a farmer from Manuagras with some education, but he was very prejudiced against Khermdhuna."

"Manuagras is a narrow and prejudiced place; half the population was essentially enslaved until five years ago. How did you meet him?"

"Four years ago he was sent by the lord to ask about free electricity for the public buildings, including the lord's house of course. The staff explained to him that everything costs money and offered to show him around the hydroelectric plant so he could see what it took to make electricity. Instead, he insisted on seeing me, so I met with him, repeated the same arguments, and turned him down. He was angry."

"Just what we need. The only thing I know about Weranokaru is that he's a major in the army. I bet Perku knows him, so maybe we should ask him."

"What's this going to do with the tomis?"

"That's what worries me. None of the tomis in those three provinces are doing well. The South Shore Board voted themselves a salary of 2,000 dhanay per year—which they have already paid to themselves—plus one percent of all profit to each of them. All of the boards want to deviate from the industrialization plans handed to them and pursue something grandiose, and if it doesn't make money they want subsidies. They aren't managing construction well and are hiring their friends to build the factories at huge profits. I've been politely writing them and explaining the basic principles of economics, and they are all ignoring me. But Meméjékwu holds me responsible for their efforts. I

need to write the prince a very clear letter about this, but I don't dare without Aryéstu's advice."

"He can tell you what will work."

"Exactly, and reinforce the message. Until this summer I thought the prince understood economics reasonably well. But now I can see that he thinks he's powerful enough to override economic principles."

"That's serious."

"Exactly." Chris shook his head. "Maybe Wérétrakester can knock some humility into him, or the Queen. No one else can do it."

"And the longer they wait, the harder it'll be."

"And I had better be careful about getting involved; it's very dangerous for us. But doing nothing could be dangerous for us, too, because if the prince gets powerful enough he could move against us. We have plenty of enemies."

"That's for sure, and the number hasn't decreased much."

"No, no matter how nice we try to be."

Just then the lights in the house's grand room went out. Chris looked up at the fixtures. "Another power failure."

Amos shook his head sadly. "This extreme cold is causing all sorts of problems. A lot of people are running as many electric lights as they can to heat their houses, and businesses are brightly lit to attract customers."

"Still, it's only 9 a.m.; midnight on the Western Shore! We should be drawing power from there!"

“The cold is causing the lines to fail. Lately, half the power failures have been system-wide, too. We have a real power grid, so the whole thing gets dragged down at once.” Just then the lights flickered back on. “They’ve cranked up Mēlwika’s two hydro plants and Gordha’s plant to full power and cut us off from the rest of the grid, I bet. It usually takes about half a minute.”

“What would Mēddoakwēs be doing?”

“Drawing off of the Dhudhuba plant. I bet the line has shorted out through the northern or southern shores, where it’s coldest. They’ll get it fixed in a few hours. We need more lines so that if one fails, we can route around it more effectively. Mēlwika can’t run its own hydro at full capacity for more than two hours; it pulls down the reservoirs and that cuts into the power output. Besides, that shot of power is needed for the eclipse. We usually turn off the Arjakwēs and Pēskakwēs almost completely at night to fill the reservoirs. In the morning, we run off of western shore hydro because everyone’s asleep over there.”

“Do you need to go?”

Amos shook his head. “Rudhkrisu is an excellent manager; he doesn’t need my help. I’ll call him before I go to the lab, though. I need to know what happened.”

“I had better get to my office, too,” said Chris. “It’s going to be a long, hard day. Income is crashing as a result of the frosts in Mēlita.”

“Long term damage?”

Chris nodded. “Olive trees around here that are six hundred years old have been killed! Peach orchards here and citrus orchards in southern Mēlita have been wiped out. I

hear winter vegetables have been killed in Kwolone land, Pértatranisé, even plateau areas of Sumilara.”

“It’s really bad; I’ll be getting another report from Pértatranisé later today. Got to go.” Amos rose and waved. Chris nodded and went to put on his coat; he had to go across the street to his office as well.

The lights were burning brightly in Jordan and Tiamaté’s apartment that night when Randu and Nina arrived. “I was afraid you wouldn’t make it!” said Jordan in Eryan as he welcomed them in.

“Thank you,” replied Randu, in Sumi. “But we have the génadema’s car, and the roads are in reasonably good shape, so we got here without much trouble.”

“I even cooked supper on the gas stove!” exclaimed Tiamaté, pointing to a stove in the next room. “I hesitated to use it, I was afraid of it, but it turns out it’s very easy and convenient.”

“Gas stoves are great,” agreed Nina. “We have one in Arjdhura, now, thanks to the gas line. But in this big house I’m surprised you have a stove at all! Don’t you have a cook?”

“This house has three stoves,” replied Tiamaté. “There’s a big main kitchen next to the great room and two small kitchens, one upstairs on this side and one upstairs on the other side in Thornton and Lébé’s apartment.”

“It was strange walking in the front door, saying hello to Chris, Liz, and Lua, then coming upstairs,” said Randu.

“We usually eat with everyone downstairs, but we plan to do some entertaining on our own,” said Jordan. “In fact, you’re our first guests.”

“An honor,” said Randu. “You’ve been moved in just ten days, right?”

“Right,” said Tiamaté. “I first saw Mēlwika ten days ago. Jordanu insists it usually isn’t this frigid!”

“This has been the worst!” replied Nina. “There’s never been a winter like this.”

“Here, let’s sit and eat,” said Jordan. “You must be hungry.”

They all sat at the dining table in Jordan and Tiamaté’s small apartment; it had a living room, a kitchenette that had a separate door to the outside so that others could use it if they wanted to, a bathroom, a large bedroom, and a small bedroom that they were using as an office. Amos and May had a bedroom on the other side of the kitchenette.

Tiamaté dished out a rich stew of rice, water chestnuts, potatoes, carrots, and chicken while Jordan poured everyone glasses of carbonated water. They all ate quietly, it being so good that no one wanted to talk at first. “This is excellent zerumu,” said Randu.

“Thank you,” said Tiamaté, pleased he liked it. “This is the first time I cooked it on my own.”

“Her mother has been giving her a crash course in cooking for the last two months,” added Jordan.

“It paid off,” said Nina. “I like the potatoes; a nice addition.”

“My parents are coming here on Primdiu if the weather permits, and I’ll make it again for them. I hope they like the potatoes, too, it was my idea!”

“How are your classes?” asked Randu. “I hear you’re taking two during this short term. That’s a lot.”

“They’re fine. Introduction to Psychology is rather difficult, but the Eryan literature course overlaps a lot with several courses I’ve already taken, so it’s reasonably easy. Mēlwika Gēnadēma’s hard, but I have the time to devote to the courses.”

“Good, because I want you to move forward as quickly as you can,” said Randu. “Arjdhura Gēnadēma needs female faculty, Tiamaté. Nina teaches one course; that’s it.”

“Gēnadēma teaching really isn’t my strength,” added Nina quickly.

“Me?” asked Tiamaté. “I’ve barely completed one year of courses!”

“That’s why I said you need to move quickly. I’ve got about one hundred Sumi students at any time; 96 men and 4 women. We need you, Tiamaté. By summer you’ll have close to two years and a dwoyeri. I’ve heard you present; you’re very good. You already have the confidence, so now you need more knowledge and some skills.”

“Thank you so much, Randu, I’m very encouraged by your kind words,” said Tiamaté, with emotion rising in her voice. “It means a lot.”

“What are you majoring in?” asked Nina.

“I don’t know yet, but there are so many interesting subjects. Jordanu’s doing development studies and I find it fascinating.”

“I need someone to teach psychology in Sumi; keep that in mind,” said Randu. “We have no women physicians on Sumilara. No Sumi is studying the new field of public health that the medical school’s starting this year.”

“There’s not enough in a lot of fields,” agreed Tiamaté. “I’ll go into one of them, I’m sure. I’d be crazy not to. This entire family I’ve married into, teaches.”

“I’m teaching nursing,” said Nina. “Four different courses every year. I may learn a fifth one soon. But that’s all we can offer nurses who can’t understand Eryan. Doctors

in Anartu offer a few more. But even the doctors there have incomplete medical school education.”

“Whatever she studies, she can teach some of those courses this summer,” said Jordan. “I’ll continue developing my Sumi, too, so I can teach development and maybe business courses this summer.”

“Where? Arjdhura or Anartu?” asked Randu. “With the new ferry runs via Sipadananga, we’re now two and a half hours from Anartu. We’ve already seen an increase in students as a result.”

“I think we can do both,” replied Jordan. “I think we should do both. If we live in the Melita house some of the time, we’ll be much closer to Arjdhura and can get to your génadema more easily.”

“And there are almost a thousand Sumis living in Swadlendha and the towns just south of Melita,” added Tiamaté. “Maybe there should be courses in Sumi down there.”

“We’ve considered it,” agreed Randu. “I doubt there are enough potential students, but we should give it a try. There are a thousand Sumis here in Melwika and not enough are taking courses in Sumi to offer very many regularly at the genadema. Arjdhura Génadema survives because of commuters from the island.”

“When you get the time, I hope you can pursue more Bahá’í contacts in the Sumi community here,” said Nina. “We made a lot of friends and some people became Bahá’ís, but many of them have moved since.”

“That’s why we invited you to dinner!” said Tiamaté. “I think this month I should concentrate on my classes, but next month if I’m feeling more settled, I want to start a

Ruhi Book One course in Sumi. We have a lot of contacts. A lot of Bahá'ís have cousins here, and they're curious to learn more."

"We have a list of twelve or thirteen people to contact," added Jordan.

"Sumilara gained how many new Bahá'ís in the last year? Three hundred? And almost everyone heard of the Faith. I'm being asked to provide a génadema course about the Faith," said Randu.

"But it won't bring in many Bahá'ís; it can't have that as its purpose," said Nina.

"It'll help," said Jordan. "Do you have contacts here you can give us?"

Randu nodded. "Definitely. We'll come to a class or two, to encourage our friends to come."

"Great!" said Tiamaté. "We want to start a Sumi devotional meeting in the house here, too, but we need to wait a month or two. We can only start so much at a time!"

"Don't overdo it," agreed Randu. "But on the other hand, we have to reach out to the Sumi expatriates with the Faith. I sense that in the next few years the Faith may grow explosively. We may be on the verge of it, especially on Sumilara where we have relatively little opposition. We need to reach the expatriates when they get more interested in the Faith as well."

"We agree," said Jordan. "That's what we want to do."

The next week brought more administrative changes: Lord Estodhéru was replaced as Duke of Lɛwésɛpa. "I'm still in a state of shock," he said to Chris, after visiting the palace. "I had no hint beforehand that this was to happen; I just got a phone call that I had to come to the palace immediately. They wanted me here at 9 a.m., which is 2 a.m. for me!

And we're having a big snowstorm in the southern hemisphere right now, so I had to leave almost immediately; they called me at midnight in Mèddoakwés! I had nine hours."

"You should have left immediately and driven straight here, so you could rest and prepare yourself."

"I didn't want to awake everyone here at 6 a.m. or call you at 1 a.m. and tell you I was on the way!" Estodhéru shook his head. "The Prince was actually very kind and thanked me for my 'dedicated service.' He gave me a beautiful, jeweled sword; it's in the car outside with my driver. Very nice. But Lèwésa now has a governor to 'routinize and modernize the economy.' "

Chris laughed. "Lèwésa has the best organized economy of any province, including Arjakwés."

"Thank you! They want the factories, Chris. He pressed me about a provincial tomi and moving all the factories into it."

"They belong to the towns."

"And that will continue; we will fight him in the courts over that. I will remain absolutely loyal to the crown and the monarchy, but I will not roll over and play dead where the rights of the towns and the residents are concerned! He implied he wanted our factories added to the *South Shore Tomi*, also. That's another way of saying the profits will go to Tripola and the prince's cronies there, and not to our people. That translates into less money for expansion of our manufacturing and lower salaries. Simple as that."

"I agree. Who's the new governor?"

"An army colonel named Elkrisu."

"Who the hell is he?"

“I have no idea, I had never heard of him before and haven’t met him. He’ll arrive in Mëddwoglubas in a week or two and move into the old castle, which means the hotel there is closed. And I’ll have to show up at a big ceremony, smile a lot, be gracious, and turn over my authority to him.”

“And he’s just a colonel. Kerda got a Major!”

Estodhéru was not amused. “I’m sure people will remember the prior rank, too, which won’t help the province at all. He’s a farmer’s son from the North Shore, so he’ll have a funny accent.”

“That won’t help, either.” Chris sighed. “I have a similar meeting pending, at 10 a.m. in Endraidha. The Prince has decided to organize a Swadnoma province and Melita will be part of it. The governor will be Aryornu.”

“Aryornu.” Estodhéru puzzled about the name a second. “You mean the old general?”

Chris nodded. “The one who was head of the army until ten years ago when he was too slow in putting down the Sumi revolt and ignored the danger of a Kwolone attack against Melwika. He’s been in retirement for a decade now, and has been trying to rehabilitate himself. Sounds like he has succeeded.”

“Does he like you?”

“I haven’t talked to him in ten years. He was always pleasant and friendly to me, but I always sensed a revulsion or bias underneath. Maybe that has changed. But the rumors have persisted that he was actually part of a plot with Jësunu, the old chief priest, to look the other way when the Kwolone attacked Melwika. He certainly dragged his feet when they arrived outside our walls.”

“Maybe you should ask the Kwolone.”

“If I have a good reason to do so, perhaps I will. We had a ten-year ceremony of the engagement last summer and the Kwolone supported it strongly, and we all made many very nice speeches about bravery, valor, and cooperation. But I can’t say I have a strong relationship, certainly not strong enough to ask a sensitive question of that sort.”

“Then I wouldn’t ask.”

Chris shook his head. “I won’t. Look at this entire experience positively: now you can devote your time to the Faith. The Central Spiritual Assembly needs more time from its members.”

“It certainly does, and I will probably put a lot more time there. I’d like to devote more time to developing Mëddwoglubas, but that will mean working with the new governor, and I doubt that will be easy. I’ll give him a chance, but I’m not optimistic.”

“All the more reason to focus on the Bahá’í community. If we grow by four or five thousand in the upcoming year, we’re going to have severe problems with consolidation.”

“Even if I have more time, I have a hunch we’re going to have less money. But you are right. I plan to go pray as soon as I get home, consult with my family, and make some plans.”

“That’s right. Lord, if you need to rest—if your driver needs to rest—we have plenty of room for both of you. If you drive home now, it’ll mostly be in darkness and your family will be asleep. So come take a rest here for five or six hours, wash, eat a good meal, then drive home in daylight. It’ll be safer and you’ll be calmer.”

“That’s good advice. I’ll take you up on it.”

“Good, I’ll tell the servants to prepare the guest rooms right away. Your driver can park your car in my parking space. Unfortunately, I need to leave for my meeting with Aryornu, or I’ll be late.”

“No, don’t be late. I’ll pray for you, my friend.”

“Thank you, and I’ll pray for you every day at the House of Worship.” Chris rose and took leave of his friend. Then he spoke to the servants and hurried across the street to get in his rover. He had no time to waste.

He headed down Route 2, due south toward the Kwolone’s central settlement on the equator. Route 2 was still graveled, but it had less traffic than the concreted roads and soon left the snow belt, so he could drive faster. Chris was amazed by the devastation wrought by severe frosts; that winter Éra had had no tropical belt at all. The tropical vegetation had been severely damaged. There was no snow, at least.

He reached Endraidha with ten minutes to spare and prayed he could find General Aryornu’s house quickly. Fortunately, the settlement was laid out with military precision. Route 2 bifurcated Endraidha and each half had a main east-west street bisected by a main north-south street. The half north of the highway was a military base surrounded by a high stone wall; inside were barracks, offices, a huge armory, warehouses, and a large classroom facility. The southern half had residences, from modest ones for married soldiers to large ones for generals; it also had a market and schools for army children. Chris was relieved to see that every street was numbered and had a sign, so he was able to drive straight to Aryornu’s house and park in front of it. It was reasonably impressive, but not huge or ostentatious.

He knocked on the door and was conducted to a waiting room filled with mounted animal heads, swords, and other impressive objects. A ticking grandfather clock showed that he was on time, but he had to wait ten extra minutes before the door to Aryornu's office opened. However, a servant didn't open it to admit him; rather, his friend Moléstu, the construction contractor, came out.

"Hail, Lord,"

"Hail, honored. A big new house?"

Moléstu nodded, pleased, and Chris looked pleased for his friend. But he had to wonder what plans the new duke had for himself.

A minute later a middle-aged man in an army officer's uniform opened the door and beckoned Chris to enter. Chris stepped into General Aryornu's office, a beautifully decorated and comfortable space. Aryornu, now in his early seventies, had white hair and thick glasses, but was still spry. He rose to welcome his guest.

"Lord Kristobéru, welcome." He stepped from behind his desk enough to extend both hands toward his guest.

"Thank you, Lord General, it's very good to see you again." They shook hands.

"This is my son in law and chief aide, Modékwu."

"I'm honored to meet you, Colonel." Chris recognized the man's rank from the insignias on his chest, which pleased Modékwu.

"Thank you, it's an honor to meet you." They shook hands as well, then Modékwu pointed to a chair in front of the desk. Chris sat, Modékwu sat in another chair near him, and Aryornu settled back into his chair behind the desk.

“I’m so glad you were able to come on such short notice,” said Aryornu. “As you have heard, the palace has asked me to serve as first Duke of Swadnoma Province, which embraces the townships of Endraidha, Swadlendha, Gramakwés, North Gramakwés, Kérékwés, and Mēlita. It is not as modest a province as one might think; its area and population are both as large as Lēwésa’s. This is a very exciting opportunity to serve my queen and I am anxious to get started, as soon as the official announcement is made next week.”

“My congratulations to you, Lord General. I am pleased by this rearrangement as well. Swadnoma has had a certain frontier quality to it, and now it will assume the full status of a province.”

“Exactly right. This is a great opportunity for the area. I’m glad you see it this way. I hope you will be generous in supplying me with advice, for I highly respect your experience.”

“Thank you.”

“Route 3 is already concreted from here to Mēlita, but I want to get it widened; it’s the province’s main street. What are the chances that the gas pipeline can be extended all the way down?”

Chris hesitated. “That’s forty-five kilometers and will cost about 135,000 dhanay. The first question is whether Endraidha needs enough gas to justify the expense. Mēlita has gas because it has factories that need it and houses that need it in the winter. Endraidha’s winters are mild and it has no factories needing gas.”

“Perhaps if we build the pipeline, demand for gas will develop; it can’t develop without the pipeline. But I understand how you calculate and justify the expenditure.

Very good. Can you give me a detailed report about Melita’s factories and its tax base?”

“Certainly, we can prepare a written report easily from materials on hand. I can tell you, from memory, that Melita currently has thirty-five stores and shops and twenty-two factories. It employs twelve hundred farmers, one hundred forty storekeepers and clerks, four hundred forty factory workers, fifty city workers, and sixty people in services like barbers, lawyers, mechanics, and builders, for a total employment of almost two thousand.”

“How much of that is the new industrial park?”

“Triwika Industrial Park has four factories and employs two hundred fifty.”

“What’s Melita’s tax base?”

“The total tax revenue over the last twelve months has been 1.8 million.”

“Impressive. How much of that is from the industrial park?”

“Very little, so far, but next year the park should generate about half a million dhanay. The township’s main tax source is harvest; it has 23,000 agris under cultivation, about 5,000 of which is in orchards and vineyards that have not yet yielded a harvest. The harvest is worth almost 1.1 million a year in taxes.”

“I see. How quickly do you think we can grow the province’s tax revenues?”

“There’s no reason the tax revenues can’t grow ten percent per year, just like the rest of this world. Melita and the three towns south of it are growing faster than that. Kérékwés plans to open four factories next year, North Gramakwés three, and Gramakwés five. Gramakwés and Swadlendha still have large areas that are unfarmed; if

we can find about two thousand farmers for them they can be producing about three million dhanay per year in crop taxes. Unfortunately, farmers are in short supply right now.”

“Could the economy absorb that much more agriculture?”

“Not immediately, but crop prices have been rising in the last two years even though production has increased because people are eating better. The big increase has been in chicken and meat production. Animals need to eat, too, so increased grain and corn production has been sold as animal feed, and the leftover grain for people has been higher quality. Melita is producing a lot of chicken and turkey.”

Aryornu nodded, absorbing the information. “So, do you anticipate a ten percent increase in tax revenues this year?”

“I am skeptical because of the cold weather. Melita produces three harvests a year in a good year, but it’ll produce only two this year. On the other hand, the industrial park is producing as much taxes as an entire harvest.”

“The weather has been terrible; that is a problem. Lord, to make the entire province’s industrial production more efficient, I want to pull all of the factories into a single tomi, and I need your help to do so.”

Chris frowned. “Why would that make them more efficient? Lord General, tomis are good if an area needs a lot of factories quickly. It marshalls the resources to build them and provides them with common services. But remember that Melita’s industrial park—not all of which is in Melita—already belongs to the Jérdomais Tomi. Five other factories belong to the Melita grange, so they are in effect already in a tomi. Eight other factories belong to Jérdomais Tomi, as do seven in Gramakwés and Kérékwes. The

remaining factories are privately owned by individuals or partnerships and are usually small. They contract for services like day care and payroll. Many of the other factories in Kérékwés and Gramakwés are owned by the lords of those townships; I doubt they want to give them up.”

“Whether a tomi increases efficiency or not, it will channel some of the profits toward the province; that’s important, too.”

“You may get more by getting permission to raise taxes. Imposing an outside board of trustees on all these separate facilities, a board that doesn’t understand them, is guaranteed to decrease their efficiency and reduce their profits. If a board builds up and creates the factories gradually, it learns how they work and gradually makes them more efficient.”

Aryornu’s face grew tense; he had wanted cooperation, not complication. “We’ll have to explore the matter further, but I am sure there is a way to do this. I want your help to figure it out, Lord Kristobéru.”

“I can have some lawyers pull out all the contracts and study them, and provide copies to you. That would be the place to start.”

“Fine. The prince says I can request some retroactive tax collection on my tenth as well; back to the beginning of the previous month, that is. On 1.8 million a year, that should be substantial.”

That startled Chris. It was customary for dukes to get a tenth of the tax collection. “Lord General, are you aware of the division of taxes that Her Majesty herself made for Melita and for the *lendhapotus* in Melita and the surrounding area?”

Aryornu scowled. He was aware that Her Majesty had given *lendhapotus*—“land aristocrats”—rights to some taxation over land granted to them that they could sell, but he didn’t know how much. “The prince said I could have my tenth; he did not elaborate.”

“The prince was not present when Her Majesty made the ruling. We will provide you with the tax receipts for the last three years to document it. Her Majesty decreed that the tax collection *would not* be divided the usual way, that is, 20% to the crown, 10% to the local lord, and 3.33% to the duke. There was no duke over Mëlita, but there were *lendhapotus* to provide for. Hence she and I agreed on the following division for the next twenty years: 9% to me, 7% to the *lendhapotus*, and 17% to the crown.”

“For *twenty years*?”

“Indeed, lord general. The same arrangement was made for *lendhapotus* in Kérékwés, Gramakwés, North Gramakwés, Ornakwés, Béranta, and Ejnopéla. It was the incentive for the Old Houses to settle on landed estates so that their pensions could be stopped.”

“Fine. But I still want my tenth of the total taxes; that’s 3.33% of the total production.”

“We’ve already paid the last month’s revenue to the palace so you’ll have to get it from them.”

Aryornu shook his head. “No, you get my share back from them. I want to be paid directly by the lords, not by the palace. Two weeks; I want my tenth.”

“Assuming Prusménu and Génménu collected a twelfth of the tax each, that’s a sixth of 1.8 million,” injected Modékwu. “Or 300,000. A tenth of that would be thirty thousand.”

“Thirty thousand dhanay. Good,” said Aryornu. “Two weeks, Lord. And two weeks for a plan to subsume provincial factories into a single tomi.” He looked at Modékwu. “Anything else we wanted to discuss with Lord Kristobéru?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good.” Aryornu turned back to Chris. “Thank you so much for coming, Lord.”

“Thank you, Lord General,” replied Chris. He turned and slowly walked to the door.

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Defense

Weranu, Her Majesty's Chancellor of the Exchequer, had the largest abacus Chris had ever seen. It was a mahogany box with fourteen rows of ivory and ebony beads, then a partition and two more sections with six rows of beads each, set on a special wing of Weranu's desk. When Chris knocked on his door, Weranu was pouring over columns of typed figures and sliding beads around.

"Oh, hail, Lord. Come in, you are welcome."

"Thank you, honored." Chris stepped in, wondering how welcome he really was; Weranu had always been very polite to him, but nothing more. "I suppose you are finding tax collections dropping."

"Indeed, this cold weather has killed the harvests. But manufacturing is holding up so far. What can I do for you?"

"I had a meeting with Duke Aryornu, the new governor of Swadnoma. Have you received any written instructions about the disbursement of Melita tax receipts?"

"No, but I gather the Prince has made various oral commitments to the new governors. What did Aryornu tell you?"

"That he could have his usual 3 1/3 percent retroactive to the first of Génmènu."

Weranu raised his eyebrows. "Her Majesty basically gave all of that, and more, to the *lendhapotus*. I can't give that to him without written authorization. Of course, it can come out of your allocation."

Chris shook his head. “Three and a third percent is more than I keep; it would cut seriously into the city of Melita’s income as well.”

“Well, I can’t help you, Lord Chris. The Exchequer transmits funds to people upon authorization from the crown. If I have authorization, I’ll transmit funds. Tell the Duke to come to me.”

“I will; but he has asked me to pay him.”

“Why? You already paid the crown.”

“I told him that.”

Weranu considered. “He’s trying to squeeze you. But that’s your problem, not mine.”

“Any advice?”

“Appeal to Her Majesty, if you can reach her.”

“She’s in Endraidha, so that should be possible.”

“No, she’s now in Anartu. They finished reviewing plans for the new palace in Endraidha and now they’re heading for a warmer place.”

“New palace?”

“Mæddoakwés always has cold winters; usually Endraidha doesn’t.”

“I see. A million dhanay?”

Weranu shook his head. “One point nine.”

That surprised Chris. “Very nice. If I have to, I’ll go to Anartu, then. Thank you, Lord Chancellor.”

“Good bye, Lord.”

Chris nodded and stepped out of Wëranu's office. It was beginning to look like he would have to appeal to the queen. He slowly headed out of the building to walk back to the military entrance, where he had parked the rover, dreading the thought.

The next building in the complex was the old palace, now the center of various offices, including the judiciary. That gave him an idea; maybe he should talk to Chief Justice Wërgéndu, grandson of the legendary compiler of Eryan law, Yusdu. He entered the old palace and headed upstairs to the judiciary.

Wërgéndu was in his office reviewing a case. He was now in his late thirties, with wire glasses, and was a very experienced and capable judge. When he saw Chris standing in his door, he said, "Hail, Lord Kristofëru. It's good to see you, what can I do for you?"

Chris entered. "I was hoping you could give me a bit of legal advice regarding the authority of orders from Duke Aryornu."

"Oh? What orders?"

Chris closed the door and approached the desk. Wërgéndu came out from behind and they shook hands and sat in chairs next to each other. "Three days ago I went to ëndraidha to meet Aryornu. He basically wanted two things. First, he wanted a plan whereby he could take over all the factories in Swadnoma—apparently including those run by Jérdomais Tomi—so they could be consolidated together under a tomi for the province. He ordered me to produce a plan within two weeks."

Wërgéndu was startled by that. He pondered a moment. "The law is clear. The monarch is strong. The local lord is strong. But the Duke is weak. The lord can create laws and power arrangements within his jurisdiction and within the sphere of authority granted him by the monarch. The monarch can overrule those arrangements or any other

arrangements she sees fit; her power is absolute, though in practice it is limited by the willingness of the lords and the people to obey. But dukes, constitutionally, cannot overrule lords. The monarch can change that by delegating to the duke authority that she possesses or the lords possess. But so far, the authority she has delegated primarily has involved tax money. The more taxes the dukes receive, the more leverage they have and the more persuasion they have.”

“What about the Prime Minister?”

“The Prime Minister, whether he is the crown prince or someone else, can only act within the parameters set by the queen.”

“So, what you are saying is that Duke Aryornu can’t seize factories.”

“Of course not. They belong to legal entities, either individuals or corporations. They have legal title over their property. If that changes, the entire kingdom will be destabilized.” Wérgendu’s voice rose. “That’s fundamental. I’ve spent maybe half my time on the bench resolving disputes over land ownership and awarding clear title. It doesn’t matter whether the owner is rich or poor; clear legal ownership of property is basic to the order and functioning of this kingdom.”

“You don’t need to tell me that, I agree with you completely. One of the things that has kept the farmers in poverty and powerlessness is uncertainty over what they own and what their legal rights have been.”

“Exactly. Ownership of property is a basic, fundamental right.”

“So, I have to write a report for Lord Aryornu, due in a week and a half, advising him how to add the factories to a Swadnoma Tomi.”

“There are several legal ways for that to happen. He can buy them. The local lord—you—can override any law the duke has created and any contracts based on his law and confiscate property legally, as long as none of Her Majesty’s laws are transgressed. And Her Majesty can confiscate any property and award it as she sees fit, for that is her right. So can the Prime Minister on her authorization. Theoretically, everything in this kingdom really belongs to her. Widumaj said so.”

Chris nodded, but chose not to dispute that particular controversial interpretation of verses from Widumaj. “So what do you recommend?”

“Take your report to him accompanied by lawyers.”

“Can you give me a letter?”

Wérgéndu shook his head. “No, but there are plenty of legal decisions that any good lawyer can find and cite. And I know you have access to plenty of good lawyers. I suggest you hire Judge Krénanu to provide you with a summary of the legal decisions. He’s number two and carries a lot of weight. But the chief justice needs to remain neutral in disputes like this, lest he has to render judgment in court.”

Chris nodded. “Alright, I’ll try that. Weranu gave very similar advice about the other problem. Aryornu also asked me to pay him his usual share of the tax receipts retroactive to the first of Génmènu, and pay him in two weeks.”

Wérgéndu shook his head. “If he wants that, he needs a letter from the Prime Minister or the Queen to Weranu, and he’ll have it in a few hours. You’ve paid your taxes already. He can’t demand it from you.”

“I didn’t dare say that to him at the time. But now I feel very differently. I don’t want to be disagreeable or angry and I don’t want to argue with him. But this is a matter of legal principle. I am willing to be killed to uphold that.”

“Keep in mind that there are things Aryornu can do to you that are worse than death. Twenty-five or thirty years ago when he was chief of the army he often had to force villages or tribes to pay their taxes. There are still blind men around whose eyes he had put out.”

“I didn’t know that, but I’m not surprised. But what I said stands: this is a matter of principle, and the principle, if not upheld, endangers my entire family and everyone else.”

“I’ll back you up in the court system. But be very careful that not a trace of rebelliousness against Her Majesty creeps into your position, for that will undermine it in a fatal manner.”

“I understand. Wérgéendu, what do you think is going on with the Prince?”

“I think . . . he has become very comfortable at exercising power and is letting his attention to principles slip. He’s my cousin and I see him often. In the last year the Prime Ministership has changed him, in good and bad ways. He has become more mature and confident.”

“But isn’t Her Majesty concerned about some of his decisions?”

“I think . . . Her Majesty is comfortable that she has built a solid legacy for herself and she now wants to give her son a chance to build his place in history.”

“That’s good, and understandable; but if he goes astray and acquires a bad reputation, that doesn’t help her legacy at all.”

Wérgéngu tilted his head; it was an ambiguous, noncommittal gesture, half way between a shrug and shaking his head. “Come on, let’s talk to Kréranu.”

That night, before it was time to go to bed, Chris told Liz about the conversations with Wéranu and Wérgéngu. “What do you think of giving Aryornu his money at the same time you deliver the bad news that he can’t have the factories?”

“That has occurred to me. The problem is that if we give him 30,000 dhanay, he’s not likely to be satisfied. He’ll find another excuse and demand more at another time. I think he has decided he can intimidate me.”

“He may also have determined that you won’t have any protection from the palace.”

“Perhaps. But if he demands something from me and the palace doesn’t veto it, that’s equivalent to Her Majesty agreeing to it, and then I must obey her.”

“True. Do you think he’d try to intimidate us?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.” His hunch was stronger than that, but he didn’t want to worry her. Liz looked at him and considered the situation.

“I’d talk to Her Majesty, if you can.”

“I will. And I want to return to Duke Aryornu’s a day or two early. I don’t want to be there the day of the deadline.”

“If he’ll let you.”

It took Aréjé Aywergui five hours to go from Ora to Isurdhuna. The city buried deep in the Kérda rift valley was unreachable from the east; six meters of snow blocked Route 1

in the mountains. But the western mountains were a bit lower and much drier, so the plows could keep the western approach open. A caravan of a bus and three freight trucks left Ora at 9 a.m. and slowly followed a snowplow up into the equatorial mountains—which had a surprising amount of snow—then northward in the rain shadow west of the peaks, and finally into Kerda. With the favorable two hour shift in time zones, they reached Kerda at noon local time.

Isurdhuna was snowy and filled with soldiers; pairs kept guard on almost every street corner. Aréjé was nervous when she got off the bus and headed for the Hospital of the Great Prophet, a new structure on the northeast corner of town, near the land surrounding the Steja or portico around the tomb of Widumaj. She had to pass many soldiers, and though they stared at her, none bothered her in the least. She entered the hospital with great relief and headed for the main offices off the Emergency Room. There, she found Dr. Widumajlébé Orai, the shift manager. They were close friends; Widumajlébé was one of a handful of women physicians and one of the leading doctors on the western shore, as well as being friendly to the Bahá'í Faith. “You made it!” she said to Aréjé. “I was beginning to think I’d have to give your two courses!”

“The bus was very late. I’ll be here overnight; there’s only one bus a day in and out of the valley, right now.”

“We can put you up. We’ve got a few rooms, though the hospital’s pretty full. Lots of respiratory illnesses.”

“I’m not surprised. When the bus descended into the valley, we passed through a thick cloud layer. Once we got below the clouds I looked out over the valley and could see a smoky haze over the whole thing. The far side of the valley looked a bit yellow.”

“Really? It’s been overcast for two weeks; we haven’t seen the sun at all! We have a constant cold breeze blowing in from the north. It’s steady but very slow. It’s constantly about freezing here; a bit above during the day, a bit below at night. Everyone’s been burning coal and wood.”

“I suspect the air here is getting badly polluted by smoke from the coal fires. I’ve been here for half an hour and I’m getting a runny nose and my eyes are watering.”

“I’ve had that for weeks. Come to think of it, so does Governor Weranokaru. He called for a physician yesterday and one of my colleagues visited him. He gave the governor some medicine because the governor insisted, even though it appeared that the governor had allergies; that was my colleague’s diagnosis. We’ve been diagnosing a lot of allergies lately, but I bet you’re right about the pollution.”

“You might not have noticed it; you have to look down on the valley.”

“Anyway, the governor called again this morning, furious that the medicine hadn’t helped, and demanding that another physician come. Maybe you should; you’re the famous doctor from outside the valley with an important reputation. He’ll believe you!”

“Alright, I can do it. Let me spend some time making the rounds, first. There are almost three hours before my first class and I don’t have to do much preparation. By the way, why are there soldiers all over the place?”

“There was trouble two days ago. The governor decreed that the Grand Temple would henceforth receive half as much tax. He wants more money for development of the valley. There was a riot. It was billed as a spontaneous protest by the pious, but it appears that the priests organized the unemployed and the gangs from the poor quarter of the city and managed the riot rather skillfully. They threw rocks at the palace and at the police

and looted a few stores in the marketplace. They also damaged the Bahá'í Center; they smashed the windows, broke in, and smashed furniture, but they didn't burn it.

Weranokaru telephoned General Perku and a hundred soldiers were bussed in four hours later to restore order. There are two hundred here now."

"Really? The priests must be furious."

"You can't imagine! A few of the younger ones were injured and are here. They're talking about assassinating Weranokaru, they're even talking about assassinating the prince! As far as they are concerned, the world is ending. You can't garrison soldiers in the holy city."

"You can't cut the priests' share of the taxes in half. That's what they're really concerned about."

"Of course, but what they're saying is that Isurdhuna has many injured and disabled people who are dependent on them, and these are the people who have spontaneously protested. There's truth to that, too. But if the priests stopped buying so many silk garments and gold jewelry, they could still take care of the poor!"

Aréjé nodded; it was true that traditionally, disabled people often came to Isurdhuna to receive charity and eventually to die, and the temple helped them. "I'm amazed that there hasn't been a peep about these troubles on the radio or in the newspapers!"

"I suppose because they suppressed the trouble so fast, but as you may have noticed, we haven't had any telephone service for the last few days. They say the snows in the mountains broke the lines, but we still have power."

"I didn't see any break or any crews working on the lines."

“I’m not surprised; everyone I know is suspicious. Wait and see, telephone service will be mysteriously repaired later today or tomorrow. The city’s been quiet for a day and a half now.”

“Let’s make the rounds; I’ve probably got an hour, then I’d better get to the palace.”

“Let’s go.”

They headed around the new, fairly modern, fifty-bed hospital. It was always stuffed with patients during the annual pilgrimage and half full the rest of the year, but that day there were only four empty beds. In addition to the usual mix of appendectomies, women with birth complications, and terminal cancer patients, plus a few people with injuries from falling on icy streets, thirty beds were filled by people with emphysema, asthma, and respiratory illnesses. Aréjé had never seen such a phenomenon before; it was quite striking. “We’ve been stumped,” said Widumajlébé.

“It’s air pollution. We’ve seen some of this in Melwika before, and once or twice in Ora, but neither city is in a confined space surrounded by mountains. I’ll have to call Melwika tonight about this; by then they’ll be awake.”

“If the telephones are working by then!”

“Well, I’ll ask the governor about that; what’s his name again?”

“Weranokaru, though the priests are calling him ‘Weranokéstru’ instead.” It meant “slayer of Werano” rather than “essence of Werano.”

Aréjé smiled at that. She grabbed her medical bag and her winter coat and headed out the door for the palace, a five minute walk away. She walked carefully on the icy street, after seeing so many injuries. And she looked at the black smoke billowing out of

every chimney in the city, rising into a gray dimness overhead. Come to think of it, the snow was gray, the ice was gray, the branches of the trees were gray. Soot was everywhere. She pulled out a handkerchief and put it over her mouth, which made the soldiers look at her with suspicion.

The soldiers at the front door of the palace, however, recognized her and admitted her immediately. The governor, hearing who had arrived to study his case, dropped everything and called her to his office almost immediately.

“You must give me something to cure my illness,” he began, as she entered. “The physicians in this valley are not well trained. They gave me medicine and it did nothing at all!”

“I apologize, Lord Governor,” she replied. “We have a sort of epidemic in Kerda right now. Allow me to ask you some questions and examine you.”

“Of course. Anything.”

Aréjé pulled out her notepad and began to ask Wëranokaru about the beginning of his problems, his symptoms, and how they had changed over time. She asked who else in the palace had similar problems. He reviewed the condition of his family and his small staff—he still barely knew the people who had worked for Duke Yusbëru—and as she asked questions and he thought about them, it became clear that half the palace had runny eyes, runny noses, coughs, sore throats, and similar problems.

She didn’t need much time to examine Wëranokaru. “I’m pretty sure I know the problem. We’re all breathing too much smoke. Look at my eyes.” She stared at his face and he, uncomfortably, peered at her beautiful eyes.

“They’re a little red.”

“But when I left Ora this morning, they were fine. I have a slight sore throat as well. The hospital has thirty patients with various respiratory—breathing—problems.”

“And it’s from breathing smoke?”

“Every house in the valley is belching smoke into the air because it’s cold, and there’s very little air movement. When my bus drove into the valley I could see the gray haze. Walk around the city; there’s soot everywhere.”

“Well, you’re not solving my problem! Is there medicine?”

“I’ll have to contact the doctors in Melwika. They would know. But I saw the prescriptions you got. I doubt there’s anything else. But—” She paused for a moment to think. “This palace has air conditioning, right?”

“I have no idea, I’ve been here only two weeks, and needless to say, we haven’t used it!”

“I understand. It’s new, so I think it must have air conditioning. The way Mëddwoglubas hospital’s air conditioning works, fans blow incoming air through a pool of ice water. The hospital has a furnace as well; in the winter the air is blown through the empty ice water containment and then across to top and around the sides of the furnace. When air is blown through water, much of the soot and dust is removed from it.”

Wëranokaru laughed. “So, we should run the air conditioning and heating at the same time? I don’t know whether that’s possible.”

“I think it is. That’s what I would recommend; fill the air conditioning pool with water. You don’t need to add ice! And the maintenance men may need to replace the water every day because I think it will get very dirty very fast.”

“Alright, we’ll try that.” Weranokaru looked out his window. “It is very gray out. And you’re right, the snow is covered with soot, and we get a fresh coating almost every night! This worries me. One of my hopes for this valley is the construction of lots of factories.”

“I heard a development talk by Thornton Mennea once where he said the Long Valley had a lot of stagnant air—I don’t remember the term he used for the condition that caused it—and that he recommended development of a lot of hydroelectric power and factories that used electricity.”

Weranokaru’s eyes lit up. “That makes sense! I’ll contact him immediately. I have a lot of plans for this place. There will be a second high school; construction starts in the spring. There will be a south entrance to the valley, one much less susceptible to closing from snow.”

“In spite of the priests.”

“Forget about them. I’ll call in the soldiers again if they stir up trouble.”

“The hospital needs a lot of equipment. Hundreds of disabled people have moved to Isurdhuna in the last few years.”

“Perhaps we should expand the hospital. The priests can’t object if I use their share of the taxes for that. In fact, that’s the way to support the poor in Isurdhuna without them!” He smiled; he had solved a problem.

“Lord Governor, I am not a follower of the priests, but I respect their charitable works. Perhaps a more gradual approach would be kinder.”

Weranokaru looked at her, surprised. “I did not request your advice, Dr. Aywergui, on these matters. But don’t worry; I know what I’m doing. Yusbéru was a

gradualist and looked at what he managed to accomplish. No, some things can only be done abruptly. Besides, you're a Bahá'í, right? I'm told the priests have been a constant source of trouble for the Kërda Bahá'ís. No more; I won't tolerate it. The Bahá'ís here are now free to do as they please. After all, you don't interfere with the government or plot against it, like the priests. I think we can make good allies."

"I'm sure the Kërda Bahá'ís will be immensely grateful, Lord Governor." She smiled.

He was disappointed; perhaps he expected her to propose ways the Bahá'ís and the government could work together. "We'll get water in the air conditioning system right away," he said. "Thank you for your advice."

"I'll be at the hospital until early tomorrow afternoon, so I'll call to find out whether that has helped. But I think it will."

He nodded. "Very well."

Chris dreaded his second visit to Governor Aryornu. He went to the House of Worship and prayed for nearly an hour before going; not only did he need divine guidance, but he needed to prepare himself properly for the psychological and emotional pressures. He asked Luktréstu to drive him and wait in the rover; he felt a bit safer knowing Luktréstu came along.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come in?" asked Luktréstu.

"I'm sure; I can handle this best myself." Chris got out of the car, which Luktréstu had just parked in front of the general's house, and walked to the door. The butler showed him straight to Governor Aryornu's office.

“Welcome, Lord Kristobéru,” he said. “Thank you for returning.”

“It’s always a pleasure,” replied Chris, extending his hands. The governor shook them, pointed to a chair, and sat behind his desk again.

“What do you have?”

“I’m afraid the news is not good. I have checked with several lawyers and they ultimately recommended that I seek the advice of Justice Krénanu himself. I have a letter from him offering a legal opinion. All factories that are currently legal property of individuals or corporate entities must remain so unless confiscated by Her Majesty or purchased for a fair and mutually acceptable price.” Chris handed Aryornu the letter. The General’s face was rigid when he took the letter. He glanced at it and tossed it on his desk. “I see. I asked you to arrange a way for us to obtain the factories, Lord Kristobéru, not present us with proof we cannot confiscate them.”

“I did not get the impression that you were asking me to arrange for the purchase of approximately one million dhanay of factories, Lord General. If you want a list of every factory and its value, based on tax records, my staff can prepare that in three days. We can even recommend which ones you might want to approach first. We’ll provide that service to you gratis; normally that would cost several hundred dhanay. I cannot serve as your purchasing agent. But if you want my tomi to do it, I can assign several capable assistants to the task, and our fee will be reasonable.”

Aryornu was startled by that. “Lord, who do you think you are?”

“I’m the lord of two townships and a servant of Her Majesty; that’s who I am. And I will be pleased to work with you under conditions of mutual respect and give-and-take.”

“Gædhému.” He uttered it like a severe insult. “And the taxes?”

“Paid to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as required by law. It is standard procedure for them to disburse it based on written instructions from the Queen or Prime Minister, so you won’t have any difficulty getting your share in a matter of a few hours.”

“I expect you to provide it to me!”

“That’s contrary to the tax laws, Lord Governor.”

Aryornu rose from his seat. “I should have you tortured until you pay it to me, gædhému. I was the queen’s tax collector for almost twenty years, and I was very good at it.”

“Lord General, I will be pleased to collaborate with you on projects of mutual benefit to our peoples, our positions, and our own personal fortunes. But if all you propose to offer is threats, I see no reason to continue the conversation. I ask that we continue the conversation under conditions of mutual respect. In that manner, we can accomplish something of benefit to everyone.”

“I didn’t ask you here to propose business partnerships to me! I want my tax money.” He stated it flatly; it was an ultimatum.

“I see.” Chris looked back at Aryornu, not defiantly, but if anything kindly. Then he rose from his seat. “Good day, Lord General.” He turned and walked out of the room. He closed the door behind him as Aryornu and his son in law began to issue a stream of profanities at him. It was a relief, in a way; profanity indicated they had no intention to grab him or harm him. He walked as quickly as he dared across the reception area, through the area inside the front door, and out to the car. He walked stiffly to the car and got in. “Drive, quick.”

“What happened?”

“I walked out. Go quickly.”

Luktréstu nodded and put the car in gear. It lurched forward and down the street.

“Sounds like you now have an enemy.”

“I’m afraid so. But I wasn’t going to be intimidated.”

Reread and edited, 6/10/13, 8/22/17, 11/23/24

325.

Eagle

Early Plowménu 13/621

Dinner at the Mennea family table was always a big affair. With the addition of Tiamaté, twelve family members usually dined together, and a few guests were not at all uncommon; the first night of Plowménu, Budhéstu, his wife Blorakwé, and his cousin Sugérsé dined with them. Budhéstu talked about psychology and its applications most of the evening, then Lébé and Sugérsé started a conversation about translation.

The latter conversation continued so long that Thornton had to put the kids to bed. It was hard to believe that their oldest, Jalalu, was almost eleven; Kalé was 8 ½, Jonkrisu 5 ½. By the time they were ready to go to sleep, Lébé came up to kiss them good night, so Thornton grabbed a letter he had received that day and took it to his father, who was sitting in his office.

“Dad, what should I do about this?” he asked. “It’s a letter I just got today from Governor Weranokaru.”

“Oh?” Chris took it and read it quickly. “We already put together a development plan for Kerda! Of course, the tomi board has ignored it.”

“He’s not just asking for a development plan. He was asking about the thermal inversion they suffered last month.”

“Where?”

“Here, where he asks about ‘stagnant air.’ Remember, Aréjé told him about the problem that the Kerda and Long Rifts suffer; air pollution accumulates.”

“I guess I do remember that in her description.”

“We can send him a copy of the various development plans we have created for the valley or for villages in the valley, but none of them have fully taken thermal inversions and stagnant air into account. On the other hand, I’m really not in the mood to travel all the way to Kærda. It’s a very long way and eleven time zones are very disruptive.”

“Then tell him you can’t.”

“I can do that; I think I’d rather. But I thought I’d ask you first because he’s one of the new governors, and he seems half decent.”

“I’m not sure about that. Amos said Perku told him there are now five hundred troops in Isurdhuna because of all the unrest. The post office was burned.”

“Maybe that’s why the letter took ten days to get here!”

“And there’s been looting of businesses. Isurdhuna’s under martial law.”

“On the other hand, if you want to break the power of the priests, this is what you have to do.”

“But I’m not sure this really will break their power; they aren’t being killed, after all. Yusbéru was taking a gradualist approach.”

“Sure, in many ways that’s more Bahá’í; but dad, the priests really hadn’t gotten any weaker, the Faith was oppressed, and Yusbéru was just trying to moderate them a bit while mollifying them with money. It doesn’t seem to me that it was working.”

“I concede your point. Well, go see him if you can squeeze it into your schedule. Say, you know what you could do when you’re there? Visit Werétrakester! I wish I could

talk to him about all the troubles we've been having and the economic mess several of the governors have started or encouraged."

"Why; so that he could talk to the Crown Prince?"

"Someone has to, and there are only two possibilities: Werétrakester and the Réjé. Unfortunately, I can't get any information about what the Prince is up to; even Aryéstu has been tight lipped. And I've asked repeatedly to come to Anartu for an audience with Her Majesty, but they've never replied."

"Never? That's surprising."

"I think Her Majesty is there for more than the tropical weather. I think she's there to escape the storm of protest."

"I see. Princess Awster hasn't said anything?"

"Your mother hasn't asked her about politics at all. Their meetings are strictly personal and spiritual in nature. The princess is definitely drawing closer to the Faith. I doubt she'll ever publicly declare her faith, but it's good to have someone close to the throne who understands."

"So, what are you saying; go to Isurdhuna, or not?"

"Yes, go if you can."

"If I can?"

"No, go, and talk to Werétrakester as well."

Thornton laughed. "Alright, I'll write Weranokaru. Good night."

"Good night, son." Chris watched Thornton walk out of his office, then turned back to his work.

He was beginning to fall asleep over his work—he was reading reports from various toms around the world—when his cellular telephone rang. He was a bit surprised because of the hour and wondered whether it was Amos or May, both of whom were back in Pértatranisés. But when he picked up the phone, the caller id was blank. That meant the switchboard had transferred a regular call to his phone, which they usually didn't do without permission. It had to be important.

He opened the phone with some trepidation. “Khélo?”

“Lord Kristobéru, this is Estoiyaju.”

“Hail, Estoiyaju. How are you on this evening?”

“I am well, Lord. I apologize for calling so late. Indeed, I thought I would only be able to leave a message for you with the switchboard. Her Majesty has received your letter asking for a chance to meet with her. She apologizes that it has heretofore proved impossible, but she has been exceedingly busy for the last month.”

“I'm sure, and I understand Her Majesty's schedule is always very full.”

“Thank you, we are very appreciative of your understanding. I gather you have concerns about Governor Aryornu. We would urge you to be patient with him for the next few months while he adjusts to his new responsibilities. We have complete confidence he will prove to be an able and wise governor.”

“I'm hopeful that will prove to be the case, and I look forward to evidence of ability and wisdom.”

“Well, we are already pleased with some of his efforts; they'll be enumerated in an article soon in the *Royal Standard*. I'm glad you understand the situation.”

“Estoiyaju, is there no possibility I can have an audience with Her Majesty?”

He hesitated. “Lord, because of the queen’s schedule, she can only offer audiences in the first few hours of the morning.”

“Before the ferry arrives?”

“Unfortunately, that is the case. It is necessary to spend the night if one wishes to see Her Majesty.”

“I see. I can be there the morning of the day after tomorrow, then. I’ll plan to see her then, if she is available.”

“She’s available tomorrow morning, Lord, but not the day after.”

“Well, if I can get there tomorrow morning, I’ll look forward to seeing her.”

Estoiyaju chuckled; he didn’t take Chris seriously. “Very well, Lord.”

“Thank you, Estoiyaju. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Lord Kristobéru.” The line closed and Chris put down the telephone.

The weather tomorrow was supposed to be good, and Okpétu flew to Anartu and the western shore fairly regularly. He picked up the phone to call him; it was barely 9:30 p.m. in Ejnopéla and he suspected Okpétu would still be awake.

Chris was at the Queen’s Anartu palace at 9 a.m. the next morning; shaken up a bit by the ride, but with his satchel of papers in hand. The pages were so surprised to see him that they rushed in to report his arrival to Estoiyaju. He had to wait about fifteen minutes before he was admitted to Her Majesty’s private meeting room. She was seated on a fancy chair—almost a throne—next to a writing desk so she could use it easily if she wished. Estoiyaju was seated discretely to the side of the room.

“Lord Kristobéru, did you grow wings?” she asked, as he entered the room.

“No, Your Majesty, I rented them. I flew here on Okpétu’s airplane.”

She laughed. “You did? That flimsy thing?”

“Well, Your Majesty, it hasn’t crashed yet, so I thought I’d take a chance.”

“You must want to see me rather badly. Please sit down and be comfortable. Many people want to see me, right now, but they usually offend me as well, so I have protected them by refusing to meet with them.”

That was a clear warning. Chris looked at her. “I have no desire to offend you, Your Majesty. If anything, I want to be your loyal servant, and I have striven to serve you loyally for thirteen years. I hope that, overall, my presence in your kingdom has been a positive one.”

“I sense you want to raise a big issue, Lord. Certainly, your presence has been a good thing. In your own way you have been a good servant of mine and of the kingdom. Thousands of people are alive because of your family, and most of the population is living better. But your family has been a disruptive influence as well, would you not agree?”

“I do agree, Your Majesty. Change is disruptive, and no change is just positive.” She had neutralized his effort to start on a positive note.

“How goes the Jérdomais Tomi?” she asked, referring to the tomi for the “old houses” Chris had set up last year.

“It’s now settling into a stable pattern. The factories are completed, the workers are trained, the product is launched, and demand is building. They’re now making sixteen modular houses a week, half the eventual goal, at a profit of 300 dhanay per unit after taxes. But I just prevented a threat to the tomi. About a month and a half ago, Governor

Aryornu asked me to arrange a way whereby he could set up a tomi for Swadnoma and add all existing factories in the province to it. This would have taken most factories from the Jérdomais Tomi and would have disrupted the operations of a third of the private factories that supply it with needed parts. It would have disrupted a lot of businesses as well; a man who has built up his own business can usually run a factory much better than an appointed board that is trying to coordinate dozens of factories that make different products. The best way to grow a tomi is not to take over existing factories, but identify a product or a group of products that are needed and gradually expand one's ability to make them."

"I see what you are arguing. How did you protect the factories?"

"We did some legal research and determined that the factories could only be taken over for a Swadnoma Tomi two ways: they could be purchased, or you could order the transfer. The Governor had to accept this determination, though of course he was not happy about it."

"Naturally. Since this matter could come up, can you elaborate on the difficulties that might result from a transfer of ownership to a tomi?"

"Indeed. I will prepare a short summary and send it to Estoiyaju."

"Please do, right away; the next few days. And please prepare a plan for the establishment of a Swadnoma Tomi, just like the plans you prepared last summer for other provinces."

"I will be honored, Your Majesty. But I should point out that those plans have largely been ignored by the tomi boards. They want to find a particularly prestigious and important product to give them a big reputation."

“Can you blame them?” she replied, amused.

“I don’t blame them; I understand the desire. But there are only so many ‘prestigious’ things to make. Most of them are already being made by someone. It will be expensive to compete with the existing producers, so the effort will cost the crown money, and prospects for a good profit will not be strong because of competition. Meanwhile, the ordinary things people need from day to day will be harder to obtain and more expensive, and the men who own the factories will probably reap an ample profit.”

“I see what you are saying. And if factories making those things are taken over, they may be neglected and become inefficient.”

“Exactly, Your Majesty. I will be frank; I think some of the members of the tomi boards are primarily interested in enriching themselves. In some cases they have already voted large salaries for themselves, even though they haven’t yet built any factories. If they take over existing factories they will probably squeeze the workers; force them to work longer hours for less pay. That will cause workers to leave or even retaliate by vandalizing equipment. The transition will be disruptive. I am not opposed to profits; I make profits myself. But the profits need to be balanced against the needs of the workers and the needs of the people. The crown benefits when those interests are balanced; if production is maximized, so are taxes. If the workers are well paid, they buy more goods, the merchants do well, and the crown collects taxes from them as well.”

“Aryéstu, our economist, has been making the same arguments. What else are you concerned about, lord?”

“There is a question about tax collection for the Governor of Swadnoma. When Governor Aryornu was appointed, he met with me and asked me to send his share of the

taxes to him directly. But Mēlita's taxes have always been paid to the crown, which dispersed them to the *lendhapotus*, so I told him to get his share from the palace. We have an agreement, Your Majesty, about the distribution of taxes, and it never included the governor. Needless to say, he was angry when I refused to give him his share of taxes out of my share. I assume Wēranu has started to send his share to him."

"I have not been informed about the matter, though I am aware of the issue, lord. The agreement we made did not include a provincial tax, but now it must, and everyone must adjust. Remind me of the agreement we made."

"The usual $33\frac{1}{3}$ percent tax—one third—was to go 2% to me, 7% to the Mēlita city government, 7% to the *lendhapotus*, and $17\frac{1}{3}\%$ to the crown."

"I see. The governor needs $3\frac{1}{3}$ percent, so everyone must sacrifice; 1.5% to you, 6.5% to the city, 6 % to the *lendhapotus*, and 16% to the crown." She turned to Estoiyaju, seated discretely at the side taking notes, who nodded.

"Ah. . . very well, Your Majesty. Of course, this will cause considerable complaining and some hardship."

"Taxes always do." She looked bored. "What else, lord?"

"One other delicate matter, Your Majesty. This entire change in the provinces is unsettling for many people. I think it is not understood well. There seems to be a perception that the governors are more interested in power and wealth than in service to the people. In some cases, they seem to be violently breaking the power of the priests or the old houses, which is and will generate strong resistance. The governors, so far, have not shown much concern about the efficiency of the provincial tomis, either. I fear that the crown's huge investment in industrialization will produce meager results, and the

results will go to a few rich men only. I know Your Majesty is very concerned for her people, so I share my feelings with her.”

“I see.” She seemed unsettled by his comments.

Estoiyaju then intervened. “Lord, have you spoken to Prince Məməjėkwu about this?”

“Not yet. I used to meet with him monthly to plan the development of the Jėrdomais Tomi, but it is now running well and making profits. My access to information about the provincial tomis is very limited. I have one or two friends on every Board and sometimes I hear a bit about their progress, but I do not receive any minutes or financial reports. Nine provincial tomis were set up last summer and by now they have collectively spent half a million dhanay on factories. Sumilara’s and Pėnkakwės’s are doing well. Vėspa’s consists of preexisting factories already in a relationship, and it is doing well. Jėrnstisėr’s is working slowly and is not making any mistakes, but has done little so far. I have heard almost nothing about successes in the other five.”

“Plans for an east Nėfa industrial park are being finalized,” noted Estoiyaju.

“Yes, and they will soon start construction,” agreed Chris. “But the South Shore Tomi Board is paying its members 2,000 dhanay per year plus 7% of the total profits, and they haven’t broken ground on anything. The North Shore Tomi Board has broken ground on six factories and is being charged about a third too much for the construction contract. The Kerda Tomi Board, I believe, has not even met.”

There was silence for a moment. Then the Rėjė said, “You have made your point, Lord, and I thank you.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, to bear this news to you.”

“As I said, you have made your point, and I appreciate your time. Now, fly home, and we will pray that the airplane doesn’t crash.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Chris rose, bowed, and walked out of the room.

It was two weeks before Thornton could arrange two days to drive to Kërda. It was mid Plowménu—the month of rains—but it was still snowing more than raining, so the drive was tricky and slow. He went via the North Shore, which was icy and slow, and when he reached Néfa he discovered that the road to Isurdhuna was closed because of an ongoing snowstorm. So he drove to Ora and took its equatorial route over the mountains, approaching Kërda from the west, where the mountains had less snow. Even that route proved tricky. It was midnight in Mèlwika—but 1 p.m. in Isurdhuna—when he arrived, and he was already feeling exhausted from the trip. Aréjé was at the hospital waiting to accompany him to the palace and introduce him.

Governor Weranokaru, Thornton noted, was his height and about his age. When he and Aréjé entered, the Governor rose from his chair and approached. “Honored Thorntonu, welcome to Isurdhuna,” he said, extending both hands.

“Thank you.” They shook hands. Weranokaru turned to Aréjé and offered a hand to her as well.

“Thank you for coming again. I’m glad you have come to introduce us, and you are welcome to stay.”

“No, I am just here to make the introduction.”

“Please stay,” insisted Weranokaru.

“Very well.”

Weranokaru pointed to a circle of chairs in front of his desk. Thornton was pleased to see that the governor did not plan to sit behind his desk; that was encouraging. They sat facing each other. “I suppose you don’t remember me,” continued Weranokaru. “Nine years ago I took a geology course from you.”

Thornton frowned. “I’m sorry. . . I have so many students.”

“That’s alright. I wasn’t a very good student. I was in the engineering corps at the time, then transferred to the regular army.” Weranokaru reached over to his desk and picked up the Kerda Development Plan. “Thank you for sending this to me. After you sent it, I made some inquiries and obtained a copy in the palace, plus two or three earlier development plans you or members of your family developed for Frachvala and other areas.”

“You had copies of them as well?”

“Indeed.” He pointed to hand-written copies on his desk. “I learned more by reading them. They were simple and explained principles, whereas the Kerda Development Plan was huge and written for the tomi set up last summer.”

“It really isn’t a plan for the province; it’s a plan for Kerda’s industrialization.”

“I think the tomi board wants to start over, if they ever really start to plan anything, that is. I have asked them to come meet with me next week. They have managed one meeting so far.”

“They were set up five months ago.”

“I know, and 50,000 dhanay has been sitting in their bank account all that time.”

He shrugged. “I see the industrialization plan focused on furniture manufacture, agricultural exports, cut stone, and book printing.”

“I didn’t put together the development plan; my father and his staff did,” said Thornton. “But I read it over carefully and he and I talked about it for an hour. The valley has excellent agricultural output and can expand it, so agricultural products are an excellent choice. The valley has excellent stone masonry and book printing. It has limited woodworking, but that’s an industry it can develop.”

“No metal working or assembly of metal parts.”

“No. Kerda has blacksmiths, but no tradition of metalworking for export. And the valley has a serious problem with thermal inversions, so the air stays in the valley and accumulates pollution.”

“Can you explain this ‘inversion’ to me? I am very worried about it, after our experience last month.”

“Certainly. Normally, the sun shines on the ground and warms it up, and it warms the air touching it. Warm air rises; cool air sinks. Because the ground warms the air near it, the air turns over and mixes. But in a valley like this, cool air settles into it and the air overhead is heated by the highlands. That’s the inversion; the air is cool near the ground and warmer above. As a result, it can’t turn over and the air in the valley is trapped.”

“And there’s nothing we can do?”

Thornton shook his head. “Nothing. Well, nothing about the *inversion*. There is a spot along the side of the valley east of here where there is a steep ravine that descends from the top of the escarpment. If Kerda ever wants to develop industry or even a gas or electric plant, a smoke stack could be built up that ravine. I don’t think it would have to go all the way to the top; even 100 meters would place the exhaust above the valley and it would probably stay up there.”

“I see; if we can get the exhaust high above the valley, that will solve the problem.”

“Much of it.”

“That makes sense. The side of the valley provides an easy way to build such a tall smokestack.”

“I would caution that we be sure the smoke is high enough,” added Aréjé.

“Normally, Kerda has about ten natural deaths per week. During the two weeks we had the stagnant air, forty-three deaths were recorded in the valley. It appears that over twenty people were killed by the pollution.”

“I suffered terribly until we started to use the air conditioning system to remove the soot from the palace air,” said Wëranokaru. “So I believe your numbers, doctor. I’m glad to hear there may be a solution. I assume if we use electricity, that will also solve the problem.”

“Correct. The woodworking and stone cutting industries proposed for the valley can use electricity. Metal working relies on heat and usually that involves burning something.”

“I was wondering about another idea. In the last five years, five hundred people—old, disabled, blind—have moved to Isurdhuna to live out their last days in the holy city. The priests have expanded their charitable services to feed them. Many live in squalid conditions; many have very poor health. If the crown were willing to provide assistance, Isurdhuna could become a center to care for the ill and the old.”

“That’s very expensive,” replied Aréjé. “An average old or ill person needs 300 dhanay per year to live and it may cost 50 or 100 dhanay per year to maintain their health.”

“True,” agreed Weranokaru. “But this valley has 25,000 people. Its taxes total 2.5 million dhanay, half to the crown and half to the Duke, or, now, to the governor. Of course, the priests used to get most of my half. I’ve cut their allocation in half, and they are not getting any of it back. The crown has built itself a new palace for a million dhanay. Why can’t we pledge one or two hundred thousand per year to support the poor? How many poor people can we support with half a million a year?”

“About 1,200 or 1,500,” replied Aréjé.

“They won’t pay taxes, but the people who take care of them and feed them will,” noted Thornton. “This is an intriguing idea, Lord.”

“It won’t generate profits like a factory, but it will generate jobs,” said Weranokaru. “Every five poor people will require one worker to raise their food, sell it to them, cook it, etc. And this does not have to go through the priests, though we could hire them I suppose. The hospital would be a central institution because the old and ill need a lot of medical assistance.”

“The best way to accomplish this goal is to establish a system of retirement pensions and universal health care,” said Thornton. “The first would take a tax from every worker and save the money until he or his wife had to retire from work; they would then live on the accumulated money. The second would provide everyone with inexpensive medical care.”

“How much would this cost?” asked Weranokaru.

Thornton looked at Aréjé, who looked back at him. “I think together they would cost about five percent of our entire gross domestic product,” replied Thornton, finally.

“That would be six or seven million dhanay.”

“Wow,” said Wëranokaru, shaking his head.

“The medical system is already costing a million dhanay per year,” said Aréjé.

“And it is expanding at the rate of half a million per year.”

“Most older people can live with their families,” added Thornton. “So it may be that a million dhanay per year will meet the needs of the kingdom for the old and infirm who have no family. Isurdhuna normally has a very pleasant climate, and if the air remains clean, it would be a good place for them.”

“We have been looking for funding to establish a hospice,” exclaimed Aréjé.

“People come here to die, especially when they have a slowly developing and painful illness. Every province will need one, but Isurdhuna would be an excellent place to start the first one.”

“Then I will petition Her Majesty about it,” said Wëranokaru. “Can you give me a proposal?”

“Indeed we can,” agreed Aréjé.

“Excellent. Thank you, honored Thornton and honored Aréjé. I am grateful for your ideas.”

Thornton went to the Isurdhuna Palace Hotel, where he had a room, and slept the rest of the day. He was up most of the night—daytime in Melwika—and wrote on his

dissertation, for he was working on several of its central chapters. At dawn he left the hotel and headed for Werétrakester's modest house near the Steja, the tomb of Widumaj.

The widu had aged quite a lot in the last few years. His beard was now mostly white and he was bent over; premature aging from the poisoning and his rigorous spiritual exercises, for he was only 60 years old. But in spite of appearances, he was still vigorous. He gave Thornton a bear hug instead of shaking his hands. "It's very good to see you!"

"Thank you, honored widu. It's been a long time. You don't get to Melwika any more."

"No, I don't travel much. I must pray and cry for visions; the kingdom needs them. How is your family?"

"We are all well. My children are growing so fast!"

"I hear Jordan is now married; the first one of the next generation."

"Yes, to a very sweet and bright Sumi woman. We all like her and the two of them seem very happy."

"That is as it should be. I am happy for them. Please, come in and sit down. Let us have some tea, and I have bread and butter. How long are you in Isurdhuna?"

"I'm leaving after we visit. If I leave by 8 a.m., I'll be home by midnight in Melwika."

"That's a lot of night driving. Be careful, please!"

"I will. The weather forecast is for a clear sky and it should be above freezing, except for Belledha and about fifty kilometers southeast of it."

“Good.” Werétrakester poured Thornton a cup of tea and handed him sugar and milk, then sat at the low table on the floor between them. “I had a very, very promising student from near here; he received powerful visions. He was on the bus that crashed last month and was killed.”

“I heard of that terrible crash! Oh, Weretrakester, I’m so sorry!”

“It was the will of Widumaj. Whenever I had dreams about the future I never saw him, and that worried me. Now I know why.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Werétrakester looked at Thornton directly. “He was to be my successor. I think it is the will of Esto that I have no successor.”

“Why do you say that?” Thornton was startled.

“That’s what I see.” The widu pulled a chunk of bread from the loaf, spread butter on it, and began to eat. “I’ve been having a series of very dark dreams lately, and they worry me about the future of the kingdom. In them a young eagle—a very handsome bird—seizes a large rabbit, but before he can fly home he is attacked by larger, powerful ravens seeking to take it. He fights them, is bloodied, and he drops the prey. Sometimes he manages to fly home safely; without the prey, but alive. Other times, he is blinded and never finds his home. Other times he suffers a fatal wound and falls from the sky.”

“What does it mean?”

“I have my guesses, but I am not yet sure. How is your father?”

“Well, I suppose. He works way too hard.”

“The génadema?”

“No, we have a committee of professors who make many decisions and some very capable deans and vice presidents who run it fairly well. The development work is exhausting him and the politics he has to avoid is draining his energy away. That’s why he asked me to stop by. He’s worried about the Prince.”

“I feared that. He isn’t the only one. The new governors appear to have systematic guidance to break the power of the priests and, I think, the old houses. The governor here, Weranokaru, has taken away half the money from the priests. In the South Shore the governor wants to appoint town managers and give them all the money the lord used to get. And Aryornu has cut the tax money going to the Lendhapotus throughout Swadnoma.”

“You’ve heard about that?”

“Of course. I don’t just pray for visions; I read the newspapers and listen to Kεkanu! The governor here has arrested fifty people since he took over, and the fighting has killed three. That you won’t learn in the newspapers, but it’s on posters all over town.”

“I didn’t notice. As Bahá’ís, we have tried to support a transition for the old houses, and we have never opposed the priests.”

“I know. It is the supposed followers of Widumaj who do the greatest damage to his religion. But unfortunately, the Prince—for he is behind all this—does not understand the power of the forces he is tampering with. That is what worries me.”

“His people have made life very hard for father. The prince expects all the tomis to make a profit and grow the economy at ten percent per year, but the prince packed the boards with his friends, and they are more concerned with making money for themselves

and their friends, so many tomis aren't doing almost anything at all. Some boards are paying themselves big salaries; others are letting friends build factories and make a lot of money on the construction. Father is supposed to make sure the tomis are growing as planned, but they aren't giving him the information he needs and the prince will soon be angry.

“Furthermore, Governor Aryornu tried to take over all factories in his province and force them to join a single tomi, and father basically told him that was illegal and he wouldn't help. Aryornu demanded back taxes from father that he had already paid to the palace and father refused him. The Réjé has resolved that problem for future taxes, but father now gets a smaller fraction of taxes from Mēlita and he owes Aryornu some back taxes for previous months, which he is now paying.

“So, overall, the last few months have been very difficult.”

“And dangerous for your entire family.”

“We think so. Father thinks you need to talk to Mēmējékwa or to the Réjé. You and she are the only ones who can help him come to his senses.”

Werétrakester shook his head. “No, there is another who can help him come to his senses: the prince himself. This is something he must do on his own.”

“But how will that happen? He has gone astray. He has become corrupted by power. He is appointing friends to governorships and tomi boards instead of people who are qualified. He is allowing corruption; father is pretty sure Aryornu demanded back taxes for one month more than the Prince authorized. The tomi boards, if they continue, will drain away tax money from development and squeeze workers with lower wages.

And look at the trouble Weranokaru has caused in this province. The only way for this to stop is for someone to talk to him whom he will listen to.”

“Perhaps. It sounds reasonable, honored Dhoru, but my visions say that I should not interfere. The eagle who is fighting the other eagles does not receive assistance.”

“But he falls to the ground dead!”

“Only in some dreams; in others, he makes it home. If I interfere, it could make things worse.”

“Or it could make things better. Anyway, father sent me to ask you to say something to the prince or the Réjé. He felt it was very important.”

Werétrakester considered a moment. “I have great respect for your father, Dhoru. I will consider this request very carefully and will pray about it. But I also have to consider the vision.”

Thornton nodded, disappointed. “I understand.”

Reread and edited, 6/10/13, 8/22/17, 11/23/24

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Fasting

Early ejnaménu 13/621

Duke Kandékwes and Princess Awster had prepared an impressively sumptuous dinner for Chris and Liz. When the four of them entered the dining room, Liz smiled.

“Mëmsikripura! One of my favorites.” The dish was a meat stew over rice.

“Ours also,” agreed Awster. “It has a good mix of vegetables as well; our cook was able to get some fairly good ones in the market.”

“That’s becoming difficult,” said Chris, sitting at Kandékwes’s right hand, with Liz next to him and Awster opposite. “But the frosts are definitely over in the equatorial zone and vegetables should start reappearing in the markets next month.”

“What has the lack of vegetables done to the peoples’ nutrition?” asked Awster, concerned.

“Lua told us the other day that the hospitals have seen some increase in malnutrition related illnesses, but two months is not long enough to cause severe problems,” replied Liz. “Bread and other staples are still available, and potatoes are pretty nutritious.”

“Ten years ago, the winters were much worse, in terms of diet,” said Kandékwes. “Even with all our money, winter usually meant eating bread and meat, with some milk and cheese. This winter there’s never been a shortage of cabbage or beets.” He turned to Chris. “So, how is Miller Motors? How’s Jérdomais Tomi?”

Awster rolled her eyes that business had come up so quickly, but she knew the men had to get it out of their system. “Both are doing pretty well,” replied Chris. “Demand for cars and pickups has dropped in the winter, as it always does, so John will idle the factory for two weeks in Ejnaménu to give everyone a vacation and save some money. Profitability has finally grown to the fifteen percent range. He plans to let it increase a bit more, to twenty percent, in order to build up reserves, before cutting prices at all.”

“What’s demand?”

“Fifteen hundred vehicles per year. It hasn’t edged up much, but at least it hasn’t dropped.”

“And Jérdomas?”

“Mobile housing units are selling slowly now. In the fall we sold thirty units to towns and villages that needed classrooms and that made the units quite widely visible. We’ve sold fifty more to serve as small shops and factories and three hundred for housing, mostly in the Mélite area and Tripola. We’ve stockpiled two hundred because we anticipate that once the harvest comes in this summer, there will be enormous demand.”

“So, no profit yet?”

“A little. We’re selling the units for 1,600 dhanay each, which has covered all manufacturing costs and generated a small profit. We’ll lower the price to 1,300 in late spring and see what that does to demand. Eventually the price might decline to half that, but first, let those who have the means and really want the units pay for the factory and the training.”

Kandékwes smiled. “Of course. And meanwhile, if you have to sell the surplus units, you can sell them to cover your costs.”

“Exactly. The inventory is like money in the bank, and the manufacturing effort has improved the workers’ skills.”

“And Jérdomas has finalized plans for another half million dhanay of new factories next year?”

“Almost. We’ve moved the ones scheduled to be built in Melita and other towns in Swadlendha province to Arjakwés province.”

“Oh? Because of Aryornu?”

“He wants to confiscate factories. He has tried another ploy: writing all factory owners and demanding that they sell their assets to the Swadnoma Tomi. Almost all of them have contacted me, furious.”

“What did you advise them?”

“To contact a particular lawyer, who was engaged by one owner and is preparing a defense for them all.”

“It’ll be a bloody fight and Aryornu will lose; in court, at least.”

“I think so.”

Kandékwes shook his head sadly. Chris was dying to ask questions, but he sensed that it was unwise.

“Okay, enough,” said Awster, interrupting. “We’re not here to plan the province’s economy for the next year.”

“Though that would be fun,” responded Kandékwes. “Perhaps over coffee after dinner, Lord.”

Chris smiled and nodded.

“I want to ask about the fast,” said Awster. “When does it start? Two days?”

“Three,” replied Liz. “It lasts nineteen days and ends at sunset when New Years begins.”

“Did you know that the priests have recalculated the date of New Years, this year?” asked Kandékwes. “They’ve been reexamining their records of the shadows in the Woodhenge. This year, Eɟnaménu will be one day shorter.”

“But they haven’t announced it?” asked Chris.

“No. I wonder whether they plan to announce it next week, after your fast begins. It’s possible.”

“Are you sure?” asked Liz.

Awster nodded. “We invited several priests and their wives to dinner last week, just after the month began.”

“I’ll ask at the Melwika Temple,” said Chris. “This is rather important. The year is 389.9 days and they haven’t dropped a day from Eɟnaménu for twelve years, so it must be due.”

“I bet they are trying to embarrass the Bahá’ís and force them to fast on New Years Day or break their fast early,” said Awster. “When the priests met with us, they expressed considerable anger about the Bahá’í Faith’s spread.”

“Your defense of the Faith didn’t help, my dear,” replied Kandékwes, smiling.

“The priests were rather embarrassed. But their real agenda for meeting with us, I think,

was the situation in Isurdhuna. Naturally, they wanted us to ask Her Majesty to call off Governor Wëranokaru.”

“They also wanted to be sure you had no similar plans for this province!” said Awster.

“I must admit, that made me envy Wëranokaru,” added Kandëkwës. “The Mëddowakwës priests have an income of a quarter million dhanay per year! That could build a lot of infrastructure!”

“Of course, a lot of it goes to charity right now,” noted Liz.

“No,” replied Awster. “They’re spending a tenth of it on the poor. The temple employs ten chief priests, fifteen junior priests, and thirty assistants of various sorts, some of whom do nothing.”

“What’s happened to their meat market?” asked Chris.

“The sale of beef from Gordha, pork from beyond the Spine, and mutton from the North Shore has seriously undercut their market,” replied Kandëkwës. “They used to have a near monopoly. Meat prices are down; they earn less. But their tax and rental income has held steady, so they’re still doing fine.”

“I don’t think you are perceived as the main threat right now, as much as the general desire across the realm to strip them of tax revenues,” said Awster. “They are *really* upset about that. Wëranokaru must be exceedingly careful.” She took a spoon full of the rice and stew. “But let me ask about the Fast again. What is its purpose?”

“Self sacrifice,” replied Liz. “It is a symbolic act of our dependence on Esto and our willingness to sacrifice for Him. It is difficult, but it is not so difficult that it is harmful; indeed, the young, the old, the sick, and others who could be harmed are

exempted. It is a time of prayer, of reexamination of our lives and purposes, a time to recommit ourselves to our ideals.”

“That’s beautiful,” said Awster. “The month of Ǝjnaménu is similar; it is the month of sacrifice. But in practice, it is a month of relaxing, of vacations from factory work, and of family feasting. Its original purpose has been forgotten.”

“It never included reexamination of one’s own life,” said Kandékwes. “I am attracted to that idea; though I confess it is something I would do without fasting! That is part of the *modern* movement sweeping Éra; people no longer just exist and do the same work their parents did. Now, people must reflect about their lives.”

“Only if the desire to choose is matched by the availability of real choices,” replied Chris. “In a traditional society, there were very few choices; you almost never decided where you would live, whom you would marry, or what you did to earn a living. Some freedom of choice requires education, mobility, career choices, and some freedom over who to marry.”

“And some limits on these freedoms, so society doesn’t collapse,” added Awster. “That is why I am attracted to Bahá'u'lláh. He has set the limits on these new freedoms, so that they produce positive good instead of chaos. Widumaj was a great divine teacher, but He could not provide answers to these new questions.”

“And centralized control won’t be the solution, either,” said Kandékwes, looking at Awster. She nodded. Chris saw the exchange and wondered whether this was an argument they had had with Prince Méméjékwu or even with the Queen.

“You are quite right there,” agreed Liz. “That was tried on Gadhéma as well; very powerful governments were established that tried to control everything, including

individual morality. They denied the existence of Esto and destroyed the pillars of religion in order to arrogate even more power to the government. The result was a great rise in drunkenness, cheating, divorce, distrust, and unhappiness.”

“Of course,” said Awster, as if it was obvious. “I fear a tendency of that sort.” She did not elaborate.

“The best solution is to build positive things instead,” replied Chris. “The Bahá’í Faith emphasizes that unity is the solution. Unity must be built on love, trust, and justice. It can’t be forced or imposed. And while building unity, one can’t cheat or cut corners because that undermines the trust, love, and justice that are essential to create unity. Unity can only be created positively.”

“But you have expelled and disciplined members,” noted Kandékwes.

Chris nodded. “We have. People do not automatically become good, love each other, and build unity. They have to follow rules; ideally the rules are internalized and they want to follow them, but people are tempted to cheat or to take power for themselves.”

“This is ironic, but unavoidable,” said Liz. “We cannot force people to be loving, it must be voluntary; but if people are pretending to be loving and are not, we have to do something about that.”

“Alas, it would be nice if everyone were born perfect,” said Awster. “But I suppose the world would be boring.”

“But how do you know when to enforce rules?” asked Kandékwes. “You say unity can’t be built without justice. But how can you guarantee justice?”

“That’s a very good question, and a complicated one,” replied Chris. “On Gedhéma the Bahá’ís have a supreme institution, the Universal House of Justice. `Abdu'l-Bahá said how to establish it and said that it would be infallible in terms of protecting the Faith and legislating about matters Bahá'u'lláh never spoke about. This protection is part of the *Covenant*, an agreement between God and humanity as mediated by Bahá'u'lláh. But here on Éra, we have no access to the Universal House of Justice. `Abdu'l-Bahá said that when Bahá'í spiritual assemblies functioned in unity, they were protected and guided, but not infallibly. So we must be very humble and pray a lot! And no doubt we will make mistakes. We already know of mistakes we have made, which we have tried to correct.”

“But what if you need guidance and don’t have it?” asked Awster.

“There are some interesting stories about that,” replied Liz. “The Central Spiritual Assembly was deliberating about a complicated matter last year. They called me in and asked my opinion; then they called in a dozen wise and experienced Bahá’ís and even asked the opinion of a few non-Bahá’ís. They really did not feel sure, but had to make a decision, so they prayed and voted. A month later, Thornton was searching the web on his computer and found a new letter from the Universal House of Justice on a very similar matter, and their decision was the same. So we felt confirmed.”

“How marvelous!” said Awster. “You are right; Esto will guide.”

“You have had a Central Spiritual Assembly for how long, now? Ten years?” asked Kandékwes.

“Eight,” replied Chris.

“Still, that’s impressive. In eight years your body has grown in reputation.”

“It has. We have had a few lords ask our advice,” said Chris.

“But what about this restriction on involvement in politics,” said Awster. “Lord, you are not absent from politics. You have served in the House of Lords.”

“I have,” agreed Chris. “Bahá’ís are banned from involvement in *partisan* politics. Our existence is political; there are people who like us and people who do not. On Earth, the Universal House of Justice decides when Bahá’ís will become involved in major political issues and when they will refrain. Here, the Central Spiritual Assembly must do the same. On Earth there have been kings and queens who were Bahá’ís, as well as people in all sorts of hereditary positions who had to act on political matters from time to time. In Britain, there were Bahá’ís in the House of Lords, for example. Here we make a distinction between the actions permitted to a lord and those permitted to someone without that rank. Lords, by definition, run towns and villages, even provinces. That’s a function of their rank. Bahá’ís who occupy that rank thus must exercise their wisdom and judgment when making decisions involving political matters, and they must avoid partisanship at all costs. Non-lords can serve in legislatures if they are elected without any campaigning or politicking, which is largely true of our elections here. Lords and non-lords who are Bahá’ís probably cannot occupy certain positions, such as a member of the cabinet, a chief justice, or a member of the army chief of staff. These positions are still too wrapped up in partisanship.”

“That makes sense,” said Awster. “So, if I were to become a Bahá’í, I could continue the work I am doing now?”

Kandékwes looked at his wife, concerned, but not surprised. Chris glanced at the two of them and at Liz. “Conducting charities and encouraging people are not

controversial. But you have a very high rank as fourth in line to the throne. I think you need to think about such a decision very carefully because being a Bahá'í could put you in a very difficult position at times. As a member of the royal family, much is expected of you already. As a Bahá'í who is royalty, even more will be expected, both by the Bahá'ís and by their enemies.”

“That’s very wise advice, my dear,” said Kandekwes.

“It is, and I have already been thinking of exactly that,” replied Awster. “I think I need to use the Fast to resolve the matter; the praying and fasting will help guide me, I hope.”

“The fast is always a good time to consider major changes in one’s life,” agreed Liz.

“Perhaps we should sacrifice at the temple as well, to seek guidance,” added Kandekwes, concerned about the implications of doing something Bahá'í to make a decision about that Faith.

“Yes, we should sacrifice as well,” agreed Awster. “There is no contradiction between these two ways of beseeching divine assistance.”

“Indeed,” agreed Liz.

“Here’s a hypothetical question,” asked Kandekwes. “If a future monarch became a Bahá'í, would he or she ban consumption of alcohol?”

Chris considered that a moment. “If I were such a monarch—which I will never be—I would consult the Central Spiritual Assembly. And if I were the Central Spiritual Assembly—which I can’t be—I would counsel a long-term plan, perhaps over twenty years, to phase out the consumption of alcohol in consultation with the Consultative

Assembly. You'd have to have the representatives of the people backing something like that, and you'd have to educate people why the law exists."

"That's wise," agreed Kandékwes. "Besides, those of us who are in the habit would need time to stop!"

"But wine and beer are quite a scourge," responded Awster. "So many poor people start to drink, and then they stay poor and their children start to drink as well, and can't climb out of poverty."

"More than half the murders in Mēlwika involve alcohol," agreed Chris.

"That's something the Bahá'is will have to do something about, eventually," said Awster.

They turned to other subjects; Kandékwes was particularly keen on soccer, for there were now six professional teams ready to compete, and a lot of interest. They finished their supper and had some dessert and coffee. Then it was time to go.

"I can't believe it," said Liz, while they were driving home. "After thirteen years of patient working with Kandékwes and Awster, she's now responding to the Faith."

"It sounds like she'll declare," agreed Chris. "It'll be interesting to see what that does."

"What tests it causes. Let's drive straight to the House of Worship and say some prayers."

"I agree."

They drove home to Mēlwika and as soon as they entered the gate they headed to the temple. They parked the rover and walked into the building; they had a key and knew

where the light switches were. They prayed silently for about five minutes, then Chris circled the interior praying—he liked to pray and walk at the same time.

They drove home. “You know, mom probably has something to do with this,” said Liz. “Her passing was five years ago this very night.”

“Really?” Chris thought about it, then nodded. “You’re right. Five years; it’s hard to believe.”

“It is. I miss her so much.”

“We all do. We could use her wisdom right now. She was a Bahá’í for 66 years. I bet you’re right; she probably has been hard at work on Awster, from the next world.”

They parked the rover in the basement of the tomi building and walked through it to their house. They checked to see how everyone was doing; Thornton and Lébé were having trouble getting their kids to go to sleep and Jordan was busy helping Tiamaté with trigonometry, which she hated. Liz played the piano for a while and Chris did office work. Finally it was time to go to bed.

Some time in the middle of the night, Liz saw her mother come to her in a dream. Mary picked up her old suitcase and said, “I have to visit a lot of people in their dreams, dear; it’s a lot of work.” She walked along the gardens of the House of Worship on her way to her first visit, then she stopped and came back to Liz. “Oh, dear, I forgot; you need to take this.” She pointed to the outer pocket of her suitcase.

Suddenly Liz bolted up in bed, awake. She had never checked that outer pocket. Her movement woke Chris. “What is it?”

“I just saw mother.” Liz felt around and grabbed the pull string on her lamp, turning it on. She looked at the clock; it said 3:45 a.m. “This is just about the time she died.”

“Really? It was a dream?”

“Yes, a vivid one. She was visiting people. And then she told me to check her suitcase.” Liz jumped out of bed and ran to her armoire. The suitcase was on the bottom, it hadn’t been used since Mary’s passing. She pulled it out and unzipped the pocket she had seen, then squealed with delight and held up an old, plastic pouch.

“What is it?” asked Chris. Then he recognized it. “So, she *did* have it. The hair of Bahá'u'lláh.”

“She told me she had it, but I was never able to find it. I don’t know why I didn’t look in this pocket. I thought I had.”

“And you saw it in the dream.”

“I did.”

“Where did she get it?”

“Milly Thompson. The Guardian gave the hair to her when she went on pilgrimage in 1935 for all her services as a pioneer and traveling teacher for twenty years. She gave mother just two hairs at the Stockholm Conference in 1953. And they’re in here. So are the prayer beads `Abdu'l-Bahá used.”

“These are incredibly special relics. We’ll have to tell the Central Spiritual Assembly.”

“Now I know which way I’m going to face when I say my obligatory prayers! I can’t face Bahá'u'lláh; no one knows where earth is, in the sky! But we have two hairs from his precious head; part of his remains.”

“You’re right; we should face them when we pray. We’ll have to set up a suitable shrine for them, too. The Central Spiritual Assembly will have to decide when and where.”

There were tears in Liz’s eyes. “Let’s say some prayers right now.”

The next morning Chris talked to their astronomer, Estonpréku, and confirmed that the equinox would occur on the 29th day of ʻĠnaménu in Isurdhuna, even though it would occur after sunset in Melwika and therefore on the 30th of the month. Then he went to the Melwika temple and had tea with Sarébejnu and Lokolubu, the two chief priests, with whom he had good relations. He asked them about the astronomer’s information and they promised to call Meddoakwés. They telephoned him a bit before noon at his office.

“Sarébejnu confirmed the plan to move New Years up by a day,” Chris told the family at lunch. “Apparently the priests in Meddoakwés were hesitant to answer his question. He attributed it to their uncertainty about the calculation; the woodhenge’s shadows are hard to measure at times.”

“So, now what do we do?” asked Liz. “There’s no time for the Central Spiritual Assembly to meet, deliberate, and if they decided to start the Fast a day earlier, no time to tell people.”

“It’s a problem. We still have time to announce it if we could get it out on the radio,” noted Chris.

“But that would require you and I to trump the Central Spiritual Assembly and make a decision without them. I wouldn’t do that; it’d undermine their authority.”

“I agree,” said Chris. “They are the divine institution, not us, and we have to show utmost respect to that fact.”

“What’s the problem?” asked Behruz.

“The priests have determined that New Years will come one day early, this year,” replied Chris. “I spoke to Estonpréku and he confirmed it. They seem to have decided to announce the date of New Years after the Fast begins, maybe to embarrass us.”

“Why would that embarrass us?”

“Because we’d have to Fast on New Years,” said Liz.

Behruz shook his head. “No, we wouldn’t. This happened in Iran every few years when the spring equinox fell on the 20th of March.”

“What did you do?” asked Liz.

“We fasted eighteen days instead of nineteen, and celebrated Naw-Rúz with everyone else in the country. Either Bahá'u'lláh or `Abdu'l-Bahá approved that policy; I don’t know which. It was an established practice for generations.”

“Oh,” said Liz. She looked at Chris. “Then I guess we don’t have a problem. The Central Spiritual Assembly can tell the Bahá’ís it’s okay to fast eighteen days this year and leave it at that.”

“It’s a no brainer,” agreed Behruz.

Reread and edited 6/10/13, 8/23/17, 11/23/24

327.

Shrine

Early Bolérenménu Yr 14/632

All nine members of the Central Spiritual Assembly gathered closely around Liz as she carefully opened the plastic bag. Inside was a silk bundle, which she pulled out, with a set of prayer beads on top. “‘Abdu'l-Bahá gave these prayer beads to an early American Bahá'í in 1912,” she began, realizing she was giving details that made no sense at all to the Eryan. “It has a set of nine beads, then a set of ten for a total of nineteen, then 76 more to raise the total to 95.”

“For saying Alláh-u-Abhá ninety-five times,” said Modolubu, nodding. It was a practice he had adopted, but relatively few Eryan Bahá'ís had followed the practice of their Assembly's Secretary.

“Someone should manufacture them,” said Estodhéru, always practical.

“This particular set, since it belonged to `Abdu'l-Bahá, would be considered a relic,” explained Liz. “We do not view Bahá'í relics the same way as the relics of Widumaj. The followers of Widumaj see His relics as infused with spiritual power that one can acquire by praying to them. For us, relics are a physical remnant and reminder of the Manifestation of God; we don't pray to them. They are symbolic of spiritual power, rather than being filled with spiritual power. We can pray when we are in their presence, but we pray to Esto and His Manifestation, not to the object.”

“I think my people would have prayed to the object as well,” agreed Jonu Obispu, referring to the Christians of Khermdhuna. “So this will require a new way of thinking.”

“But this is just something owned by `Abdu'l-Bahá,” added Randu. “Can we see Bahá'u'lláh’s hair?”

“Certainly. It’s a different type of relic, though it is still symbolic, not an actual source of spiritual energy.” Liz gently picked up the silk bundle and began to unwrap it. Inside was another plastic bag, and in the bag were two thin strands of black hair. They all stared at them in silence.

The silence continued for almost a minute. Then Modolubu picked up a prayer book and opened it to the Tablet of Visitation to Bahá'u'lláh. He began to read it with great solemnity and emotion. Several of them began to cry. Chris felt tears well up in his eyes as well as Modolubu recited the text. When he finished, Mitrubberu, their great musician, chanted a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Then there was silence again.

“It’s . . . as if we were in His presence,” said Stauréstu.

“It’s amazing,” agreed Estodhéru. “Is this something we can actually show people, though?”

“Perhaps on very special occasions,” replied Liz. “There are photographs of Bahá'u'lláh, also, and they are on the worldwide web. I am sure we can make a good quality picture of him. But we would invite people to make a special pilgrimage to see these objects, or show them on a special anniversary. They would not normally be on display.”

“They are too sacred,” agreed Chris.

“Even the picture?” asked Modolubu, surprised.

“Yes, especially the picture, because we do not worship the man and we do not want to picture the man when we pray,” replied Chris. “The picture of Bahá'u'lláh is the picture of a sacred being and must be treated with special respect.”

“We need to build a special place to house these objects,” said Aréjé. “A place befitting their sacredness.”

“A beautiful place,” added Stauréstu.

“We need to think about this very carefully,” replied Estodhéru. “Because a shrine will also be targeted by our enemies, and as we grow we will have more and more of them. I’d favor building a beautiful shrine, but keeping these objects hidden somewhere else, so there is no danger they can be damaged or destroyed.”

“What is the situation here?” asked Chris, referring to Lewéspa, for they were meeting in Mëddwoglubas.

“Governor Ælkrisu replaced the temple priests here several weeks ago because they protested the cut in tax support. He hauled in three new, very anti-Bahá'í, priests from Isurdhuna. It was an interesting move; probably an attempt to thin the ranks in Isurdhuna and throw them a bone, but the new priests here are completely dependent on the governor, so they can’t protest the level of support. They’ve already made several anti-Bahá'í speeches at the temple, and last month they called for special sacrifices for ‘Esto’s bounty to protect the traditions of Widumaj against gedhéme falsehoods.’”

“Has there been any unrest?” asked Chris. “We can’t get news about the situation.”

“I know, they’re censoring the newspapers. No, no one here has made trouble; there have been some troops in town and everyone knows it. The Bahá'ís won’t protest,

and there isn't organized anti-Bahá'í sentiment either. The bigger source of unrest is Elkrisu's attempt to force all the factories into a single provincial tomi. So far, one factory has caved in and agreed to be taken over. That has caused enormous anger and controversy in the entire province. There may be trouble in the upcoming months."

"So, this is not a good place for the relics," concluded Brébéstú. "Lord Chris, what do you think of Melwika?"

"It certainly is peaceful and stable right now, but I'm not sure it's stable long term, either," replied Chris. "It's hard to say exactly what is happening. I'd favor keeping the relics a secret for now."

"So, no praying toward them?" asked Modulubu.

"We've managed for over thirteen years to pray without having a specific spot to pray toward," replied Chris. "I like the idea of building a shrine for these objects and telling the Bahá'ís that they can pray toward it. It would be optional, since we don't have the authority to set an ordinance. But until this world is more stable, I'd keep the relics secret."

"I think that's wise," agreed Estodhéru.

"Chris and I have been talking about where the shrine should go, and we think Mæddwoglubas deserves precedence over Melwika," added Liz. "This is the indigenous place where the Faith has the deepest roots. This is the place where the first indigenous Lord accepted Bahá'u'lláh. And it is on the western shore, the traditional center of Eryan civilization, and probably always the place with the most population."

“I think that’s wise,” agreed Randu. “Melwika is a ‘new’ place; it would be surprising if it had such a shrine. But Meddwoglubas is venerable, and the Sumi ruin nearby shows it has been a center of civilization for a long time.”

“It’s premature to make a decision about this, isn’t it?” asked Estodhéru. “Thank you, Liz, for showing the relics to us.” She nodded and put them away. Meanwhile, Jonu said, “Has anyone any idea what’s going on in this kingdom right now? It seems that in a matter of a few months we have gone from forward movement to backward movement. The chill has even reached Khermdhuna; the new governor of the North Shore has refused to answer any letters from us and has demanded an independent accounting of the harvests our residents have collected in Melita and nearby towns.”

“The troubles in Kerda are continuing,” added Aréjé. “Last week I was unable to go there for my classes at all. There was no bus service for three days. The hospital staff won’t report any details, but I gather there was another riot in Isurdhuna and the soldiers were called out.”

“The Governor of Swadnoma has continued his pressure on the factory owners,” added Chris. “I think the Prince has decided that a strong centralized authority is essential for the kingdom’s advance and he has decided that he wants to appoint the governors, or as many of the governors as he can. He has also decided to appoint as many friends and loyal followers to tomis as possible. But they have no idea how to run tomis, want to go after the most impressive things possible, and want to make as much money for themselves as possible. Since that combination doesn’t work, they want to add as many profitable factories to the tomis as possible.”

“But if they continue on that path, they will bring about a partial collapse of the economy,” said Brebéstu, agitated. “Not to mention unrest.”

“They’re trying to break the power of the priests and the old houses, too,” said Chris. “That guarantees some powerful enemies. In Kerda, that has helped the Faith, but here it has hurt it.” He shook his head. “We need to devote some time to praying for the kingdom.”

“I believe Lady Liz is still here to advise us about expansion of the Faith,” exclaimed Estodhéru. “So perhaps we should turn to that subject. The statistics are finally settling down; we have about 11,050 Bahá’ís. The last year has brought in four thousand.”

“This kind of growth is unsustainable,” said Liz. “That’s part of my advice. Two thousand people have joined through the large conferences or right after. Consolidating them is impossibly difficult. We still have not managed to use the core activities effectively to enroll new Bahá’ís and consolidate them. Not enough of the new people are following through with the Ruhi books; even fewer are reading Bahá’í texts or taking courses on basic teachings. We’re losing people, too; they’re becoming Bahá’ís-in-name-only and have no incentive to become more active. Not many people are slipping back into the traditional religion, but they aren’t moving forward.”

“I’d worry about the new environment, too,” agreed Estodhéru. “Big conferences in this new atmosphere might be dangerous for the Faith.”

“I don’t see either the rapid growth or the new atmosphere as reasons to stop growth, though,” said Chris. “On the contrary, this is time to push local consolidation more than ever before. We sent out three youth teams last summer and they visited how

many places? Twelve? Maybe the number is more like thirty, when you remember that each village they stayed in served as a base to visit two or three more.”

“You’re right about that,” agreed Modolubu. “The three teams stayed in a total of eleven villages and offered a total of 89 classes in 35 locations. Those localities saw 1,072 enrollments during the summer and fall; one quarter of our annual enrollments. Enrollment rates have continued strong over the winter. The teams conducted thirty-six Ruhi book one classes and reached 864 people. Since then, almost 800 more have taken a book one class. They helped reinvigorate fifteen local spiritual assemblies; my correspondence from assemblies has increased noticeably since last Ridván. Those teams have been vital to our consolidation.”

“That’s where we need to put our attention next year,” said Liz. “Youth teams attract a lot less negative public attention than the conferences. We have permission to continue the radio programs; the public can hear about us that way.”

“I think that’s right; we need to lay low,” agreed Estodhéru.

“How many youth teams can we form this summer?” asked Stauréstu.

Modolubu looked at Chris, who looked at him. “We have one hundred Bahá’í youth at Melwika Génadema,” said Chris. “That’s a huge increase over previous years. It was possible because the youth teams identified capable youth and encouraged them to apply. Almost all of them have taken a Bahá’í course this year and many have attended evening deepenings. They won’t all be willing to go out in youth teams, but we have youth who want to go out and who aren’t in génadema as well. I think we could form ten teams.”

“Ten?” said Brébéstu, surprised. “Can we afford to send out that many?”

“If we don’t plan conferences, we can,” replied Stauréstu, who was treasurer. “We lost 40,000 dhanay on those conferences, and a youth team costs maybe 2,000 at most.”

“Can we find enough places to send them?” asked Jonu. Then answering his own question, he added, “We could use a team in Khermdhuna most of the summer. I think half the township that is still nominally Christian would convert.”

“Kerda needs a youth team *now*,” added Aréjé. “The door has been flung open by Governor Weranokaru.”

“A team based in southern Véspe could cross the border to Lewéspe and avoid the ire of our new governor,” added Estodhéru. “If the bulk of the courses offered in this province were development oriented, the complaints would be minimal anyway.”

“I think that’s the way to go,” agreed Liz. “Youth teams can offer all sorts of supplemental courses about the Faith, team-teach Ruhi classes with local tutors—of which we now have plenty—reinforce children’s and youth classes, provide literacy courses, and offer developmental services like health courses, agricultural advice, and development planning. The youth teams have an excellent reputation; they’re one of the most positive efforts we’ve ever tried.”

“That insulates us from criticism,” agreed Chris. “And based on last year’s experience, we might manage three or four thousand enrollments with them.”

“And more human resources,” added Liz.

Mitrukaru Terskui drove a full load of people in his pickup truck to the Melwika Bahá’í Center. They stopped once to pick up Soru and Kanawé at their school outside Meddoakwés, crowding the truck even more.

The greening fields yielded to Mēlwika's gray walls, often covered by posters. Parking near the Bahá'í Center was hard to find; pickups had driven in from all over the western shore. The Center was bulging with over two hundred people, in neat lines to eat a free supper. Mitrukaru and the others joined the lines, then sat at the crowded tables to eat. Before they finished, Chris Mennea rose. "Dear Friends, thank you for coming," he began. "Two weeks ago, the Central Spiritual Assembly met in Mēddwoglubas to make plans for the upcoming year. We decided not to hold large conferences this year; perhaps next year, but we need to consolidate the gains of last year first. Instead, we want this coming year to focus on youth teams and local classes. All of you have been invited because you have gone out in youth teams already or because you have a skill the villages need. The Central Spiritual Assembly would like to invite all of you to devote some time this summer to offering free classes somewhere in the world where they are needed. It could be for three days, three weeks, or three months. The more we do, the better.

"It can be directly on the Faith, indirectly, or completely independent of the Faith; that's fine, too. Most people on this world can't afford an education, so we want to bring it to them. We particularly need people able to teach literacy, because our goal of spreading literacy is lagging. Women are badly needed, and their activity will serve as a role model for many. The Bahá'ís have helped organize fifteen of the twenty-two new womens' gabrulis. We think every village needs a salon. Randu, what else did we want to mention?"

The Sumi educator rose. "Age; we need to say something about that. This is not just a call to youth. Let's say a youth team can visit village 'A' for a month. Wouldn't it be marvelous if every three to six days a new expert arrived and offered a special class

through the youth team to the villagers? The youth will organize the classes and publicize them. They also will work closely with local teachers, because more and more, we have local resources that need encouragement. We hope that youth teams of six, rather than offering seven or eight courses per week, can offer closer to twelve because of the assistance of local experts and Ruhi tutors, and because of the visits of experts.”

“How many teams are we talking about?” asked Mitrukaru.

“At least ten,” replied Chris.

That caused a bit of a gasp run through the crowd. “I hope you plan to add an agricultural expert to each one!” Mitrukaru joked.

“Actually, Mitrukaru, we want to do exactly that,” replied Chris. “But we’ll need your help to recruit them. Ideally, we’d like each team to include a health professional, someone with agricultural extension training, an engineer or mechanic, someone with development training, someone with business and accounting experience, someone able to conduct literacy classes, a Ruhi tutor or two, and someone able to organize musical or artistic programs. We may not get all these skills on every team, but there may be other skills we can get instead. Teams of that sort can provide quite a range of expertise to rural communities. The idea, remember, is to help village populations to get ahead and to accept the Faith. We offer the secular knowledge and the Bahá’í knowledge freely and to everyone; there is no linkage. Helping the villages get ahead is the key to transforming this entire society; otherwise, development might leave them behind. It is also the key to bringing this entire world into the Faith. We can bring large numbers into the Faith in rural areas without encountering organized resistance.”

“What about teaching soccer and other sports?” asked Məgusu, a member of the Tripola soccer team and a Bahá’í who happened to be in Məlwika that evening.

“I’m sure you’ll be too busy playing, but if you can spare a few days, or if we can find someone to do it, definitely,” replied Chris. “Youth teams can organize the local youth into soccer leagues and can help someone—it might even be the local spiritual assembly—to maintain the teams. We hope Women’s Gabrulis can start up as well; Liz plans to visit the youth teams, stay a week, and see what she can organize.”

“What will be the financial arrangement?” asked Budhéstu.

“The same as the previous years. The Central Spiritual Assembly will provide each team with a pickup truck, some basic equipment like sewing machines and tools, will cover lodging and meals, and will provide up to 100 dhanay a month for development supplies. There will be no honorarium to the members. We are doing this to serve the people and to serve the Faith. Of course, many of you are students and will find this an ideal opportunity to see the world, to see many different rural areas, and to practice the skills you are developing in your education. It’s an exciting opportunity, that way.”

“Do we have to make a three-month commitment?” asked Migélu, a second year medical school student. “Because I’ve already committed to go back to Khermdhuna part of the summer to open a clinic there.”

“Ideally, we want three-month commitments,” replied Chris. “But we will take what we can get. In fact, we would like to form one youth team right away and dispatch it in two weeks, after national convention. The spring is a good time to start. Kerda badly

needs a youth team right away. We may have to form one-month and two-month teams as well.”

“Reporting?” asked Sarédaktré. “Last year, we didn’t get much advice and when people wanted to join a team, they couldn’t find it.”

“We plan to fix that this year,” replied Chris. “Modolubu will hire someone who does nothing but coordinate the youth teams full time. We want each team to report to him every day and we’ll have a standard reporting format, so we can collect and analyze information quickly. Next month we’ll ask local spiritual assemblies whether they want a team, and if so what skills they need, so we’ll match teams to communities better. Teams will not stay in one province; they’ll go anywhere their combination of skills are needed. We also plan to ask assemblies to raise some funds, so that if they want to embark on a particular project once the team arrives, they’ll have the means to do it. That was another common problem in the past.”

“How big can this effort get?” asked Thornton, impressed by the thinking.

“You mean in future years? This world has about 280 villages. We’d love to see a youth team visit every village at least one month every year. To do that, we’d need about one hundred three-month teams! And we’d love to see teams become more and more specialized and capable. Think of the development and consolidation that would be possible! And no one else can offer anything like this. The Development Corps can throw money at problems; the Royal Bank, also; but no one can actually send someone to almost every village to train people and answer their questions. I’m not a youth, and I’m volunteering at least a month to help train people in opening small businesses. Other questions?”

“Where do we sign up?” asked Budhéstu, causing many people to chuckle. “I’m serious,” he added. “If you’ve never done this, you’ve got to give it a try. You have to live a fairly primitive—or maybe I should say simple—life, but you meet some incredible people, you pray a lot, and you get to be of help. It’s a very rewarding experience.”

“I really agree,” said Randu. “The youth team that went to Sumilara last summer had an effect I can’t begin to explain. To have a half dozen Eryan youth come to the island humbly, live with the Sumis, and learn their language was a very impressive thing. The island’s still talking about it. The island’s Bahá’í population almost tripled to 1,500 and we attracted several very prominent people to the Faith. This summer we intend to establish Bahá’í communities in the last villages without them; next week Sumilara will form local spiritual assemblies in twelve of eighteen localities.”

“Of course, half that growth came from the conference, not the youth team,” said Jordan. “And I gather we’re not planning big conferences this year.”

“No, but maybe next year,” replied Chris. “Let’s consolidate our gains.” He turned to Randu. “I think that’s it, right?”

“I think so. We have a sign-up form to fill out which asks about skills you can bring—please list anything at all, even cooking and cleaning—and when you are available. I’ll pass them out.” Randu began to walk to the various tables and offered forms to everyone present.

Soru turned to the others seated at his table. “I think I’ll try to go,” he said.

“Really?” asked Mitrukaru, surprised. “But what about your school?”

“It’s mostly closed up in the summer, and we have reliable staff. I was planning to teach in only one or two of the summer génadema terms. If Kanawé and I can, we’ll leave

a month free to travel with a team, or to visit several teams, depending on what the Assembly wants.”

“There are a lot of rural kids with seeing and hearing problems, autism, and other conditions,” agreed Mitrukaru. “And of course they’re hidden away and are a source of shame for many families.”

“That must change, and the Bahá’ís must help,” said Soru. “What about you, Mitrukaru?”

“I think we’ll go out for a month at least. My agricultural extension duties really don’t let me get away much more than that.”

“Of course.”

Just then Chris came to the table with forms; Soru raised his hand to take one, surprising Chris. “Great. All the members of the Central Spiritual Assembly plan to volunteer, even if it is a few days.”

“I’ll contact Bahá’ís who are good farmers or who have some agricultural extension training,” pledged Mitrukaru. “I’d really like to see our agricultural support efforts expand, especially considering how much Bahá’u’lláh stresses the importance of agriculture.”

“Excellent,” replied Chris. He moved on to the next table, where Thornton and Lébe were sitting. “Any way you can go to Kerda after convention?” he said to his son.

“After convention? I don’t know, I’m still immersed in the details of the dissertation!”

“But it’ll be done by then, right?”

“Yes, it’s due the 1st of Dhébelménu. I’m hoping to be able to catch up on my sleep before Convention on the 5th through the 7th. ”

“Lébé, you’re not teaching the second spring term, right? Any way the two of you could go to Isurdhna for a month? Youth team aside, we need some resources for consolidation in Kërda.”

“The new governor is allowing big Bahá’í meetings,” agreed Thornton.

“And you hit it off with him,” added Chris. “I hope that’ll be possible.”

“We’ll have to bring a tutor along for the kids,” said Thornton to Lébé, who was thinking.

She nodded. “Sure, it’s inconvenient for our other work, but it’s a service we can provide the Faith. I can do my translating from there.”

“If we can find a good spot to stay, it may actually be more convenient,” said Thornton to her. “Because you’ll be freed from a lot of other day-to-day tasks and responsibilities. I’ll have to come back to defend the dissertation.”

“That’s at the end of Blorménu,” replied Chris. “More than a month later, and I’m just asking whether you can go a month.”

“Okay, we can do it,” agreed Thornton.

When Chris and Luktréstu arrived in Kérékwes, they were surprised to see three fancy cars parked outside of Lord Mitruiliku’s villa. “It looks like every Lord in the province is here,” Chris said. He pointed to a car with a distinctive coat of arms painted on its side. “Even Mitrulubu!”

“I thought they weren’t talking to each other.”

“So did I, but it has been over four years since their father’s death. I guess they’ve found a bigger enemy to unite over.”

“But isn’t this a meeting to talk about the late spring planting and farm problems?”

“So Mitruiluku said, but I found that reason suspicious.” Chris got out of the car and headed to the villa door.

The butler ushered him straight into Mitruiluku’s reception area, next to his large and expansive office. As Chris suspected, the other lords of Swadnoma were already there: Tritu of Swadlendha township and the three Kérékwes brothers, Mitruiluku, Mitrubbaru, and Mitrulubu, “Mitru’s light,” “Mitru loves,” and “Borne for Mitru” respectively. The first two had been estranged from the third ever since their father, Lord Mitru, had died, and the oldest, Mitruiluku—governor of Vésa province for his father—fought a battle for control of the family heritage with the second oldest, Mitrulubu, who was mayor of Ora.

“Hail, Gentlemen. I never thought I’d see a gathering like this,” Chris said, as he entered.

“Hail, Lord Kristobéru,” replied Mitruiluku. “You are welcome. Please, sit; I’ll bring you tea.” Mitruiluku turned to the samovar and immediately poured tea and added sugar. He remembered how Chris liked his tea; but in the past, Mitruiluku’s butler always provided the tea, not the host.

“Thank you, you are very kind,” said Chris, trying not to look suspicious. He settled onto a vacant pillow on the floor and sipped his tea, deciding not to say anything more until others spoke first.

“We are very appreciative that you could make it,” said Mitruiluku. “Lord Tritu just arrived as well. How has planting gone in Melita?”

It was a strange question; normally Melita planted during mid Ejinaménu, the equivalent of early March, but the planting had occurred three weeks later and had finished two weeks ago. “It went well, I think, and the danger of frost seems to have passed. Even in Melwika the crops have been planted, and they seem to be safe from frost. The cold winter killed the winter crops, but the spring crops seem safe.”

“Prices seem to be staying strong, too,” added Tritu. “Swadlendha replanted right after the frosts and our vegetable sales are now very strong.”

“Melita’s chicken and turkey farms had to slaughter a lot of poultry when the price of feed shot way up,” noted Chris. “The price of poultry will be high for a few months.”

“What I want to know from you, Lord, is whether the rumor is true that you are planting sugar cane,” said Mitrulubu.

“I am,” agreed Chris, glancing at Tritu. “A thousand agris of it, on land in Swadlendha that I am leasing. There will be a sugar refinery as well, built this summer.”

“How do you expect to sell that much sugar?” asked Mitruiluku, puzzled.

“I don’t. Miller Motors has just completed a liquid fuel system for cars, pickup trucks, and other steam-powered vehicles. The system uses pure grain alcohol, which can be made from sugar cane. Liquid fuel will probably prove more popular than charcoal and wood; it’s far more convenient, one wastes much less of it, it’s easy to store and to turn on and off.” Chris shrugged. “Or demand will not materialize and my sugar cane fields will become the home of thousands of snakes.”

The others chuckled at that. “The Governor will get his share of the taxes,” concluded Mitruiluku.

“Did he get any autumn taxes from you?” asked Mitrulubu. “After he was appointed, he called me in and demanded two months of taxes right away. I debated about the matter and decided not to make trouble.”

“Probably wise,” said Tritu. “Duke Aryornu is amassing much more power than one might expect. I paid it as well.”

Mitruiluku looked disturbed by that comment and shook his head. “He hasn’t burned down my house yet.”

“I went to Weranu and he told me that if I had paid the taxes to the crown, the governor could get his share from the exchequer,” said Chris. “And I had paid the taxes, so I told the Governor he should ask Weranu for his share.”

“A brave man,” replied Tritu.

“I’m pretty sure that while he asked for two months’ taxes, the prince had only authorized one,” added Chris.

“Well, we can’t let the governor—I won’t call him Duke because the prince can strip him of his power and title any time—extract protection money from us,” exclaimed Mitruiluku, raising his voice. “And we definitely should not let him seize factories.”

“He has two now,” noted Mitrulubu. “One of my business partners sold his sixty percent share to Aryornu the other day at, I think, a bargain price.”

“He’s grabbed two in Melita the same way,” said Chris. “But gentlemen, there are legal means to pursue, and they are being pursued. I will not participate in any other

defense. It is perfectly reasonable for us to meet and discuss legal means to protect our towns and their tax bases. But I draw the line there.”

There was silence in the room for a moment. Then Mitruiluku said, “We have no desire to do something illegal. None of the four of us can approach Her Majesty, Lord, but you can. We wanted to meet with you to implore you to beg Her Majesty’s intervention.”

“I did speak to her about a month and a half ago, and I had reason to think she would help.”

“Well, she doesn’t seem to have spoken to Aryornu,” replied Tritu. “I’ll tell you what I have learned. Aryornu has received permission to form a provincial police. That doesn’t seem very unusual; all provinces have police forces. But our police force has two unusual features. First, it has a huge number of part time policemen; at least fifty and maybe one hundred. I’m not sure yet how many, but I was shocked to hear the size.”

“One hundred?” asked Mitruiluku. “That’s impossible. The province has how many people; fifteen thousand? The province needs a total of maybe twenty-five or thirty police, and most of us have township police forces!”

“Melita alone has fifteen full and part time police. We need a lot because of all our commercial establishments,” said Chris.

“Swadlendha has five and Endraidha has fifteen,” replied Tritu. “We need a provincial police force to provide specialized services, like how to solve murders. We don’t need one hundred former military veterans being paid to be part time police. For what? But more seriously, there’s this.” Tritu leaned forward. “The provincial police have

acquired permission to access the army's armory. That includes access to the new firearms."

"Firearms?" asked Chris, surprised. "I thought they were still semi-secret."

"They are; most of the *army* doesn't have access to them. But the Swadnoma police do. That makes no sense at all to me."

"So, we will have army veterans walking around our towns with pistols and guns when we don't need them at all?" asked Miruiluku, scowling.

"Correct. The queen needs to know about that."

"Well, there is one thing we can do," suggested Chris. "All five of us can request to meet with Her Majesty together. That's five towns out of six, and I doubt anyone would expect the commander of Endraidha to join us. We can all speak. I am willing to speak about the seizure of factories again. I will leave it to Lord Tritu to decide whether he will raise the issue of the police."

"Oh, I will!"

"And I'll complain about the taxes," added Mitruiluku. "I will. I was insulted by the demand!"

"Well, do we want to ask Her Majesty, or not?" asked Chris. "If so, I'll arrange the audience. She may invite Aryornu to come as well. We may need to be prepared for that."

"Fine with me," said Tritu. "He doesn't intimidate me."

"Nor I!" added Mitruiluku. Mitrubbaru nodded; Mitrulubu looked down at the floor. Mitrubbaru tapped him on the shoulder.

"So, brother, are you with us?"

“I . . . guess so. I’m worried about angering Aryornu.”

“What can he do, if every lord in his province meets with the queen about him?”
asked Tritu. “We have to be unified. He’s powerful, but so are we!”

“I think it’s a good idea,” agreed Chris. “We have a right to speak to Her Majesty; we are Lords and have legal rights that Dukes don’t have. And we have a reasonable case. We should make it. I’ll try to arrange an audience next week in Meddoakwés.”

Reread and edited 6/10/13, 8/23/17, 11/23/24

328.

Stirring Things Up

Mid/Late Bolérenménu, yr 14/632

Chris Mennea hurried across the street outside his house through a gap in the traffic and opened the house's outer door. He pulled out a key and unlocked the inner door to enter the courtyard. He saw Liz, Behruz, and Lébé in the great room, which was wide open to the courtyard, now that warm weather had arrived.

"How did the audience go?" asked Liz, when she saw him.

"It was alright." Chris walked to the great room and sat on the couch. "Her Majesty was gracious; Aryornu was there and was scornful and defiant. No doubt she noticed. And Mitrulubu backed out and never showed up."

"But Tritu, Mitruiluku, and Mitrubbaru were there?" asked Behruz.

Chris nodded. "They made it. Her Majesty loves to find compromises. She affirmed that factory owners have a right to their property and that they should not be pressured. I think that was a warning to Aryornu and I hope he'll lay off. Certainly, it means she won't confiscate and transfer property, so he lost that option. Where taxes are concerned, Tritu paid Aryornu taxes that he also got from the exchequer and she didn't ask the governor to return it; I think she felt that money freely given was given, after all the other three of us didn't give him anything."

"At least you don't have to worry about the request coming back to haunt you," said Liz.

“I think that’s true. The third matter was the most interesting. Tritu accused Aryornu of forming a private army, armed with pistols and rifles. Her Majesty affirmed that he could establish a provincial police force and that it could have access to firearms *if they were needed*, though she seemed to disapprove of a provincial force of any size and didn’t seem to think that firearms would ever be needed. So I really don’t know where that charge will go. Aryornu seemed pleased by her judgment.”

“I don’t like that,” said Behruz.

“Nor I.”

“Any hope for a provincial plan for development?” asked Behruz.

Chris shook his head. “Don’t hold your breath. The question of a gas line from Melita south to Endraidha will be up in the air for months.”

“Then they won’t get one this year. The gas company can’t afford it, anyway.”

Liz walked over to the radio. “It’s time for *The World Table*. May called us a little while ago and said we *had to* listen to it.”

“Who’s on?” asked Chris.

“Chanavu, the very popular singer.”

“Why should we listen to that?” asked Chris. “He’s a big money maker for the phonograph company; maybe that’s why.”

He settled into his chair; he could use an hour of relaxation, he was almost 69 and it had been a long day. A moment later the show began with a recording of Chanavu singing the Beatles song “Love Me Do” in Eryan, accompanied by the three string and pan pipe; hardly like an electric guitar or piano. It struck Chris as silly. In the last six months the phonograph company—struggling to avoid bankruptcy—had discovered that

Earth rock music could be recorded from a computer onto a vinyl cylinder—they still had not switched to discs—and the Eryan public loved it. More importantly, there were no royalties to pay. The new sounds had become immensely popular with the young.

Chanavu, a young crooner from a village north of Ora known for his popular songs, started transposing them into Eryan lyrics and arrangements and they had proved popular as well, catapulting him into stardom overnight. This would be his second appearance on Kekanu's *World Table*.

Love Me Do faded into the background and Kekanu began with his usual opening script. "Greetings to all. The sky is growing dark, and all around the world we are heading indoors to spend some time together. It is time for our *wereḍu*, eclipse meal, though it is at different times of the day in our different time zones. As light appears threatened by darkness and life by death, we come together for love and family, huddle together in our homes, and break bread with our dearest ones." There was a pause, then a recording of Kekanu singing part of the Hymn of the Eclipse was played:

*Skando covers Sulo, just as the dragon Werétrā threatened the great Mitro,
The glorious disk becomes a dark circle, it eclipses the majesty of the sun;
But the sun reappears, Rostu slays the dragon, Mitro is saved,
And so light conquers darkness, Werétrakester the Dragonslayer gains a great
victory,*

Good defeats evil as assuredly as the sun reappears.

"We've had an unexpected change in our program today. Chanavu was scheduled to appear, but just half an hour ago someone walked into the studio unexpectedly. Chanavu was honored to meet him and graciously offered to appear on the show

tomorrow instead. I refer to the conscience of our people, the dragonslayer himself, Werétrakester, our widu. Honored Werétrakester, welcome back to the *World Table*.”

“Thank you so much, Kekanu. I listen to your show often. In Isurdhuna it is broadcast at two hours before dawn. I often rise, listen to your show, then perform my morning devotions. I know many Kerda families who eat their breakfast during your show.”

“Thank you, honored. So, what has been on your mind over the last few months? What have you been meditating about?”

“Much of the world has seen a situation similar to the hymn of Widumaj that you just chanted. A battle between good and evil has been going on, all around the world. The sun indeed has been consumed; witness the cold winter we just experienced, with frost everywhere for the first time in several decades. I can only speak in detail of the situations I have witnessed in Kerda, where we have had over a dozen major incidents—some were riots—since the beginning of winter. The Holy City has been the unhappy host to four hundred soldiers; many people think it is one hundred or two hundred, but in fact it is now four hundred. I have been informed—secretly—that twenty-four people have died in the fighting. Several dozen businesses have been vandalized; five have been burned. Several hundred people are in prison, yet the trouble continues. The temple and the quarters of the priests—these are palaces for twenty-five hereditary priestly families—have been surrounded by soldiers and closed off.”

“Why is that? To protect them?”

“No, to prevent them from coordinating and encouraging the riots. You see, Duke Yusdu was thanked for his services and forcibly retired in the fall and he was replaced by

a young, green army officer, Governor Wëranokaru. The governor decided it was time to strip the priests of their hereditary privileges. I am not in favor of inherited wealth, at least not enough to create a lavish and wealthy lifestyle. But it is not just to strip them, suddenly and without warning, of half their income. I do not think Esto or Widumaj would approve of holy priests approving of or encouraging violence to right an injustice, either. Overall, it has been a very sad, unseemly affair. Esto punished the entire city by blanketing it in a suffocating cloud, which killed twenty or thirty more people. We were judged. Yet the unrest continues. If it continues into the summer the great pilgrimage will be impossible.”

“You spoke of a battle between good and evil, but in this case both sides appear to be evil.”

“Yes, in this case the battle is not between good and evil, but between two sides with a mix of both. It is more akin to a civil war than the slaying of the dragon Wërétra. That is what has made this battle the most intense, also. Elsewhere, the battle is less intense because the aggrieved parties have refrained from retaliation. In the provinces of Lëwésipa and Swadnoma, new governors have sought to seize factories from their owners under the pretext that centralizing all the manufacturing operations in the province will make them more efficient. I think we would all agree that seizing factories from their owners will not make them more efficient. Indeed, consider Lëwésipa for a moment. All of us listen to clock bells and the ticks of clocks made there. The piano in this studio was made there. Most of us wear clothes made there. Since when can a green army officer, suddenly put in charge of the place, make this world’s most productive and clever area more productive? Every village in the province has factories, and as a result everyone in

that blessed province has work. They are a prosperous people! They have schools; their children have plenty to eat. And they should be prosperous; they have made many things that all of us enjoy and benefit from. What does ‘efficiency’ mean, then? It means that a small number of men—seven or nine—will own all the factories, instead of the villages or large groups of partners. And what will they do? Raise prices, cut wages, and make themselves rich! That’s efficiency? No, that’s greed and selfishness.”

Kekanu paused before commenting, not sure what to say at first. “I am sure Her Majesty will protect the people,” he said, aware that overt criticism would prompt a huge fine.

“Yes, but I am sure she is not fully aware of the situation. You see, the newspapers and the radio have all been muzzled. Who can learn about these situations? In Swadnoma, the new governor has managed to pressure several factory owners into selling their factories to a provincial tomi at bargain prices, but the rest are bravely taking him to court. In response, he is establishing a provincial police force in a province that only has six townships, all of which have competent police forces. Why is a provincial police force needed at all? One of the six townships is Endraidha, home of four thousand soldiers! In the North Shore, the new tomi has been taken over by its new governor and they are trying to pressure factory owners to ‘partner’ with them, because after almost a year that tomi has done nothing but spend a hundred thousand dhanay on salaries and foundations for new factories. What does ‘partner’ mean? The factory owners get to keep their factories as long as they share their profits! In other words, it is a bribe. The South Shore tomi has also started to look hungrily at the existing factories, because that tomi

also is ineffective and is giving salaries to its Board members without starting new manufacturing.”

“This is shocking news, Werétrakester.”

“It should be shocking news, but nothing has been done, so how shocking has it been, heretofore? In my dreams, again and again, I see a young eagle soaring from his mother’s nest, in search of prey. He sees a fish, but a bear grabs it first. He spies a mouse on the ground and swoops down, but an owl seizes it first. Finally he manages to capture a rabbit—it is so large that he can barely carry it—and he struggles to fly home with it. But ravens see him and challenge him, then attack, and he must fight them off. He drops the rabbit—he loses everything he has gained—but the ravens continue their attack. They bloody him, they blind him. And then. . . well, then I usually wake up, so I never find out whether the young eagle manages to fly back to his mother’s nest to nurse his wounds and fly again. In some dreams, he gets home. In others he fatally plunges from the sky.”

“What a terribly disturbing dream!”

“Indeed. I dare not sleep some nights because I fear the dream’s recurrence.”

“What does the eagle refer to? The kingdom?” Kekanu didn’t want to leave the audience with the impression it referred to the prince.

“Dreams have many meanings, and that may be one. Perhaps the ‘mother eagle’ is Widumaj. We have indeed been straying from Widumaj as a people ever since the ‘new knowledge’ arrived. Science and industry are not bad by themselves; we had a form of both of them before the new knowledge. But they have led to greed and a desire for power over others, and that violates the teachings of Widumaj. We must return to the virtues Widumaj called us to, centuries ago, before it is too late. For the ravens are

gathering; I see that every day. And Her Majesty has seen them too, for in her speeches she always calls on her people to cling to honesty, justice, frugality, hard work, and self-sacrifice. Those are the characteristics missing lately.”

“What can we do?”

“Pray. Sacrifice: both in the sense of sacrificing animals and in the sense of sacrificing self. Improve yourself: learn to read, learn a new skill. Become informed about conditions in this world. Vote for experienced and capable people. If you are a person in power: listen to others. If you run a newspaper: do not censor yourself, but tell the people, frankly but in a way that will not agitate, about what is going on. Expose injustice. If you are a judge: uphold the justice Widumaj demands. If you are a member of the old houses or the priesthood: do not assume you are entitled to wealth and honor, but earn them. If you are in charge of a business: do not work solely to enrich yourself, but to enrich your entire community. If you are an assistant to someone in charge: do not tell your leader just what he wants to know, but tell him the truth, for that is what he needs to know. If you are a maker of posters: Make wise and truthful posters. If all of us were a little wiser, a little more trusting of the motives of others, but also a little less naïve about the motives of others, the realm would function much better.”

“Is there a role for the artist in this vision of yours?”

“Of course, for art inspires action. Artists can change our attitudes, and they should.”

“So, we can still fight off the ravens?”

“Indeed. We must—”

Suddenly, the lights in the room went out and the radio went dead. They were so immersed in the program it was quite startling. Chris rose and stumbled toward the kitchen, where the cook was operating a gas stove that threw some light. She had turned on all the burners and was pulling out candles. He brought several back to the great room. “We haven’t had a power failure during the eclipse for several months,” he noted suspiciously.

“And this is the sort of show that could cause one,” said Liz. “Everyone’s listening to this. Kekanu’s brave.”

“He’ll get fined by the palace, even if he has no control over Werétrakester. This show will stir things up.”

“Didn’t Werétrakester tell you this dream, and identify the young eagle as the prince?”

“He did, and everyone will understand that; at least until Kekanu offered an alternative interpretation.”

“That was clever of him. It depersonalized the criticism. I wonder what this will do?”

“We’ll see.”

Over dinner, they speculated about the impact of the radio interview and the palace’s reaction. While Melwika got its power back fairly quickly, the radio station in Pértatranisér remained off the air for the rest of the eclipse, and Amos called later that evening to tell everyone that the power lines had been deliberately cut outside of Ora, an act that had taken down the entire grid and would require two days to repair. The

electricians were told by nearby residents they had seen soldiers performing the act of sabotage.

By the next morning, posters were appearing around Mēlwika denouncing injustice, denouncing the Prince, even denouncing the Queen. Chris and Liz made a quick walk around town after breakfast and counted six new silk-screened posters, one supposedly from the western shore. Then they headed off to their offices. Liz's was in the Women's Gabruli, a converted house a hundred meters away. She planned to spend much of the day on the phone, calling Women's gabrulis to encourage them and find out what they needed, or calling local spiritual assemblies to find out how they were doing and what problems they had. Several of each had left messages in the middle of the night when the rates for messages were very low, knowing she'd call back, because she got bulk rates for heavy use of the phone lines. She started by sending messages proposing when she would call a dozen different people, for many of them did not have telephones of their own and thus had to be near someone else's at a certain time. Fortunately she had a very able assistant, a génadema student named Okiné, "hummingbird."

Liz was in the middle of discussing knitting with a woman in the Ejnopéla Gabruli when Okiné stepped into her office, a look of surprise on her face. "Her Majesty, Princess Awster is on the phone!" she whispered urgently.

Liz's eyes grew large. "Krusémé, I apologize, but I'll have to call you back, I have an emergency at this end . . . thank you, good bye." Liz put the telephone down. "Put her through. What does she want?"

“She didn’t say, but there was urgency in her voice. I sensed she needed to talk right away.” Okiné hurried back to her own office to put the call through. “Okay, pick up.”

Liz picked up the phone. “Good morning, Your Majesty.”

“Good morning, honored lady. I apologize for disturbing you, but I felt I had to call you.”

“No problem at all, Your Majesty. How can I help you?”

“I was hoping that we could talk later today. Whenever it is convenient for you, really. If you could spare an hour to have some tea, I would very, very much appreciate it.”

There was a yearning in her voice that was unmistakable. “I’m actually free all morning, Your Majesty. Shall I meet you in an hour?”

“Oh, that would be marvelous! I will be forever in your debt.”

“I’ll see you in an hour, then. Shall I invite Chris to come along as well?”

“Certainly, I think the Duke will be present as well.”

“Very well, we’ll be there at 11 bells.”

“Thank you so much. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Liz put down the phone, then immediately picked it up and asked the operator to connect her to 2015, the phone in Chris’s office, which would bypass Luktréstu. As soon as he answered, Liz said, “Chris, I just heard from Princess Awster. I think she may be ready to declare; there was urgency in her voice that was unmistakable. I’m going to her house, arriving at 11, and you’re invited.”

“Eleven? We’ll have to leave in fifteen minutes, and I have a meeting at 11:30.”

“Well, either cancel it, or I’ll go myself.”

“I think Luktréstu can reschedule. Alright, see you at the rover in fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks.” Liz hung up the phone, asked Okiné to reschedule everything she had to do for the next four hours, and went out to walk around town and pray. She couldn’t sit, after such a call.

Liz did the driving so Chris could fit in two more calls about his sugar cane plantation while they drove to the capital. They parked inside the Lord Mayor’s courtyard and headed inside just as the clock was striking eleven. Princess Awster was waiting; Kandékwes looked like an unwilling participant in the conversation. Chris offered a sympathetic glance.

“I was up all night,” Awster began. “The widu’s talk on the radio gave me much to think about. Werétrakester was right; if we want to make changes to this world, we have to make a spiritual commitment to virtue. I do not see a consistent commitment to virtue in my family, in the priesthood or the old houses, or among the ordinary people. I do see that commitment in your family and in the Bahá’í community.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” replied Liz. “We are imperfect, but we try.”

“We are all imperfect, but not everyone tries,” continued Awster. “I am not in a position of power, though I am in a position of influence. Ever since I married the Lord Mayor twenty years ago, I have tried to be the mother of the poor for this city. Since your family arrived, I have entered many new roles as patron of the Development Corps and the Women’s Génadema. But I have never felt that my commitments fit together. Through the principles of Bahá’u’lláh, they fit together.”

“But Your Majesty, being a Bahá'í is more than belief in a set of principles,” noted Liz, gently. “It is also faith and trust in Bahá'u'lláh.”

“I have that, too. I’ve had that for some time, I think, but I’ve never dared to say so. I’ve been saying the prayers and fasting, too.”

“She did indeed fast,” concurred Kandékwes. “And she has been praying your prayers. Last night she prayed half the time and cried the other half.”

“I did cry. Some of it was joy and some was fear. I have not yet told Her Majesty of my faith. You are the first.”

“Then we thank you for the privilege, and welcome you to the family of Bahá'u'lláh.” Liz rose and walked over to Awster, who rose. They hugged.

“Thank you.” There were tears in her eyes.

“But this is a political problem,” exclaimed Kandékwes. “Which is the main reason I wanted to join this conversation. It will not sit well with Her Majesty, the Crown Prince, most of the old houses, and all the priests that the princess has become a Bahá'í. This is not the time to say anything.”

“Of course. We won’t speak to anyone, even to the Central Spiritual Assembly, without your permission,” said Chris.

“I need time to prepare people,” said Awster. “But I had to tell you first, for you have patiently nurtured me all these years as I moved from disinterest to attraction.”

“We are honored,” said Liz.

“We are both deeply concerned about the kingdom,” said Kandékwes. “The crown prince has let loose forces that are doing terrible damage, and he cannot yet accept responsibility for it. Her Majesty desperately wants him to succeed and doesn’t want to

interfere. Yesterday the widu set in motion contrary forces that cannot be moderated, either. The only moderate forces are the Bahá'is, and they stand aloof to politics.”

“We are still few,” replied Chris. “We seek to moderate everyone, but they won’t listen to us. If we turn to coercion or force, we will destroy the very principles of unity we stand for.”

“What do you recommend I do?” asked Awster.

“Love your brother, pray for him, try to pray with him, and urge him to do that which is right,” said Liz.

“And we know what that is; read *The Secret of Divine Civilization*,” added Chris.

“Even Werétrakester said to me once that he felt *The Secret of Divine Civilization* was a good blueprint for our civilization,” noted Kandékwes. “But after last night, I fear we will have little influence over your brother.”

“I had a rather nasty fight with him,” agreed Awster. “But in a few days I’ll try a more gentle approach.”

“Meanwhile, I suggest we pray together,” added Liz.

“I would like to meet with the Central Spiritual Assembly at some point soon,” added Awster. “I think I need their advice.”

“Then we will arrange it when you are ready,” agreed Chris.

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329.

House Fire

Early Dhébelménu, 14/632

Jordan and Tiamaté rolled through sugar cane fields that seemed endless. The plants were a meter high at most and beginning to accelerate their growth in Swadlendha's equatorial sun and the bountiful irrigation water that a dozen pumps sent their way from deep wells. The stain of muddy water could be seen along the edges of many fields, and it occasionally poured across the dirt tracks separating fields, splashing the steam car with red when they drove through.

Jordan turned left and started to drive north along another dirt track. They passed the end of a sugar cane field and reached a field where two men were laboring to plant small canes in rows. "Why are they working today, your grandfather's not paying people to work on Primdiu!" said Tiamaté.

"I think they own this field. The Pértatraniséer Grange has been selling cane plants to anyone who wants them. When grandpa decided to plant a thousand agris of cane, some people smelled opportunity."

"So, how much cane is getting planted down here?"

Jordan shrugged. "Probably two thousand agris. Let's hope demand for alcohol's enough by then!" He tapped the car, "But it sure does make it easier to operate these things."

They drove north a half kilometer and entered unbroken tallgrass prairie. "A lot of this township is still unfarmed."

“Swadlendha has 195 square kilometers; that’s more than twice the size of Melita. A lot of rich grassland, and with summertime irrigation it’s very productive.”

“And over half the farmers are Sumis. But a lot of them are itinerant. I hesitate to offer them Bahá’í classes because you never know where to find them later.”

“I know, I worry about that, too. But we should continue the classes. There are now enough Bahá’ís around so they can find a community if they want to. Every village on Sumilara has Bahá’ís, and pretty soon every one will have a spiritual assembly. For that matter, Swadlendha now has an assembly, so it can follow up.”

Tiamaté nodded; Swadlendha township had elected its first spiritual assembly a week earlier. “Oh, I’m not saying we shouldn’t be conducting these literacy and Ruhi classes, especially with your grandfather’s workers. I just wish we could be more sure the workers would stay here so we can follow up! This is the third class and I checked the attendance list; half the people missed either the first or second class.”

Jordan shrugged. “That’s always the way it is. Bit by bit, day by day. At least they know ten more Sumi letters—if they remember them—and they’ve studied another Bahá’í prayer. If we can keep up this commitment seven more weeks, some people will be literate, and some will be Bahá’ís.”

“Yes, you’re right. Let’s head to Melita for the night.”

“That’s where we’re going,” he replied. “I could use a nice hot shower! That tent was *hot*!”

“And let’s go out to eat at that new Sumi restaurant in the shopping area, then go to bed early.”

He nodded. They had been teaching literacy and Ruhi classes, plus answering general questions about the Faith, all day. The tent next to Swadlëndha Grange had been packed, mostly by Sumis working for Chris.

Jordan turned left at the next intersection and headed west, toward Route 3, the concrete ribbon that would take them north of Mëlita. They reached the Mennea home there in forty minutes. They stayed there every Primdiu night, then Jordan met with the City Council on behalf of Chris every Dwodiu morning, they had lunch with Tiamaté's family in Èndraidha, then they drove back to Mëlwika for the rest of the week.

They washed off the sweat of a day of tropical heat, went out to eat—in spite of the servants' insistence they could cook a good meal quickly—then walked home in the cool of the evening under a half full Skanda.

In the middle of the night they were awakened by the sound of breaking glass in a neighboring room and a poofing sound. Jordan bolted up in bed. "What was that?"

"Something broke," said Tiamaté.

"I think something broke a window." Jordan flipped on the light switch and got out of bed. He was naked, but the two of them were the only ones sleeping in that part of the house. He opened the door and walked down the hall to the next room, the one at the end of the wing, which was the largest. It was Chris and Liz's suite; they had twice as much space in the Mëlita mansion than the Mëlwika house.

He opened the door and was shocked to see a wooden floor covered by a sheet of orange flames and thick, black smoke. He coughed and slammed the door shut. "It's a fire! We've got to get out!" he shouted to Tiamaté. He dashed back to their room and

pulled on his clothes, then they ran down the hallway. It was beginning to fill with smoke pouring under the door.

“Let’s awaken the servants!” he shouted. Jordan paused long enough to close the doors connecting the corridor of the private wing to the main part of the house; that would help a bit. They dashed down the stairs and into the main part of the house. The kitchen was straight in the back; Jordan headed that way while Tiamaté picked up the phone to summon the Fire Department. “Fire! Fire, wake up!” he shouted, pounding on the door leading to the quarters of their caretaker and cook.

“What? What happened, what did you do?” asked the caretaker from the other side of the door.

“Someone threw a firebomb through the window into grandpa and grandma’s room!”

“May Esto protect us!”

“You’ve got a few minutes before the fire gets this far, but not much time, it’ll spread fast! We can’t put it out, it’s too big!”

“Call the fire department!”

“Tiamaté did!”

A moment later the butler and chief caretaker of the house, Albkordu, “Whiteheart,” dashed out of his room fully dressed. His wife, their cook and maid, was right behind. He pointed to the house’s main entertainment rooms. “There’s ten thousand dhanay of furniture, mirrors, fixtures, and paintings to rescue!”

“Tell me what to do, I’m you’re servant!” replied Jordan.

“Let’s go!”

They dashed into the main rooms and began grabbing anything they could and hauling it out the front door. Jordan glanced at the residential wing the first time they went outside; flames and smoke were pouring out two sets of windows and the roof was beginning to smoke. The fire was spreading fast.

With a clanging of bells and toots of steam whistles, Melita's two fire engines raced up to the house. The firemen jumped off and headed to the fire hydrant with the hoses. "What happened?" exclaimed the fire marshall.

"Someone threw a firebomb through the last set of windows about ten minutes ago! The breaking glass woke us up!"

"It's got a good start on us, but we should be able to save the main part of the house, if it hasn't spread there yet. Fire bomb, you say? A bottle full of alcohol?"

"I suppose. There was broken glass on the floor, I think." Jordan thought about the brilliant blaze he had seen, then shook his head. "It wasn't alcohol; alcohol burns pale blue. The flames were bright orange."

"Bright orange?" The fire marshall, a military veteran, was startled by that. "Only the army has access to naphtha. You'd better call the police."

"We'll have to walk over to the hotel," pointed Tiamaté.

"No one goes into the house," agreed the fire marshall. He ordered the servants away from the doors as his men ran in with hoses.

"We've got to call your grandpa," urged Tiamaté.

"He's in Mëddwoglubas at the National Convention. I have no idea what time it is here, so I don't know what time it is there."

“It doesn’t matter; we have to call him. Someone was targeting him. They threw the firebomb through his bedroom window. Why firebomb a second story room when the first story’s easier to hit?”

“You’re right. Someone saw the steam car and assumed it was grandpa. And the firebomb wasn’t alcohol, which is the only substance someone can get easily.”

“The fire marshall said it was army naphtha. We’d better tell Chris about that, too.” She shuddered. “And now we have time to get scared!”

“You’re right, there was no time before.” Jordan looked at his hands and realized they were shaking uncontrollably.

The verdant fields around Pértatranisér had been washed by an unusual morning downpour when Amos and May drove through, on their way home from Mëddwoglubas and the convention. The gathering gloom of the eclipse was falling across the land as they parked their steam car and unpacked their luggage. The kids were in school by then, so Amos was able to turn straight to the incoming mail and telephone messages. He started with the four newspapers that had arrived since they had left for the convention; they had a subscription to all eight of the Eryan-language weekly newspapers. The *Melwika Nues*—a Primdiu publication, though it usually appeared the night before so people had time to read the sales coupons carefully—had a headline article about the hasty and biased choices made for selecting the governors of Kerda, Lëwésa, and the north and south shores. The *Tribune*—a Dwodiu publication for Néfa and Pértatranisér—had the same article in the same location but different local news, because the two papers were jointly owned and blocks of set type were shipped back and forth. The *Vésa Truth*—a

Suksdiu publication from Ora and the world's second most widely read paper—was typically conservative, but even it ran an article on page two about the continuing unrest in Kërda. Finally, the *Tripola Bédhe*—which appeared every Penkudiu—offered an article about South Shore's slow spring planting, its possible impact on income and tax revenues, and how that would compound problems caused by the South Shore Tomi, its slow expansion of industry and its interference with legitimate businesses.

What a difference, compared to the tame, timid headlines of ten days earlier!

Amos thought. Këkanu's interview with Wërétrakester had even emboldened the *Vëspha Truth*. The poster makers were suddenly left behind by the newspapers, though they were now turning to wilder theories. He wondered whether the change was a good thing; the palace, most likely, was furious.

He turned to the letters next and opened the six that had arrived, which were routine. The telephone messages were last because they were small pieces of paper piled on top of the rest, and one from that morning was extremely urgent; the palace was fining the radio station 50,000 dhanay. The amount was an absolute shock to Amos. He headed over to the radio station.

The letter had been opened by the station manager while Këkanu was on the air, so he still didn't know. Amos sat in Këkanu's office, listening to the show in the distance, rereading the letter again and again and wondering what to do. In between readings he stared at the accumulated pile of two weeks' newspapers, their blaring headlines all arranged to be visible. Këkanu was proud of the cascade of media attention he had started.

Finally, *The World Table* was over and Kekanu came out, charged up and excited by the show. He usually was; he was one of the few people Amos knew who got more energized by work rather than less. He saw Amos sitting in his office and came in. “Hail, Honored Amos! How was your convention? Did you like the show?”

“Convention was pretty good. We kept it small and quiet this year, so it wasn’t flashy, but it was exciting.”

“Did you hear the Isurdhuna Bahá’í Center burned down last night?”

“No! How did you hear about that!”

“I have a source in Kerda that’s reliable and willing to talk. Werétrakester.”

Kekanu smiled. “He called a bit after dawn and told me. We ran it on the news at the beginning of the show.”

“No, I didn’t hear. I missed the beginning of your show because I had just gotten home. Speaking of burning, did you hear that someone torched Chris’s house in Melita last night?”

“No! That’s terrible!”

“The fire department came right away and put the fire out; they saved the main part of the house, but the residential wing burned. No one was injured, fortunately, but Jordan and Tiamaté were asleep there at the time.”

“How terrible! We live in crazy times. I’ll have to mention the fire on the show tomorrow.”

“Maybe not. This came today.” Amos handed the letter to Kekanu. The singer read the letter and his face turned bright red with anger.

“They can’t do this! Fifty thousand? That’s outrageous! It’s impossible, the station earns only thirty thousand per year!”

“Well, it has to be paid. Maybe we can get a bank loan. This world has no limited liability laws, so you and I are jointly liable for this fine if the station can’t pay.”

“*Fifty thousand?* Honored Amos, you know I don’t have money like that! I was a penniless musician until the station came along! I haven’t earned that much, total, yet!”

“I’m sure you don’t have it. But neither do I.”

“What will we do? This is sheer robbery! It’s Mēmējékwa, that villain and thief! Can Chris help?”

“I don’t know. We can’t call him yet; he’s on his way to Mēlita to survey the fire damage. And I wouldn’t be surprised if he finds a letter to the *Mēlwika Nwes* announcing a fine as well, so he may have a shortage of funds.”

“This is crazy! It’s unacceptable! I’m going to demand an audience with the Queen!”

“No, don’t do that! I’ll talk to Chris; he’s the best one to talk to her about this matter. I suspect all these papers will be appealing.” He pointed to the array of headlines.

“They better be! This is naked injustice! I’ll call Werétrakester! Maybe he can talk to the queen! And until then . . .” Kēkanu considered. “Until then, I’m off the air. At least two weeks.”

“What? You’re the most popular item on the radio station! We make half our advertising revenue during the *World Table!*”

“I know. I want the time slot empty and silent; no reruns, no music, nothing. Just for a week, then, Amos. I want to make a point. They can’t fine me for a silent protest.”

“Probably not. Maybe that is best.”

“We have to do *something*. This is naked power. It’s tyranny! If we don’t stand up to them, they’ll gain complete, absolute control over everything!”

“I know. Please calm down, Kεkanu. Bahá’ís can’t disobey the government, remember. I have to pay the fine, or my portion, anyway. But no one can complain about silent air. I think that’s a very creative response.”

Kεkanu shook his head. “Amos, this is no time to be meekly obedient. The future of this world is at stake. They can—they will—gain total control if we don’t stop them. The new knowledge allows terrible concentration of power if there aren’t checks and balances!”

“I know. A free press is an important part of that, but the press and the radio don’t have an official role as opposition, and they can’t have one. The role of the press has to be neutral conveyors of news. Leave it to the widus like Werétrakester to protest. He’ll insist on strengthening consultation with the people.”

“If he can.” Kεkanu shook his head. “I fear for our future, Amos. I don’t see anyone who can stop this slide into dictatorship.”

Amos nodded. He had faith that somehow, Bahá’u’lláh would make sure everything turned out right in the end, even if the result was not desired by anyone. But Kεkanu did not and could not have that faith. “Look, we’ll do our best. I’ll get ahold of Chris and see what he suggests.”

“Alright. As I said, I’m going off the air, starting tomorrow, for a week. But let me know what I can do.”

Chris and Liz walked around the blackened ruin that was the residential wing of their Melita house. They stopped to look into the end of the wing and could almost look right into the main part of the house; the doors at the end of the wing were blackened from heat and smoke. Curls of smoke still rose from the ruins in a few places.

“Can we go inside?” asked Chris.

“Yes,” said Penku, the city’s fire chief. “It’s safe to go in.”

Chris opened the front door, followed by Liz, Jordan, Tiamaté, Penku, and the chief servant, Albkordu. The main hall smelled of smoke, was dusty with ash, and the tile floor was covered by puddles of water. Liz shook her head as they walked across the main entertainment rooms and into the kitchen. “Do you have a place to stay?” Chris asked Albkordu.

“No, lord, we’ll stay right here.”

Chris shook his head. “No, the house is not inhabitable. We’ll find you a place right away.”

“You are too kind, Lord, to think of us in this situation.”

“Not at all, your lives were in danger.”

“Thank you, Lord. The furniture, rugs, and art work are all safe; we moved them to the grange. Half the town turned out to help.”

“Everyone has been kind.” Chris turned to Penku. “Any new ideas about what happened?”

“The police have been interviewing everyone. There was an eye witness who saw the puff of flames suddenly shoot out of the upstairs window. They saw two men jump

into a car and drive over to Route 3, then south, toward Endraidha. It was a black car; they couldn't see the license plate."

"Half the cars in Endraidha are black."

"Exactly, Lord, and we don't even know whether the car went that far. For all we know, it could have turned off Route 3, taken farm roads, and headed north and east instead."

"That's right." Chris shrugged. "So, when can we start to rebuild?"

"We'll be done here by tonight. We've already completed our investigation and photographed the scene thoroughly. We're still hosing it down every hour or so, but by tomorrow it'll be stone cold and the fire engine will depart."

"Okay, I'll contact the contractor and have him pull out the old blueprints and get started rebuilding." Chris looked at the house. "What a waste."

"Tiamaté and I just had lunch with her parents," said Jordan. "Her father is absolutely livid. He's convinced someone was trying to kill you and fears the army's involved."

"I suspect he's right," said Chris, raising his voice a bit.

"Anyway, Aisendru plans to do some informal investigating and will let us know if he finds anything."

"He had better be careful," replied Penku. "I'm a veteran and suspect the army as well. Jordanu saw the fire bomb. I suspect it was made by someone in the army."

"I am inclined to lay the blame at the feet of Aryornu. He's angry at me. This strikes me as a clumsy way to pressure me, though."

“Perhaps its retaliation,” suggested Liz.

“Perhaps.”

“You have many enemies, Lord,” noted Penku. “The old houses are angry with you, and some of the priestly families. I would advise great caution. Hire some guards for your houses and to protect you when you travel.”

“We have to do that.” He turned to Liz. “I’ve seen enough.”

“Yes, so have I. Jordan, are you and Tiamaté heading back to Melwika? Let’s all drive together.”

“Let’s head due north to Route 1 and through Meddoakwés,” added Chris. “I’ll call the contractor after we get home.”

“Okay, grandpa, we’ll follow you.”

Chris thanked Penku and Albkordu and offered the latter sixty dhanay—two weeks salary—extra so he could get a hotel room for the next few days. Then he and Liz got into the rover. Liz drove northward on Route 3 while Jordan and Tiamaté followed. Chris watched nervously. Finally he called the tomi to get his messages. One was that the *Melwika Nues* had just received a letter from the palace demanding a fine of twenty-five thousand dhanay.

“They must be fining everyone,” growled Chris. “I bet it’ll do no good to appeal the matter to the Queen, either.”

“You should try; these are ruinous fines.”

“They’ll also push all the public discussion to the makers of posters. There are already some pretty extreme posters out there. Newspapers actually help moderate public opinion, not inflame it.”

“Tell her that. It won’t help if the newspapers publish a blank column in the middle of their front pages as a protest for being censored. People will get the point and public opinion will turn against the palace.”

“I’ll have to start by writing a calm and rational letter,” sighed Chris. He picked up his cell phone and dialed Prosperity Bank; one of the messages was from Yimanu, the President. After almost ten years of operations, Yimanu had become quite capable, and he was widely trusted by the business community.

“Chris, can you make it to a meeting of the Board of Directors tomorrow afternoon, about 3? I already checked with Luktréstu and he said you were free,” said Yimanu, once they finished preliminary chit-chat.

“If he says I’m free, I guess I can make it. What’s the reason?”

“Increasing interest rates by half a point.”

“Oh? We’re not covering expenses?”

“The economic environment is becoming less certain, so risk has increased. Under those circumstances, we need to cover ourselves.”

“That’s true, but an increase in rates will also reinforce the uncertainty.”

“I know, but we can’t help that, can we? We have to protect the bank and its assets.”

“You’re right, Yimanu. I see the logic. Alright, count me in. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Chris. Bye.”

“Bye.” Chris closed the line. Liz looked at him. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It isn’t. Higher interest rates will shrink the credit market and slow growth. That will anger the prince and make everyone worried. It could even trigger a recession or depression.”

“A depression?”

“Sure. This world isn’t immune from business cycles. People have had a mentality that everything will expand forever, and that attitude creates bubbles and encourages excessive risk taking. Sooner or later, everything catches up with you and there has to be a correction.”

“Which is a nice way of saying a lot of people suffer.”

“I’m afraid that’s true.”

Reread and edited 6/10/13, 8/23/17, 11/23/24

330.

Resolving Dilemmas

Late Dhébalménu.mid May, Yr 14/632

“In short, my friends, the Central Spiritual Assembly loves you very much and wants to encourage you,” Thornton said, concluding his talk. “The situation in Kerda has been very difficult for quite some time now. But there appears to be light at the end of the tunnel. Your steadfastness has been an example to all of us, and it has gradually paid off. The Faith has a solid reputation in this province, in spite of the attacks launched against it. The destruction of the Isurdhuna Bahá’í Center has engendered sympathy; it must be rebuilt, to demonstrate our resiliency. The discrimination you have suffered has already demonstrated the depth of your faith. Just like the Bahá’ís in Iran, who are still suffering to this day through decades of unremitting hostility and oppression, it appears that the friends in Kerda are destined to show us what true faith means. Don’t think that your neighbors haven’t noticed; they have, and many are listening to the Bahá’í radio broadcasts. Remind them that you are a Bahá’í. Invite them to attend a study circle or a deepening. Plan a devotional meeting in your house and invite them. Make a personal plan to teach people about Bahá’u’lláh, and contribute sacrificially to a new Center. We know what to do, so let us be bold and give it a try. Bahá’u’lláh assures us that if we take the first step, He will shower confirmations down on us. So let us arise and act. Questions?”

The nearly hundred Bahá’ís crowded into the central garden of Estobaisu’s house applauded politely; they didn’t dare sound too enthusiastic because a loud sound from the

garden could be heard on the nearby streets, and they didn't want to attract attention.

“Honored Thoru, thank you so much for your message to us,” said Estobaisu, a former philosophy student who was manager of Isurdhuna's “Home Improvement” store and the town's wealthiest Bahá'í. “Perhaps you could summarize your plans for presentations over the next month?”

“Sure. Lébé and I will be in Kerda for five weeks and we plan to speak twice a week here in Isurdhuna, Tridiu evenings and Primdiu afternoons. We'll also be speaking in Frachvála, Justha, Albagras, and Lepawsnédha. You have had very strong Ruhi study circles, so we are proposing classes on Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Iqán, so you can learn what He says about the nature of religion, and a course on Bahá'í history, so you can understand the sacrifice that has built the Faith. And just today I went to Widi Génadema and they asked that, in addition to advanced geology and ecology, I offer a course on the Bahá'í Faith. Can you imagine, steps from the Steja, a formal course on the Faith for credit! Of course, I said yes immediately. This is possible because you all have been steadfast in spite of discrimination. So those are our plans for the month.”

“This is marvelous,” said Estobaisu. “I'm sure we'll fill the classes here in Kerda!”

“Honored Thoru, do you really think the Faith can grow here? This is the most fanatic part of the country!” exclaimed Widumajbédhu, a Bahá'í physician, who was also a member of the Isurdhuna Spiritual Assembly.

“Yes, certainly, because not everyone is a fanatic. You have many friends and neighbors who are not. Love them, invite them to see what we have, and people will join the Faith. If you have cousins in any of the villages, teach the Faith to them, for most

villages are not yet represented in the Bahá'í community. We must make dissemination of the Faith to the villages a priority.”

Several others had questions as well; Thornton called on them one by one, answered their questions, and then suggested people ask him more questions informally. The session began to break up into smaller discussion groups. About the time Thornton was beginning to think he would need to drive back to Frachvala soon, and was beginning to wonder about what route to take in the dark—because he and Lébé had been advised not to follow the same route every time, lest a gang decide to attack and kill them—Estobaisu hurried over. “Governor Weranokaru just called Lord Manu’s telephone in Frachvála asking for you; he called here to let you know. It would seem that he already knows you’re in town.”

“It didn’t take long. Was there a message?”

“Yes, to call him back. You can use my phone in my office.”

“Thank you.” Thornton walked in the direction Estobaisu had pointed and spotted an office with a telephone on the desk; he was the only Bahá'í in town with a phone. Thornton walked in, picked up the phone, mentioned to the operator who he was, and asked her for Governor Weranokaru. She knew he had been trying to reach him, so she put him straight through.

“Khélo, Weranokaru here.”

“Honored Governor, this is Thorntonu. I hear you were trying to reach me.”

“Indeed, Thorntonu. I just heard that you would be giving classes at Widi Génadema this month. I am very pleased to hear this news. The province needs expertise of the sort you can bring.”

“Thank you, you are very kind. Lébé and I have been wanting to get back here for several years, and fortunately it worked out this month.”

“Yes, I hear you will be getting a new degree, a doctor’s degree, in another month.”

“If I pass the oral examination, indeed, but we will see.”

“And you will be offering classes to the Bahá’ís as well?”

“Indeed, in several locations, to encourage them.”

“I’m glad you are encouraging them. Please convey my sorrow that the Isurdhuna Bahá’í Center was burned. We have a lot of fanatics in this town, and as you know I’m trying to curb them. I am confident we will eventually determine who committed this crime and will bring him to justice.”

“Thank you. The Bahá’ís are aware of your determination to seek justice and much appreciate it.”

“Have you any time we can get together?”

“Indeed, honored Governor. My classes at the génadema are Dwodiu through Pɛnkudiu mornings, and Kwéterdiu and Pɛnkudiu afternoons. So tomorrow and Tridiu afternoon I’ll be free.”

“Could you come Tridiu for lunch, then, and remain an extra hour or two? I’d like to pick your brain about development issues. I much appreciated our conversation of two months ago and would like the chance to run other ideas past you. I’m also concerned about slowing business growth and rising interest rates.”

“I’d be honored to discuss these things with you.”

“Excellent. Tridiu, then. Goodbye.”

“Good bye.” Thornton put down the phone and wondered what he could say about interest rates. He’d have to talk to his father more about the matter. He headed back to the main gathering. Estobaisu and Widumajbédhu were talking together and immediately hurried over to him.

“Did he want to talk to you about the Faith?” asked Estobaisu.

“No; development. At least that’s what he said. We met two months ago to discuss economic development of the valley and the impact of air pollution. He took a course from me about a decade ago, and even though I don’t think he did very well and I barely remember him as a student, he seems to like me.”

“Good. The Isurdhuna Spiritual Assembly met with him last week; he invited us. He wanted to assure us that he would catch the arsonists of the Bahá’í Center.”

“He promised to torture anyone captured, extract confessions and the names of accomplices, and send them all to prison without delay,” added Widumajbédhu. “We weren’t quite sure what to make of such efficiency.”

“He’s an interesting fellow,” said Estobaisu. “He wants to see the valley become rich, and wouldn’t mind becoming rich himself. He sees the old houses and priests as obstacles and wants to smash them. He does not want bribes and I don’t think he wants to offer any, either; he’s not corrupt in that sense. But he is ruthless.”

“I think that’s right. I’m surprised I didn’t hear of the meeting.”

“We haven’t told the Central Spiritual Assembly,” replied Estobaisu. “We didn’t dare telephone with the news, or write a letter; neither is secure. We were waiting for someone we could trust to leave the valley or come in, such as yourself. We’ll give you a written report to take to the Central Spiritual Assembly.”

“Thank you. The Central Spiritual Assembly would like to meet with your Spiritual Assembly. While I am here, it can be arranged using my cellular telephone. I can call my father’s phone, and the call does not go through the telephone system at all, and the army is not equipped to intercept the broadcast, so it is secure.”

“Excellent, we’d like to have a chance to talk to them frankly.”

“We’ll need to set up a way to communicate securely, also,” said Thornton. “It occurs to me that if you handed a sealed envelope to any intercity bus driver who’s driving to Məlwika and the envelope said ‘Mitru Miller’ on the outside, he’d deliver it to Mitru and wouldn’t open it. Mitru could deliver it to my father, who could get it to the Assembly.”

“That would be very helpful,” said Widumajbédhu. “We’ve been waiting for Aréjé or Stauréstu to visit the hospital, but neither is scheduled to visit until fall.”

“We need a secure and reliable system of communications,” agreed Thornton.

“It’s a shame it has come to this,” added Estobaisu.

Chris drove to the prince’s palace in Məddoakwés with considerable trepidation. He had not met with the prince for almost half a year; now he had demanded an audience. That did not bode well.

The venerable old house Werétrakəster had used as his home and school had been razed to the ground three years earlier and replaced by a much grander, more luxurious structure. Chris found himself disapproving of the new building every time he entered it. The butler led him to a meeting room where he had to wait fifteen minutes until Prince Məməjékwu and his chief of staff, Wəranobéru, entered.

Chris immediately rose as the two entered. “Lord Kristobéru,” the prince said in greeting, as Chris bowed.

“Your Majesty, it’s good to see you again.”

“Thank you.” Méméjékwu sat on a throne-like chair at the head of the table and motioned Chris to sit again. “Lord, we need to talk about growth. The last six months have been pitiful; tax revenues have been flat. Tomis have not been successful. And now the interest rates of Prosperity Bank have gone up, contracting investment! The interest rates must come down, Lord.”

“I see, Your Majesty,” replied Chris, slowly and carefully. “Have you asked Aryéstu about these matters?”

“Right now I’m asking you about them, Lord.”

“There have been natural conditions that have not been favorable to growth. The cold winter killed many crops, cutting annual agricultural output about ten percent. Then a cold spring forced a replanting of about half the north shore’s crops.

“Uncertainty has been a major factor as well. A one-day interruption in the power supply of Vésipa and Rudhisér during Kekanu’s interview with Wëretrakester caused problems and delayed some manufacturing. All winter and spring, mail service, telephone service, even electricity have been irregular to Kërda. Eight businesses there have been burned and twenty more have suffered some looting, which causes worry to suppliers. Deposits to the bank branch there have been irregular and withdrawals large; the branch has had to shut its doors twice. These problems ripple through the system.

“Factories in Swadnoma have cut back on investment because their future ownership has been placed in doubt. Some purchasers have avoided purchasing products

from them because they have been uncertain whether quality and price would be the same in six months.

“Factories in the north and south shores and in Lewéspa have felt similar pressures; naturally they aren’t investing, they’re worrying about survival. And I don’t know what the new tomis are doing because they have not shared minutes, plans, or balance sheets with me; not until yesterday, anyway. Perhaps they heard I was scheduled to meet with you. The North Shore, South Shore, and Lewéspa Tomis, from what I can see, have been completely unsuccessful and have spent money imprudently.”

“And I asked you to exercise oversight.”

“You did, but one can’t exercise oversight when they don’t show you anything. Perhaps I should have written to you a few more times about the matter.”

“And the rise in interest?”

“As I said, it is a product of uncertainty. Loaning money is inherently risky. When financial conditions deteriorate, more loans become uncollectible. Under those circumstances a bank must raise interest rates, which forces borrowers to be more prudent and covers the losses of those who aren’t.”

“And what do you recommend?”

“What are your priorities? Is the Seven Year Development Plan and a doubling of the economy still the overriding goal?”

“Absolutely!”

“Then private investment in factories must be safeguarded. Factories cannot and should not be expropriated. Private investment by the wealthy and by collectives—granges, women’s gabrulis—need to be encouraged and protected. If that is

done and low-interest loans are provided, the economy may grow ten percent a year all by itself. Tomi Boards need to be effective—as they are in Sumilara and Rudhisér—or they should be replaced by more capable people. Provincial tomis should view government seed money as a start-up only, not a continual subsidy; if they think of the money as a constant and reliable flow, they will not become efficient.”

“Lord, how is it that you make so much money, and these tomis can’t?”

“You have to choose your investment opportunities carefully, based on what you know. I know agriculture particularly well; I once was a commercial farmer. Her Majesty gave me Ménwika, then Pértatranisér, then Mèlita, and I had experience educating farmers to use equipment and organize their own farms. None of the three would have worked if those areas already had farmers; they would have been traditional and successful in their own way, and they wouldn’t have wanted to change. But they were landless young men desperate to try something new. Then existing farmers saw what they did and were willing to try something new as well.

“As for factories, I know what has potential because I know what worked on gèdhéma. I’ve invested in forty businesses in fourteen years, about half with granges, and my tomi provides them with accounting support so they can manage their money wisely. When I am part of a business partnership, the other partners can always buy me out, and they often do; I’m no longer involved in about fifteen of those businesses, mostly in Mèlwika. I don’t make money on everything; the génademas are money losers and always will be. I need the businesses to cover their costs. The electric, telephone, and gas companies barely cover their expenses because the costs of expansion are so high.

“But I don’t get involved in crazy business ideas if I can avoid it. For example, the South Shore Tomi has decided not to invest in dairy operations, pasta making, cloth weaving, or shoe making; all things that the province needs. Instead, they’re going to build a big factory to make a million light bulbs a year. Of course, right now the world only uses half a million bulbs a year, and Rudhu Naskerpə dai makes them all efficiently at a reasonable profit. How can the South Shore make a million bulbs and sell them for less? They’ll spend a half million of the palace’s money to set up a facility almost as good as Rudhu’s—there’s no reason for him to share his secrets, so they’ll have to rediscover them, which will take time and cost money—and run it almost as efficiently if they are lucky, so they will need an annual subsidy to compete with him. The palace will end up covering their red ink. This is not a business plan, Your Majesty. It is foolishness and ultimately it is an unnecessary drain on the palace’s revenue.”

Məməjəkwu looked at Chris for a moment, digesting the story. “The South Shore needs cheese and shoes, not light bulbs.”

“Exactly. And the villages need the jobs, not Tripola. Let the villages decide what they want, because they know what talent and experience they have. Support them with legislation and low-interest loans. Make sure they have infrastructure: a good road, power, and telephones. They’ll open factories and businesses and figure out what will make them money. If they fail, they’ll convert the failed factory building into something else rather than abandoning it. Almost half the businesses started by granges and villages fail. But they don’t drain the palace treasury. Then new ones open that make money.”

“Then why did Jérdomais Tomi work?”

“First, it had one big, new product that people wanted. But there aren’t many big, new products. Second, it had good management in the form of Mendhru and support from my business consulting tomi. Third, it built facilities to make dairy products, shoes, pasta, bread, and other necessities; it didn’t just focus on modular houses. Diversification guarantees profit. Fourth, it sited its facilities in seven different townships, so it supported a lot of different populations, and they lent it their support in return. Fifth, it had a lot of investment from many sources and a plan to spend it. And as you know, you watched the costs like a hawk. We met monthly about it.”

The prince raised his hand. “You are right. We’re giving these tomis money and not demanding oversight! That’s what we need to do; call in the boards to the palace to explain their progress, and dress them down if it is inadequate!”

Chris tried not to look surprised that the prince was rediscovering something elementary. “Your Majesty, the goal must be clear. I assume the goal is the Seven Year Development Plan? It requires an average of ten percent annual growth in the economy. There’s nothing wrong with giving the challenge of achieving that goal to your friends, and there’s nothing wrong with them making a reasonable profit on their efforts to achieve the goal. But the goal is the key. What is the goal?”

“The goal is doubling the kingdom’s economy in seven years. That has always been the goal and it remains the goal. You are correct, that is the priority.”

“How, then, can I help in the achievement of that goal, Your Majesty? I am in favor of the goal as well. Should I help to review the efforts made so far? Review changes in the plans the tomis started with? And someone should start to audit their expenditures.”

“You are correct; some of the tomis have strayed from the goal. I agree, those are the measures to pursue. Can you appoint accountants to review the finances?”

“If you request it and the tomis are compelled to cooperate, we can produce a confidential report for your eyes only.”

“How quickly?”

“If I assign my best people to it, we can review each tomi in one to two weeks. Of course, it would help if we were paid for this work.”

“Very well, we will contract you and your tomi to review all the provincial tomis. About how much?”

“A thousand dhanay for a week’s work by the team. We’re talking about North Shore, South Shore, Kerda, Sumilara, Swadnoma, Lewésipa, Vésipa and Rudhisér? I think I can get you a report in eight weeks.”

“Eight thousand dhanay, then. Make it so, Lord. I’ll ask Aryéstu to serve as liaison to the effort.”

“Excellent. I suspect it’ll take us two weeks to get started; we won’t get records very quickly. Then the work will speed up. You’ll write letters to the tomis about this?”

“Absolutely.” Meméjékwu smiled for the first time in the meeting; he looked pleased. “Thank you, Lord Chris. I think you have resolved a dilemma.”

Chris drove home shortly thereafter, pleased and relieved. “I don’t mind working for the Prince as long as his requests are reasonable and ethical,” he explained to Liz after supper that evening. “As long as we have a business relationship, everything works out reasonably well.”

“That’s because you’re trying to keep morality out of it. That worries me, Chris.”

“I am *not* trying to keep morality out of it, my dear. Not at all. By business relationship I mean a level playing field, where I’m not threatened or penalized unfairly. And this report will be an opportunity to establish new palace policies about some unethical business practices. In particular, I want to stop the demand that businesses sell their factories to provincial tomis or pay them a special fee.”

“Of course. But be careful; you can’t avoid a power relationship with the prince. You can never be his business equal.”

“I agree. I concede that.”

Just then the telephone in Chris’s office rang. He walked over to the office and picked up the phone “Khélo?”

“Lord Chris, Alláh-u-Abhá. This is Aryéstu. I just returned from the Prince’s palace, where he asked me to meet with you regularly about reorganizing the tomis.”

“Excellent, I’m glad he spoke to you already. I hope you can devote an afternoon a week to the effort.”

“An afternoon a week? Yes, I can arrange my job at the génadema to free up that much time. Now, Lord Chris, what did you say to the Prince that prompted this effort? I’ve been practically begging him to do something of this sort!”

“I asked him what his priority was and he agreed that it was the Seven Year Development Plan and a ten percent annual growth of the economy. I said good, there’s nothing wrong with appointing friends to Boards and there’s nothing wrong with their earning a reasonable profit as long as they arise to the challenge of the plan. He agreed to

that and said then we had better exercise rigorous oversight. That was part of the effort that made the Jérdomais Tomi successful.”

“Ah, very clever! I couldn’t let go of the fact that the Boards are stuffed with cronies and incompetent friends, so whenever I broached the subject with His Majesty, inevitably I complained about the compositions of the Boards. At that point the prince shut down the discussion.”

“I avoided that matter entirely. Give the Boards a chance; maybe they’ll rise to the challenge. `Abdu'l-Bahá once let a greedy man serve as treasurer of a Bahá’í community and it transformed his attitude toward money.”

“We can always hope! But you are right: give them a chance. I just hope the Prince will be willing to fire them after that.”

“So do I. He may have to decide what his real priority is: growth, or friends.”

“By the way, the palace is planning some sort of big radio announcement for tomorrow, after the eclipse. It may be related.”

“We’ll listen, then.”

All day, anticipation built about the palace’s announcement. The last few weeks had been rough on the palace; posters appearing on walls around the kingdom had been highly critical, and some had called for abolition of the monarchy and establishment of a republic, or at least the writing of a Constitution. An underground newspaper had also started circulating—a single typeset sheet—and it featured articles about human rights, free elections, and appointment of the Prime Minister by the consultative assembly.

The Mennea clan gathered in their great room to listen to the prince's radio address. "The last year has been an important time of experimentation for the kingdom," he began. "The first palace-organized and supported tomi was established, Jérdomais, and it began to produce modular buildings which have proved popular and an important service to the people of this kingdom. Since then, eight more tomis have been started, and several have already been notably successful. But none of the eight new ones have made an important contribution to our single overriding goal: doubling the kingdom's prosperity in seven years.

"The purpose of all the reorganization the kingdom has seen in the last year has been prosperity; prosperity for everyone, not just the rich. Provinces have been reorganized and new governors appointed to shake loose old structures restraining our growth and free us to expand. Tomis have been founded to channel resources to the construction of factories and businesses.

"All of this has been controversial, as one might expect it would be. Progress has been slow. Hence, as of today, we are taking several steps to accelerate our progress. All eight of the tomis are called on to produce a progress report, which will be externally audited and verified. Governors are called on to prepare a progress report and a plan for the next year, a plan against which they will be measured a year hence. The Exchequer is reviewing the kingdom's tax records to determine exactly how much we are growing, where growth has been fast or slow, and what we can do to accelerate growth. The Economics Institute at Géselékweš Maj Génadema is called on to prepare a comprehensive review of our progress, two years into the plan, and a revision of the goals to achieve a doubling of our collective wealth.

“By the end of the summer we should have a good idea how we are doing and how our plans need to be redirected. For that reason, the Consultative Assembly, normally convened in two weeks, will be postponed. That will allow the Assembly a chance to provide its input. Until that time, the existing budget will be extended into the next few months at the same level of funding.

“Her Majesty and I are sure the entire kingdom will support this plan for our future. We are well on the road toward a second doubling of our prosperity. The first doubling took twelve years and produced good roads, electricity, telephones, machine-made cloth, ice boxes, and steam-powered machinery. What will this second doubling bring? It has already brought us cheaper steam cars, pickup trucks, and modular buildings. Let us march into a glorious future together, confident that life will get better.”

There was silence in the room as everyone digested the prince’s remarks.

“‘Glorious future’? He sounds like a communist party functionary,” commented Lua.

“They’ve been studying China,” replied Thornton. “The palace sent someone here a few months ago every other night for three weeks to scan the Worldwide Web for information about China.”

“Fast growth, no democracy,” said Chris. “Interesting choice.”

“And now, no consultative assembly. Note he didn’t say when it would be reconvened, either,” said Liz.

“I noticed,” said Chris.

“Well dear, good luck,” Liz concluded. “You are now the efficiency consultant for a totalitarian government.”

Reread and edited, 6/10/13, 8/23/17, 11/23/24

331.

Ph.D.

Early Kaiménu/late June, Yr 14/632

Chris hurried from the back door of Prosperity Bank, avoiding the large crowd accumulating in front, and jogged to the génadéma a few hundred meters away. Much to his surprise, Thornton's public defense of his dissertation was occurring in a totally packed hall. Up front were his four geology colleagues, each with a copy of his 350-page dissertation, *The History of the Sea: A Geology of Éra* in front of them. Just about every geology student was present in the front rows. The rest of the lecture hall was packed by curious onlookers; the all-Génadéma Conference had started that morning, and it appeared that half the attendees had come to the defense.

Thornton was busy answering a question about the so-called Néfa Epoch, when the sea stood about one hundred meters higher than today, and how he estimated the epoch as occurring about three quarters of a million years ago. He cited the span of time the aliens had told them had occurred from the terraforming of Éra, the total number of meters the sea had dropped, and the percentage of marine species that appeared to be different in the Néfa coral reefs. All provided very crude measures of the passage of time, but it was the best they had. The fact that Néfan coral reefs were overlain by massive gravel and boulder deposits in the Ora region suggested that the era had ended when the Long Valley had flooded and then drained.

Chris sat spellbound by his son's care, thoroughness, and articulateness in replying. When Thornton finished, the audience applauded. He did equally well with the

last question, then the four members of the panel rose to shake his hands and congratulate him. The dissertation had already been privately defended a week earlier; the public defense was a formality.

“Could I ask the various doctoral candidates present to rise, so we can acknowledge them,” suggested Thornton. “They’ll be doing the same in a year or two or three. There’s Skandu the historian, Soru the special educational expert, Aryéstu the economist, Randu the educator, Estonpréku the astronomer, Gwiweru the meteorologist, Mitraisu the agricultural expert, Dontanu the mechanical engineer . . . well, Dontanu isn’t here. We have an impressive range of experts who are developing. Let’s give them applause as well.” Thornton led everyone in applause for the others. Then the meeting ended and a crowd surged forward to shake hands with the world’s first Ph.D.

Chris caught up with Liz and they stood to watch their son accept congratulations. They accepted a few themselves. Lua, May, Behruz, and Amos were all there as well, and John Miller. John walked over. “That was incredibly impressive. Thornton’s brilliant, Chris.”

“I guess so. I only heard a little bit, but I was impressed.”

“I even understood most of it; he tried to explain everything in everyday language. I’m proud of him as well.”

“So am I.”

John looked at his friend of fourteen years. “So, will my workers be able to cash paychecks in a few days?”

Chris looked around to see who was listening. “I think so. We’re scraping up cash everywhere we can. If you can provide some cash, we are sure the bank can cash the

checks. And they can always deposit checks and write checks against the money, since that keeps the credits in the system.”

“What do you mean by cash? With the harvest in, everyone has cash and credit, so they’re buying. Pickups aren’t flying out of the show room, but they’re selling. But many people pay by check.”

“That’s become common. But keeping the credit flowing; that’s the challenge.”

“If anyone can handle the challenge, it’s Yimanu.”

“I agree, he’s become very experienced. Let’s see whether we can push through the crowd now and see our son.”

The two men began to work their way forward to see their son and son in law. The crowd was shrinking anyway, and in another two minutes Thornton thanked the last fan and was able to turn to his family. “Wow, I never expected such a reaction!” he said.

“You were brilliant,” replied normally curmudgeonly John.

Lébé kissed him. “Dad’s right.”

“I just wonder how other doctoral candidates will feel,” said Liz. “If they feel they can’t do something like this, they may study an extra year.”

“Well, we set a standard of quality,” said May. “That was part of the goal of the first Ph.D.; we wanted people to understand what the degree represented. And we achieved that today.”

“I’m afraid I’m too burned out to go to any more events this afternoon,” said Thornton. “I need to go home and relax.”

“I’ll walk you home, then,” said Chris.

Lua, May, and Amos hugged him and said their goodbyes; they were going to other lectures and presentations, for the two-day conference had a full schedule. Chris, Liz, Lébé, and Behruz walked with Thornton out of the Natural Sciences building and across the campus, toward home. “So, what will you do now, son?” asked Chris.

“The geological research isn’t over; there’s a lot left to study. We’ve got three Master’s degree candidates doing really interesting research on fossils. Paleontology’s one of the next frontiers; we still have a very poor knowledge of the various species that lived in the sea over time. Reconstructing the succession of species is the key to nailing down the relative time scale; we still can’t date an outcrop very reliably by studying its fossils.”

“And then obtaining radioactive dates?” asked Chris.

“We’re still ten or twenty years from being able to do that,” replied Thornton. “We’ve also got a pretty interesting succession of land animals and plants to study. Then there’s the question of the north polar basin, when it was flooded by the sea and when it was dry, and its impact on climate. It appears that in the past when the sea was more than 125 meters higher than today, the north polar basin was a salt water bay. Tropical surface water tended to flow up there even during the winter, so the north pole was not as cold as it is now and didn’t generate the cold fronts we have today. Consequently, coral was much more extensive at that point.”

“How many times has the sea almost dried up?” asked Chris.

“You missed that part of my lecture, I guess. There’s evidence of three great floods down the Glugluba, and I think we can see the remnants of the three huge landslides that blocked it and backed up a lake in the Long Valley. The Kërda valley has

been flooded with a huge lake twice, and both times it drained via a catastrophic flood. The Néfa Basin seems to have over one hundred meters of alluvial deposit from the floods.”

“Let’s hope that doesn’t happen any time soon,” said Liz.

They left the campus and headed down busy Péskakwés Street toward Temple Square. As they approached the square, a man hurried over to Chris. “Lord, please, what am I to do! You’ve closed the bank and I can’t get any money out for my family! This is not just, Lord, it’s my money!”

Chris looked at the young man and recognized him “You’re Roktikardu, right? The mechanic?”

He was surprised Chris remembered a brief meeting several months earlier when he had brought the rover over to the engineering school for the mechanics class to study it and tune up the engine. “Yes, Lord; I’m surprised you remember.”

“Yes, I remember, you were in the second year mechanics class and worked on the rover engine. You’re Dwobergone, right?”

“Yes, Lord, but my wife and baby daughter and I now live here in Melwika, on ‘Tutane Hill.’ And we have no money for the Harvest Festival!”

Chris nodded and reached into his pocket. He handed Roktikardu six one-dhanay pieces. “Take these; that gives you enough money for a day, anyway. The bank will be open every day, ten bells to one bell; just three hours. Anyone can withdraw up to ten dhanay per day, thirty per week, which is enough to cover rent, taxes, mortgages, and other routine expenses. We have not changed our practices in terms of lending, depositing, and withdrawing. We keep twenty-five percent of our cash on hand as a

reserve and lend out seventy-five percent. The problem is that yesterday a rumor started to spread in Néfa that Prosperity Bank would have to restrict withdrawals because of a cash shortage. The rumor was not true, but it caused a run on the bank, and the Néfa branch had to institute our standard restrictions when a run happens. Earlier today that run spread to the Mæddoakwés branch when a lot of people showed up to take money out ahead of the Festival, and we had to start the restrictions here as well. These things last a week or so, then everyone calms down. The bank is sound.”

“But Lord, it’s my money; why can’t I take it out any time?”

“Because you’re earning interest on it, which is possible because the money is loaned out. If the money weren’t loaned out you could have it any time, but it also wouldn’t earn you any interest. One reason people deposit money is so that they are a bank customer and thus can be considered favorably for a loan.”

“Well, that is true, Lord. Thank you very much, I’ll give this back to you next Dwodiu.”

Chris shook his head. “No, I don’t want it back. I want you to give it to someone else who is in need instead, and when you do, ask them to pass it on to someone else needy. That way we will help each other, and the money will go round and round.”

Roktikordu smiled. “Thank you, Lord, you are very kind!”

“I hope you enjoy the Harvest Festival,” replied Chris. They shook hands, then Roktikordu was on his way. “I hope there is a Harvest Festival,” added Chris, after the young man was out of earshot.

“Why? What did you see?” asked Liz.

“Well, this morning it was almost impossible to get through the crowds to reach the Grand Court. There were police and soldiers everywhere, and they were heavily armed. Ekwésu led a crowd of a thousand protestors to the Main Square and the police left them alone; we could faintly hear the chanting and shouting even in the royal audience hall. I suspect the police will move against him and the other ringleaders tonight, when they’re at home. I’m not sure how you can hold a Harvest Festival if part of the city wants to protest instead.

“The Grand Court was barely less chaotic because most of the lords wanted to complain about or condemn the prince’s actions. He has lost their support, except for a scattered few. One lord even demanded that he abdicate the throne! I’ve never seen anything like it before; it felt like the kingdom was disintegrating. Finally, the Réjé walked out, and Méméjékwu followed fifteen minutes later, at which point the Grand Court adjourned.”

“They should never have canceled the consultative assembly,” said Thornton. “The Grand Court would have gone much smoother if complaints and condemnations were aired beforehand!”

“Very true, but now they’re in an almost impossible bind. Then you add a bank run to the uncertainty . . . it’s a day from hell for the royal family.”

“You argue everything is being done to double prosperity, then this happens,” agreed Liz.

“Méméjékwu’s speech has already been contradicted,” said Chris. “The real question is what happens tomorrow with the Festival. If it is more or less normal, maybe things will recover. If it has to be canceled and all that business for merchants goes down

the drain, that'll hurt the economy further, and it'll make everyone upset or angry at the system."

"How dangerous is this situation, dad?" asked Thornton, worried.

"Extremely dangerous. There's the possibility of revolution, and that would cause chaos. Mēlwika is probably the most stable place around because it has an elected government that the residents trust. But if the economy lurches downward and a depression results, even Mēlwika could see unrest."

"Pray and teach the Faith," concluded Liz.

"Definitely," agreed Chris. "But speaking of teaching the Faith, Liz: we'll have to see whether you can get to Mēddoakwēs for your weekly meeting with Princess Awstēr. It may not be safe."

"I was wondering about that. We'll see what happens tomorrow."

Chris rose at dawn the next morning. It was the best time to walk around Mēlwika because the streets were still relatively uncrowded. He hiked up to the top of the mountain behind Miller's Foundry and Motor Works to look out over the city of now 18,000 people, sprawling beyond the city walls in many places. The fields to the south were greening with their second crop of the season and Chris could already see smoke from steam tractors rising from fields as the farmers—most of whom had finished paying for their land and now owned it outright—were hard at work. West of the hill, the Arjakwēs passed through the city and flowed toward Mēddoakwēs; Route 2 paralleled the north bank a few hundred meters away and was a continually built up strip of suburban housing to Nénaslua. Grain elevators dotted the city in its southeastern addition, just east

of the génadema, and smoke rose for smoke stacks in all three of the city's industrial parks. It was a remarkable, hard working place; prosperous, literate, and stable. He shuddered to think what could happen if all the systems supporting it collapsed.

He walked eastward along the crest of the mountain ridge, stopped to pay a morning visit at the Sumi Temple—where he often said a Bahá'í prayer because it had such a beautiful view—walked through Sumiwika, the city's Sumi district, then turned southward, descended the ridge, crossed the Péskakwés, and walked to the Melwika Génadema and the Bahá'í temple next to it to say more prayers. Finally he looped through Temple Square and briefly visited the Temple to “Esto of the Light” to say yet another prayer and greet the priests. Then he walked home.

The morning news on the radio was almost useless; it noted that the Harvest Festival was starting that day, but mentioned nothing unusual. The fact that the situation was being treated as if it were normal, however, suggested that nothing drastic was happening, so he picked up the telephone and called Dr. Mitretu Perkasi, the leading Bahá'í in Meddoakwés, who was already at the city's hospital.

“Alláh-u-Abhá, Mitretu,” Chris began. “What's the situation? Should I drive to Meddoakwés for the Festival, or not?”

“Alláh-u-Abhá, Chris. You're the second person who has called today. I got off the phone with Mitru Miller just a little while ago. He has to plan the bus runs in and out of the city today. He called the palace and they told him it was a normal day and he should assign the usual number of buses to handle the Harvest Festival. I think that's probably good advice. I walked around town this morning at dawn. I swear that every single soldier in town is on guard duty; all thousand of them. They may even have hauled

in extra soldiers from Endraidha. They are literally standing on every street corner. They aren't taking any chances at all, so I think we can assume the city is pacified and the festival will, indeed, go on."

"Good; I'm relieved. How many extra patients do you have from the troubles yesterday?"

"We treated thirty people for injuries, mostly broken bones and cuts from the soldiers' batons. They hit a lot of people. A dozen people were admitted for serious wounds; concussions or fractured skulls. Most of the others went to prison from here, I'm afraid. We sent a doctor there last night and he told me there are fifty prisoners as a result of the troubles yesterday, including Ékwésu."

"So, they arrested him."

"Oh, yes! Yesterday afternoon. They got a few more last night, including someone they say was a leading poster-maker. They're interrogating prisoners pretty roughly, too; the doctor had to treat some fresh injuries. They're trying to find out who's printing the underground newspaper and where."

"Of course. Okay, thanks, Mitretu. Sounds like it's safe to drive into town. That was my main concern."

"Are the banks going to be open today?"

"Yes, 10 to 1, longer if the crowds are manageable. One reason I'm calling is because I want to go to the palace with Yimanu and talk to them about a large cash loan. If we get that, we could open the doors and not worry about a bank run. People will re-deposit money once they see everything is stable. We also need a statement from the palace reminding everyone that their deposits are now insured up to 2,000 dhanay."

“So, retirement savings and such are alright?”

“Yes. In fact, the retirement savings system is keeping the entire banking system afloat right now because it represents about two million dhanay of assets that can’t be withdrawn. They’re beginning to represent a pretty formidable pool of money for investment in development projects. Everything is fine right now, Mitretu.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. I rather wish the Central Spiritual Assembly were running an investment and retirement system; I’d feel a lot better about it! Thanks for reassuring me.”

“The entire financial system is fine so far because there are no bankruptcies. If they start spreading, that’s a different matter. Furthermore, there’s no bubble in house or real estate prices; the prices have been going up, but not unreasonably so. As long as we have political stability and some economic growth, we’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Chris, I feel better, then. Maybe I’ll see you at the Festival later today, then.”

“Perhaps. Thanks for the advice, Mitretu. Bye.”

“Bye.” Chris hung up the telephone, relieved. He would call the palace and make an appointment. But he was not planning to attend the Harvest Festival, and he would advise Jordan and Tiamaté not to attend; he had his doubts that any member of the family was safe. They had too many enemies.

Reread and edited 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

Assassination

Kaiménu 7/ June 28, Yr 14/632

The Məlwika Bahá'í Center gradually filled with the Bahá'ís who had volunteered to spend part of their summer doing service, or who were considering such an effort. Chris looked over the crowd, pleased by who had shown up. Almost everyone who had gone out the previous two summers was there: Swadé Dwobrébakwési, Migélu Giérmosunu, Budhéstu and Blorakwé Klənvikai, Sugérsé Klənvikai, Khwanu Khermdhunai, Sarédaktré Kuasi, Gramé and Tomasu Miller, Primanu Primusunu, Jordan and Tiamaté Domo-Menneai, Damkiané Silagisu. Notably missing were Mitrukaru and Kordé Tərskuai; she was about to have their first child. Surprising additions were Thornton and Lébé Mennea, Randu and Nina Maradar, and Soru and Kanawé Dénujénése. Several dozen more had come as well.

“We should get started,” said Modolubu to Chris. “It looks like everyone has their name tags.” Chris nodded and beckoned Tiamaté, Khwanu, and Gramé to the gap in the circle of chairs where they could chant prayers. Everyone quieted as the first prayer, in Sumi, began.

“Thank you,” said Modolubu, after the last prayer ended. He stepped forward. “Thank you, everyone, for coming. This will be the third year we will send out deepening and development teams. This time we will have some older people along, as well as younger ones and even some children. We are particularly pleased to see three school teachers present who have volunteered their summers for teaching the Faith and basic

literacy skills. We have doctors, nurses, mechanics, engineers, farm experts, professors, experts in domestic arts, and people who are enthusiastic and hard working. We had wanted to send out as many as ten teams, and it appears we will be able to field nine; not bad, and another tripling of our capacity. We will be teaching Ruhi books, but now we need classes on so many other topics as well; we hope some of you can cover basic Bahá'í literature and the skills of consultation and local spiritual assembly functioning. Everyone has volunteered for at least a month; we ask you to volunteer for one, two, or three months, for each team will remain in one place an entire month before moving on to another province. It is our hope that each team can visit three villages per month, nine per summer, and we will therefore reach 81 villages altogether, which is about a third of all the localities in the realm. This year we face some serious challenges if unrest spreads; we'll need to discuss that possibility later. First, let's go around the room. Will everyone stand, introduce themselves, say what skills they'd like to offer, where they are from, and where they'd like to go." He nodded to Jordan and Tiamaté, who were seated next to him in the circle of chairs.

It took some time for everyone to introduce themselves; fifty-three were present, and a few were still arriving. Modolubu was smiling when he rose again. "Isn't our diversity marvelous? So many skills! And we are offering all our courses for free. We hope to start over a thousand people down the road toward literacy and provide basic medical knowledge, new domestic skills, new farming skills, and some development ideas to at least a thousand more. We will also have access to some experts. Liz Mennea—who apologizes she can't be here today, she had a prior engagement in Meddoakwés—has promised to visit every single team in the field to talk about the

Women's Gabrulis, what they do, and how they can be set up. Widubéru Markdhunai, head of the Development Corps, hopes to visit every team every month, so that they can help the Development Corps award grants to villages, especially for clean water systems. Chris Mennea and several of his assistants in the Mennea Tomi have agreed to visit and offer accounting and business organization courses. We have promises from the members of six grange boards to visit in order to offer information about setting up granges and some of their services, especially microcredit. We think Mitrubbéru Kanéstoi will visit as many of the teams as possible to sing and lead an entertainment evening; his popularity as a radio show host will be a big attraction, and the teams will be able to help identify musical talent before his visit. We think we will have one or two professional soccer players who are Bahá'ís visiting the teams as well. Tonight some of them will be here and we'll break into small groups so that they can meet with members of as many teams as possible. So, as you can see, you're going to be very busy this year doing many different things.

“The Central Spiritual Assembly will provide each team with a pickup truck, which is essential for you to reach more than one village at once. You'll have two large tents, though ideally you'll be able to sleep in a local schoolhouse. You'll have cooking gear and three sewing machines, so you can demonstrate how to use them. Teams with the appropriate experts will have medical, mechanical, and agricultural supplies. Every team will have half a dhanay per member per day to cover food and other necessities, plus 100 dhanay you can spend on one or more development projects over the summer. That isn't much, but the emphasis of our teams is not charity; we'll provide expertise, the villages provide labor, and the Development Corps provides the grants for most projects.

“So, what are your questions?”

Soru’s hand immediately shot up and Modolubu nodded. Soru rose. “My concern is mixing the team with other tasks. I’m available to participate in a team based in or near Pértatranisér or southern Vésa. In the former, I’m opening a new school for the blind and deaf; in the latter I’ll be working with a small group of blind children for a month. My contributions to a team won’t be constant, but will represent a few hours a day; every morning or every afternoon. Kanawé will be busy with the kids and thus may have even less time.”

Modolubu nodded. “That’s fine. Randu and Nina similarly have teaching commitments and will be based in their family home in Bilara, where one team will be based for a month. Thornton and Lébé are going to Sértroba in the land of the Krésoneš for a month, then to Gimutroba in the land of the Kaitereš for a month, and will be teaching geology and gathering folk tales, but will also be able to supervise a team. So we’re building some teams around places where certain experts can go.”

“What are we doing about the unrest?” asked Budhéstu, who was quite pessimistic about the current situation.

“Good question. If we have to, we will get cash to the teams to make sure you have the money you need. We are asking for a daily report, telephoned to Mëddwoglubas; I’ll be available twelve hours a day and we’ll have the telephone staffed eighteen hours a day, so you should be able to get through. If there’s any unrest where a team is located, the team leader should assess the situation and, if necessary, pull the team out. We want everyone to be safe; that’s our priority.”

“What about helping the local people suffering from the unrest?” asked Budhéstu.

“That’s a decision the team will have to make. Some may prefer to leave, others stay to help.”

There was silence for a moment after that comment. Then Swadé spoke up. “It used to be that bringing people into the Faith was the priority, but now I gather that is less of an emphasis. You didn’t mention all the people who came in last year or mention any informal goals this year.”

Modolubu smiled. “You’ve put your finger on a controversial matter. The Central Spiritual Assembly met with our two Auxiliaries and we discussed this subject at length. Éra now has 11,200 Bahá’ís out of a population of 330,000. We are over three percent of the population; one person in thirty. Almost everyone has heard of the Faith, and Mitrubbéru’s radio programs and his Bahá’í show are popular. People have access to basic information; in fact, many Bahá’ís are reporting a shift of the culture toward Bahá’í values. People are beginning to chant Bahá’í prayers and Widumaj’s interchangeably at public gatherings, for example. Furthermore, we are moving into a dangerous period when we need to consolidate our communities and demonstrate our values through service. We have barely two thousand Bahá’ís voting in Bahá’í elections and about five hundred contributing to the national Bahá’í Fund. Maybe a thousand contribute occasionally to local funds. Feasts are attended by about two thousand people, not all Bahá’ís, even though they should be for Bahá’ís only. Half the communities don’t offer children’s or youth classes on a regular basis. That also means local Bahá’í communities are not yet holding deepening and Ruhi classes regularly, even though we have over 150 Ruhi tutors. Hence, when a team visits a village, it needs to activate as many local Bahá’ís as possible. Get them to do as many classes as possible. For that matter, get non-Bahá’ís

to serve their villages sacrificially through free classes and services. Bahá'í culture is a culture of acts of service and innovation on behalf of others. This is a much more difficult challenge for us than offering a few classes. If we can inculcate that value in the local Bahá'í communities and villages, everyone benefits and the Bahá'í communities get stronger. Long term, our goal should be a series of development teams in every village sponsored by the local Spiritual Assembly, rather than roving teams sponsored by the Central Spiritual Assembly.”

That caused murmurs; no one had been thinking that way. Modolubu picked up a mimeographed compilation of Bahá'í texts and held it up. “That was the idea behind this compilation. I think we should start to review it. We have copies in Sumi at the registration table, if anyone didn't pick one up. Let's spend an hour going over it, then take a break.”

Her Majesty, Queen Dukterésto walked with grace from the front door of the governor's palace to her car and sat in the back seat. Estoiyaju was there to close the door for her and sat in the front seat. Prince Meméjékwu followed right behind her, shaking hands with Governor Aryornu and then heading for his car, which was parked behind hers. Aryornu waved as the two vehicles sped off.

Her Majesty watched the governor's palace shrink behind them. She glanced at the new royal palace that had been started across the highway from the governor's palace; both buildings were just impressive stone facades, their interiors largely unfinished. “I wonder how much he's spending,” she commented.

“I wonder, too,” replied Estoiyaju. “It looks to me that his palace is a quarter the size of yours, and yours will cost two million.”

“Cousin Aryornu doesn’t need such a huge palace. Why should he spend half a million of Swadnoma taxes on such an edifice! It’s for his own ego. No wonder Mennea and the other Lords are complaining that he’s squeezing them.”

“And I didn’t get the impression that your visit will change things much.”

“Nor I.” She contemplated the situation that her son had set up with growing displeasure.

“Your Majesty, you had asked to see the Korda,” Estoiyaju noted, instructing the driver to turn right after they had passed the “Military Palace,” a long stone building that was essentially the kingdom’s pentagon.

“Yes,” she replied. The “Korda” or main street of Endraidha was a concrete avenue lined with classrooms, storage buildings, and a large dining hall. The name was standard for all army camps. The main central building was the armory, large and impressive; looking through an arched entrance, one could see a huge stone plaza filled with armored vehicles. Two were pulled up in front of an entrance to the armory itself; uniformed men were loading rifles and pistols into armored steam wagons. The queen looked closely, as she had not seen firearms very much. Then she noticed the uniforms; they weren’t the army’s, but the provincial police’s. “So, Aryornu’s police get to use rifles? I could see pistols occasionally for training, but rifles? That’s not right.”

“I saw the order. The Crown Prince approved of use of ‘firearms.’”

“I see. That’s too much. I’m not even sure they need pistols; ɛndraidha and Mɛlita both have very competent police forces. Radio over to my son’s car. As soon as we’re out of ɛndraidha, we’ll stop the car and I’ll transfer over to his. I think he and I need to have a chat.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said Estoiyaju. He picked up the radio, set to a radio channel that only the palace could pick up—not even the army and police—and called the other car.

They circled around ɛndraidha, drove back past the two palaces and the military headquarters, and headed north on Route 3, which was the shortest route back to Mɛddoakwés. Once they passed through Swadakwés, which was immediately across the river of the same name, the two cars stopped and the Queen stepped out. She opened the back door of Prince Mɛmɛjékwu’s car and climbed in; the prince’s assistant shifted to the front passenger side.

“We need to talk,” she began, even before the cars started moving again. “Did you see the provincial police were loading up with rifles at the armory? And they were using two armored steam wagons, which must be army property! Why does Aryornu need to train a provincial police in such a manner?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t know. I did see men loading arms into the armored steam wagons, but I didn’t notice the uniforms.”

“My good prince, I agreed to the idea that cousin Aryornu needed some rehabilitation and a restoration of rank. I deeply regretted the circumstances that forced us to replace him as chief of the army, not because cousin Roktekester isn’t as good—on the

contrary, he's a better leader—but because no one with royal blood should ever be humiliated in public. But our cousin is going way too far. He has this police force that uses firearms, which is as good as a private army. And he's building a monstrosity of a palace.”

“It does seem gaudy.”

“Huge, expensive; he wants to look important!”

“The police force does look rather like a small private army. But if there's any province that can tolerate it, it's Swadnoma; there are 2,500 regular troops based there, after all! A small private army may be an ego booster, but it can never match the regular forces.”

“I don't view him as a threat in that sense. His ego is causing colossal *waste*. I am repelled by that. His private force must cost 100,000 or 200,000 dhanay per year. That's how much the province spends on school teachers. And his palace is worth as much as all the public schools and a génadema to boot. Why; to make him feel important? Please!”

“Well, we came down to talk to him about the waste of public money.”

“And did he listen to us?”

Méméjékwu considered his mother's question for a moment, then shook his head. “No. He was polite, friendly, courteous, and welcoming to us, but I got the impression he planned to continue building his palace and police force. He is searching for funds to extend the gas pipeline this far.”

“With the money he's spending, the pipeline could go all the way around the sea! At some point, humiliation will be our only recourse. You must write him and make it

clear that his position as Duke is not guaranteed; that his ego must be satisfied with public works that will give him a lasting reputation as a generous and wise leader.”

Məməjəkwu nodded vigorously. “I’ve warned him in writing and I warned him again at this meeting that Swadnoma must grow at least ten percent per year because it already has so much industry. But maybe that wasn’t enough.”

“I don’t think he’ll act. His personal demands are out of line. Gugédu wasn’t this bad, and we replaced him.”

Məməjəkwu scowled. “Mother, if the governors are generating ten percent annual growth, let them erect big palaces. I want them oriented around results and they should enjoy a reward for success.”

“If they reward themselves too much, there won’t be enough money left to produce the ten percent growth. Growth does not happen by itself; it requires investment.”

“Aryéstu has become boring, he reminds me of that so much. Alright, I’ll write Aryornu.”

“Thank you. I’ll dictate a summary of some of my points.” The queen looked away from her son, rather exasperated by the prince’s reaction. Just then she felt the car put on its brakes and looked up. They were in a stretch of real prairie, where the grass grew two meters high on both sides of the road; it was beautiful and impressive. She lifted her head to look out the front and saw her car, in the lead, slowing as well. The route was obstructed; it appeared that a truck had lost a load of hay, requiring a quick stop to clear the pavement.

Then it struck with no warning. A series of loud bangs. A spray of bullets. Shattered glass flying all over the car. Her Majesty screamed in surprise, fear, and pain. Something hit her left shoulder and upper chest and pushed her against the door to her right. Mëméjékwu emitted a loud gasp.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty!” It was Mëméjékwu’s assistant, Brébkordu, shouting from the front seat. She looked and saw he was shouting at the prince, not at her, and she turned. Her son had been hit by several bullets in the chest and face. He was groaning.

“By Esto!” she gasped. Then she looked down and saw that she was covered by blood as well.

A moment later Estoiyaju jumped out of the lead car and raced back to the prince’s, because both cars had stopped. He took one look. “Your Majesty!” he exclaimed, referring to the queen. “Someone shot at both cars! They ran off into the grass!”

“We must get to a hospital immediately,” she said as forcefully as possible, shocked that all she could manage was a whisper.

“Aryornu did this!” said Estoiyaju. “Or maybe the army; they’re the only ones with guns. We can’t go to Endraidha Hospital.”

She managed a nod. “Məlwika.”

“Məddoakwés is closer.”

She shook her head.

“Məlwika. Better.”

“Your driver was shot as well. Straight through the head; I think he’s dead! Let me get in between the two of you to help you.” Estoiyaju pulled the door open without another word from the queen, climbed over her, and dropped into the seat in between, oblivious of the blood and glass. He looked at Brébkordu. “Mélwika. Call the palace and patch a call through to the hospital, they need to be prepared.”

“That’ll take an hour!”

“Take Route 5 to avoid the wagons and other traffic, go as fast as you can, and blow the horn.”

Brébkordu nodded; the driver started them forward. “We’ll call the Melita police and get an escort,” he added.

“Good,” said Estoiyaju. He turned to the prince, who had stopped gasping; he was unconscious. He examined the young man. Three bullets, one through the mouth and bleeding profusely; Estoiyaju bent him forward so the blood would run out his mouth rather than drown him. He pulled out a handkerchief, then shook his head and began to pull off his expensive shirt.

“How is . . . he?” asked the queen.

“Unconscious. Let me see how you are doing.” He began to examine the queen closely, tearing her dress to look at her chest. She didn’t complain. He handed her bundles of cloth from his shirt. “Press here and here. Hard.”

She cried from the pain but pressed. He turned to the prince, who, he saw, also had a serious neck wound that was bleeding profusely. He pressed a cloth against it, hoping against hope. Up front the driver drove as fast as he could, which was amazingly fast; the car was capable of 110 kilometers per hour and the concrete pavement permitted

it. Brébkordu was constantly on the radio telephone. Estoiyaju prayed no one bled to death and the driver would keep their careening vehicle on the road.

As soon as the call reached Melwika Hospital, they put it through to Lua. She pledged they would drop everything as soon as the car arrived. Then she called her dad. Chris, in the middle of the deepening program for the development teams, kept feeling his cell phone vibrate in his pocket, so finally he apologized and hurried out.

“Dad, there’s been an assassination attempt on the Queen and Crown Prince somewhere down by Endraidha. They’re coming here via Route 5.”

“What! Thanks for telling me! What happened?”

“Gunshots. They’ve both been hit three times.”

“Gunshots? The army!”

“I guess.”

“Or Aryornu. Does the palace know?”

“They called the hospital. Queen’s orders.”

“I’m glad she’s still able to make decisions. I had better call mom; she’s with Princess Awster.”

“Exactly, that’s why I called. I’ve got to run. Bye.” Lua hung up. Chris dialed Liz’s cell phone number. It was a delicate situation; Liz wouldn’t want to pull it out in front of Awster and Kandékwes. They had been carefully maintaining the fiction that they had arrived with two cell phones and still only had two, when in fact they had nine; in fact, they had even gotten a replacement cell phone for Jordan after his had burned up in the fire.

She didn't answer, as he expected, so he called again, and again, and again, all the time thinking about what else he could do. The shock that something like this would be tried was . . . shocking. He was numb at the thought. Thanks to the succession guidance Widumaj had given, the Eryan had managed to achieve an extremely stable succession that had seen only two Civil Wars in six hundred years. He started to run through the succession possibilities. Without the Prince, succession went to his son, Gésélékwes Tri; but he was only twelve and thus ineligible, because the succession law said that no one could succeed until they were eighteen. That put Princess Awster, Meméjékwu's sister, next in line. If she were dead, any sons or daughters she had would be next if they were eighteen years or older, but her three surviving children ranged in age from four to ten.

After that, one had to look farther afield. Gésélékwes Dwo had had five children, but all three sons had predeceased him, and the other daughter—the queen's younger sister—had died ten years earlier without issue. The succession law specified that succession went to the sons in order of birth, then the daughters, then to each son's children in order of birth. Gésélékwes Maj had had three children who survived him and had issue, the oldest son being Gésélékwes Dwo. The younger son had been Judge Yusdu, whose sons were Roktekester and Gurwekester. The third child—in actuality the oldest—had been a daughter, Bidhé, married to the Lord of Ékwedhuna, and they had had two sons; General Sérékwes, recently deceased, and General Aryornu. Aryornu was older than Roktekester; he was the oldest surviving grandson of the oldest child of Gésélékwes Maj, which gave him seniority.

Suddenly, Chris thought he saw the purpose of the plot.

Then the phone at the other end was answered. “Chris, are you crazy!?”
whispered Liz, in English.

“Liz, this is an emergency. I think you need to take the cell phone to Awster. Lua just called. Someone fired shots at the car carrying the Queen and Crown Prince. They were both wounded and they’re being driven to Mēlwika Hospital right now.”

“What? Oh my God!” Liz was so shocked she could only express herself in English. “Are you sure about this?”

“Lua called. They’re preparing the emergency room.”

“Alright.” There was a pause at the other end of the phone while Liz walked back to the room where Awster and, it turned out, Kandékwes was located. She switched the phone to speaker mode and explained.

“What? Are you sure about that!” said Kandékwes, shouting.

“This is horrible! Unbelievable!” said Awster.

“It seems to be true,” replied Chris, knowing they could hear him as easily as he could hear them. “The hospital got a radio telephone call from the queen’s car. The queen ordered them to be driven here, so they’re on their way. This happened somewhere down by ɛndraidha.”

“Did you say gun shots?” asked Kandékwes.

“That’s what Lua said.”

“The army!”

“Or Aryornu and his private police force, which has permission to use the guns. If the Crown Prince and the Queen both die, I believe he’s the next one in succession after Princess Awster.”

“That is correct,” said Kandékwes, ominously.

“And the palace hasn’t informed us of this event!” said Awster.

“Please come here immediately, then,” said Chris. “The Queen and Prince will be here, and we will do everything we can to guarantee your safety.”

“We’ll be there immediately,” replied Kandékwes.

“I’ll go with them,” said Liz.

Chris’s phone beeped. “I’m getting another call, so I had better take it,” Chris said. “Bye.” He closed the circuit and connected to the other call. “Mélita Police, trying to reach you urgently, Lord,” said the Melwika telephone operator.

“Put me through.”

There was a pause. “Lord Kristobéru, we just sent one of our police cars to Melwika,” said Bédhu Lubésto, chief of police. “We thought we should let you know; they’re accompanying the car of Prince Méméjékwu. The Prince and Queen are both in it and are seriously wounded.”

“We’ve heard. Gunshots?”

“Indeed, the car’s windows are all smashed! Even the driver’s window, it’s a miracle he wasn’t hit! I saw it when they drove by. I’m in the other police car right now and heading south on Route 3 to visit the scene. They’re keeping me informed by radio. I hear both have three gunshot wounds, the prince to the neck and mouth, the queen to the shoulder and upper chest. I don’t know where their third wounds are; I only heard about two each.”

“Dr. Lua’s readying the emergency room. Thank you for the warning.”

“You’re welcome. Now, what’s this . . . wow, there are two armored steam wagons rolling north on Route 3 at maximum speed. By Esto, if they aren’t careful they’re going to hit us!” There was a long pause, then Chris heard a roar at the other end.

“Bédhu? Bédhu, are you there?”

“Yes, Lord, but they missed us by centimeters! I don’t think they’re controlling the steam wagons very well!”

“How fast can they go?”

“Probably fifty or sixty kilometers per hour! The idiots don’t know how to drive!”

“Who was in it? Did you see the uniforms?”

There was a pause. “Interesting that you would ask. They weren’t army uniforms; no leather tunics or dark green shirts. They were wearing dark blue!”

“Could they be provincial police?”

“Yes, the uniforms were right!”

“Alright, call the palace and tell them. Any idea how many men the two steam wagons had?”

“No. I could see a half dozen on top of each one, though.”

“Have the Melita switchboard patch you through to the palace and inform them. I’m sending Melwika police down to provide escort as well. Let me *know anything at all* that you learn, understand?”

“Yes Lord.”

“Thank you. Goodbye.” Chris hung up. He could feel his heart racing and the adrenaline flowing. He paused to think of all the calls he could make; Roktekester, to get the army involved; Dêku, former chief of Melwika Police and now chief of the Royal

Police; Wéroilubu, chief of Melwika's police. But first he hurried back inside the Bahá'í Center. "Thornton, Jordan," he called out, interrupting the meeting. "Can both of you step outside for a minute, please?"

"Sure," said Thornton, rather irritated, since he had his hand up and wanted to comment about a particular passage they were all discussing.

"Sorry, but this is extremely important." Chris stepped outside and waited. Both were outside in a few seconds.

"What's so important?" asked Thornton.

"You guys have your cell phones?"

"Yes."

"Sure."

"I need your help to make some calls. There's been an assassination attempt on the life of the Queen and Crown Prince. They're both gravely wounded by gunshot wounds and are being driven to Melwika Hospital as fast as possible, with a Melita Police escort. Thornton, call Wéroilubu and tell him that two armored steam wagons full of Swadnoma Provincial Police, armed with maybe as many as one hundred men with rifles and pistols, may be on the way here. Once the royal car is inside we have to close the gates and make sure they stay closed against the steam wagons. Jordan, you call Dëku, head of the royal police in Meddoakwés. He needs to dispatch police cars southward down routes 1, 3, and 5 to locate the steam wagons and report where they are and where they are going. I'm calling Roktekester right now to alert him. I just pray he's not part of this plot."

"Dëku won't listen to me!" replied Jordan.

“Tell him I’m right here, and I’ll talk to him if necessary.” Chris pulled out his phone and dialed the operator. “Lubésé, Jordan and Thornton are here with me and will be calling through your switchboard as well to make calls for me. You can reach me on any of the three lines. Have there been more calls between the palace and hospital?”

“Indeed, Lord, Dr. Lua is on the phone to the prince’s radio telephone right now.”

“Excellent. Please connect me to General Roktəkəstər. Say it is a grave security matter.”

“Immediately.” He could count on Lubésé and he could hear the worry and seriousness in her voice. She knew the situation.

It was almost a minute before Roktəkəstər got on the line. Meanwhile, Thornton explained the situation to Captain Wéroilubu, Melwika’s Chief of Police, who was willing to send a police car south but argued that the city walls and gates were the jurisdiction of the city’s army garrison and Commander Aisu. So Thornton called Aisu.

Then Roktəkəstər came on the line. “Lord Kristobéru, we have a crisis too!”

“I’m sure. Dr. Lua told me of the assassination attempt. Bédhu Lubésto, Chief of Police in Məlita, told me two armored steam wagons are on their way northward up Route 3 at a high rate of speed and they have armed men on top with dark blue uniforms.”

“Dark blue?”

“Swadnoma Province Police, I suspect.”

“That sounds right.”

“Roktəkəstər, is Aryornu next in the line of succession after Məməjekwu and Princes Awstər?”

“Traditionally, yes, but if the Queen’s own issue are ineligible, she can decide who will succeed her among the collateral lines. Let’s not speculate, Lord!”

“I agree. Roktøkæstær: please order Commander Aisu to close the gates of Melwika after the prince’s car passes into the city. I want this city closed up and the walls defended.”

“How can you stop armored steam wagons? They can smash down your gates! And the riflemen will clear the walls of defenders!”

“We’ll worry about that later. Please order the garrison mobilized and the gates closed.” Chris was firm.

There was a pause. “Very well. That’s a wise request, even if it may be ineffective.”

“We have half an hour to make it effective, my friend.”

Reread and edited 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

333.

Deaths

Kaiménu 7/ June 28, Yr 14/632

Chris, Thornton, and Jordan walked as fast as they could from the Bahá'í Center, past the hospital and their house, to Commander Aisu's office in the Citadel. He saw them coming in and beckoned them into his office. He was talking to Roktekester. He put down the phone.

"We have the order. How much time do we have?"

"The armored steam wagons were south of Mēlita; about 75 kilometers from here," replied Chris. "Their top speed is maybe 60 kilometers per hour, so a bit over an hour. Dēku has agreed to send out police cars to watch for them, and Wéroilubu's sending a car down Route 5 to provide an escort for the royal car, then it'll turn back and watch for the steam wagons."

"Good, but how can we possibly stop them? I've been in them many times; they're formidable weapons, and very powerful!"

"I have an idea," replied Thornton. "Park city buses across the gates in front of them, with their brakes set and their tires punctured. The armored steam wagons can't smash through the gates with the buses in the way. They're too big. And if the soldiers get out to move the buses, they'll be subject to fire from the walls."

"But the soldiers have *rifles*," replied Aisu. "They're superior weapons!"

"Aisu, don't be fooled by firearms," replied Chris, sternly. "I have two pistols and John Miller has an old rifle and we can get them, if you want. But they really aren't that

superior. At the ranges we're talking about—less than fifty meters—they're no more accurate than bows and arrows. They can be aimed and fired faster, but the men on the wall will be behind the crenulations.”

“But arrows can't penetrate into the armored steam wagons!”

“And bullets can't pass through stone walls! If the soldiers are stuck inside their armored steam wagons and outside the walls, what can they do? They can't get into the city. If they get out of the armored steam wagon to move the bus, they'll be subject to arrow fire!”

“That's true,” said Aisu.

“And they won't be completely safe inside the armored steam wagons, either,” added Thornton. “Because the men on the walls can throw Molotov cocktails downward on the roofs of the armored steam wagons. The burning alcohol will drip inside.”

“That's true,” said Aisu, feeling better. “But we have only one hundred men in our garrison, and the city has nine gates. That'll spread my men very, very thin.”

“We can mobilize the entire police and fire forces; that adds fifty more,” said Chris. “And there are maybe a thousand men in the city who will recognize the old military emergency warning bell, if we ring it. They can throw Molotov cocktails pretty well.”

“How many arms do you have? Explosives?” asked Thornton.

Aisu shook his head. “Two hundred bows, four hundred quivers with a dozen arrows each, two hundred spears, two hundred swords . . . no explosives.”

“I see,” replied Thornton.

“Still, that’s twenty bows and forty dozen arrows per gate,” said Chris. “Thor, Jordan, you’ve got an hour to get bottles from anyone who has them, fill them with anything flammable Behruz can supply, and stuff a flammable cloth in the top. As Lord, I can order the city bells to ring.”

“Better do that right away so people have plenty of warning. We need to get the word out fast because we have less than an hour. What about the radio?”

“I’ll call the main radio station and ask them to broadcast a warning!” said Chris. “Once we’re sure where the armored steam wagons are going, the radio station should announce it! If they hear it, they’ll think twice about attacking a mobilized city anyway!”

“I’d better get started, we’ll be lucky if we can locate enough buses to block the gates!” said Aisu. “I’ll send men to all the gates, loaded with weapons. They’ll decide who to let onto the walls. Lord, you get me police and firemen to help with the defense and mobilize the population.”

“We’ll work on the Molotov cocktails.” Thornton and Jordan dashed out.

“I’ll be back,” said Chris. He hurried out as well to call city hall and order the emergency bells to ring, then called the police and ordered them and the firemen mobilized. Meanwhile, he ran to the basement of the tomi to grab his revolver from its hiding place in the rover, then ran upstairs to get Luktréstu to help him.

The phone rang. “Khélo?”

“Lord, Captain Bédhu here. I reached the scene of the shooting about ten minutes ago. It appears the armored steam wagons stopped briefly. The queen’s car was abandoned here; the driver’s dead with two bullets in his head; one of the steam wagons pushed the car off the road. The rear windows and the driver’s window were all shot up.

They intentionally shot the driver and pumped bullets into the back seat to kill anyone there.”

“Where was the queen?”

“I gather she was riding with the prince. The back seat is covered with glass, but no blood, so no one could have been sitting there. I counted ten bullet holes in the upholstery. Estoiyaju was sitting next to the driver and was unharmed; they had no interest in killing him.”

“He’s lucky. Thank you for the information. Take notes of the crime scene, then head back to Melita and dispatch a photographer to photograph it thoroughly. Only then should the driver’s remains be removed. One more thing. I don’t have time to do this. Call the radio station in Pértatranisér and give them a complete and thorough report. I’d do that immediately, before calling the photographer. The news needs to be broadcast to the world.”

“Of course. That’s a frightening responsibility, but I agree.”

“The armored steam wagons have radios. If they hear that the world knows, they may hesitate to strike. They’ll know the element of surprise is lost. I’m confident in your ability, Captain.”

“I’ll do that right away, then.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Chris hung up, relieved that it was arranged. Bédhu was articulate and precise; he’d do a good job. And Melwika’s switchboard only had three staff; if they obtained

help they only had room for five operators at once. He suspected they were overwhelmed at the moment.

Then he heard the city bell begin to ring. It was a constant ringing, not the slow, majestic peeling that one heard every quarter hour, but fast, loud, and frenetic. A moment later the bell at Foundry Square began to ring as well, followed, five seconds later, by the Grange bell a kilometer to the south. Eighteen thousand people were pausing from their busy lives or their work to listen and wonder.

“He’s on the radio!” shouted Luktréstu from the other room. Chris hurried in and heard Bédhu being interviewed by Dèkwéru, the popular disc jockey whose show was on for the four hours before Kèkanu’s *World Table* program.

“Good.” He saw a car moving rapidly across Citadel Square and moved to Luktréstu’s window to watch. The Hospital’s emergency room entrance was there. “That’s got to be the prince’s car!” he said.

Luktréstu hurried over. They watched orderlies stream out of the hospital’s door with gurneys. They immediately lifted the queen out of the car; Chris could see the entire scene quite clearly. Orderlies on the other side of the car, however, were not hurrying to get the prince out. “Looks like he didn’t make it.”

“Looks that way,” agreed Luktréstu, a lump rising in his throat.

Chris’s phone rang again. “Khélo.”

“Lord Chris, this is Dèku. I dispatched a police car to wait where Route 5 passes the intersection south of Moritua. The police car was parked about fifty meters north of the route, out of the way, to watch in safety. They just reported two armored steam

wagons raced by, heading east on Route 5. I've ordered them to follow at a discrete distance."

"Thank you. Can you please report that to General Roktekester. I'll inform Commander Aisu."

"Very well. What can we do?"

"Pray. We're mobilizing the city's defenses."

"We'll pray, then."

Chris said goodbye and called the operator. It took almost a minute for an operator to answer. "Put me through to the radio station in Pértatranisér, please."

"Immediately, Lord." There was a long pause as the operator connected to the Pértatranisér line—a single pair of wires within a bundle of wires that ran all the way to Pértatranisér via the north shore—and spoke to the operator at the other end. There were some clicks.

"World Radio."

"This is Lord Kristoféru of Mēlwika; do you recognize my voice?"

"Yes, Lord, I do. At your service, Lord."

"I need to make an announcement over the radio, could you connect me with the Dēkwéru, please."

There was a long hesitation. "What's the nature of the announcement, Lord?"

"Mēlwika will soon be undergoing an attack and we need to mobilize the population. The only way to do it is via the radio. This city has more radios than any other."

"Very well, Lord. Just a moment."

It was fully two minutes before Dëkwéru came on the line. Chris made notes of what he had to say. Luktréstu saw a car pull up at the hospital. “Princess Awster is here!”

“Good. Liz will be back, then.”

“Which way are the armored steam wagons going? Through Dëksawsuperakwa?” Chris nodded. Luktréstu added, “Then tell the people there to block the bridge over the river.”

Chris smiled. “You’re brilliant! This is how this world should be; people should have good ideas like that!”

Luktréstu smiled proudly. A moment later there was a click as the phone was transferred. “Lord Kris, this is Dëkwéru. This sounds like quite an emergency.”

“Yes, it is. There are two armored steam wagons heading toward Melwika and we need to stop them outside the walls. Her Majesty and the Crown Prince are now here at the hospital.”

“Lord, when was the last time we met? Over the winter?”

“Over the winter? No . . . it was last summer, wasn’t it, during the big Bahá’í gathering?”

“Yes, of course, that’s right.”

Chris realized Dëkwéru was testing him. “It was actually on the last day, I think. I came to the radio station with Mitrubbéru and shook your hand.”

“Quite right, Lord. Very well. Since I know you are helping to pay a 50,000 dhanay fine, you know the wisdom of what to say over the radio. My song is coming to an end; please wait.” There was a pause. More clicks. Chris looked at Luktréstu, who had given up pacing back and forth and had picked up his phone to make a call.

“We’re now interrupting our pre-eclipse music show for another surprise guest. Lord Kristoféru Ménnéa is on the telephone from Melwika with information. Lord, what is your announcement?”

“Thank you, Dekwéru, we very much appreciate your accepting this call. We have just been informed that two armored steam wagons are heading this way—to Melwika—with armed men on board. We have strong reasons to believe they are part of the plot to assassinate Her Majesty the Queen and the Crown Prince Méméjékwu. We are therefore asking the residents of Melwika and Ménwika to take the following actions.

“First, to the residents of Deksawsupérakwa: the two armored steam wagons must cross the Majakwés Bridge to get to the city of Melwika. We are calling on you to block the bridge immediately. The best way to do this is with heavy equipment, such as grange tractors and public buses. Please go to the grange and move all heavy equipment onto the bridge immediately. If any is damaged, I will replace it. It is imperative that the bridge be blocked as long as possible to give the city of Melwika as much time to prepare as possible.

“To the residents of Melwika city: the city gates are about to be shut and barred. If you are in a house outside the city, we recommend that you stay in your homes. The armed men are not after you, they are after your queen. If you are inside the walls, we are asking you to take the following actions. First: if you see a city bus or a heavy truck, please try to stop it. They are all ordered to report to the city gates immediately. We need buses and heavy equipment, including tractors, at the gates immediately. Second: we need liter-sized bottles and rags because we are making Molotov cocktails. These are glass bottles filled with flammable liquid. They can do considerable damage to an

armored steam wagon, especially if dropped from above at close range. If you have alcohol or even oil for lamps, please empty it into a clean bottle, grab a rag that can be soaked with fuel and lit, and head for the nearest city gate. Third: If you are an able bodied man who served on the walls during the Kwolone siege, please report to the walls immediately. If you are a man with weapons in your house—specifically, a bow and arrows or a sword—please report to the nearest city gate immediately. If you are any other person, please do the following: inform your neighbors what is happening. Urge everyone to turn on their radios or go to the nearest radio. Do NOT use your telephones because the switchboard operators are overwhelmed. If you have no role in the potential combat, please remain inside your house. Stay off the streets.”

“Is that it, Lord?”

“Yes. I think I should probably repeat these instructions several more times, though.”

“I agree. Have we any news as to the medical condition of the Queen and Crown Prince?”

“No. They are at the hospital and undergoing treatment.”

“Can you confirm that they were shot with guns?”

“That is what we have been told by two reliable sources.”

“Do we know who hatched this plot?”

“No, but it was someone who had access to the army’s firearms.”

Chris repeated the instructions to the Melwikans again. At the end, Luktréstu began to wave and point at the other phone. “My assistant, Luktréstu, will take this phone for a minute while I talk to someone else, Dëkwéru. He can describe the streets, which

are hopping with traffic now.” Chris handed the cell phone to Luktréstu, who walked to the window and began to describe the scene without saying what part of Melwika he was looking at. Chris picked up the other phone. “Khélo?”

“Lord, this is Aisu. The radio show is having an immediate impact! I never would have imagined in a thousand years we could organize people so fast! Could you please tell people to bring bottles and wicks to the Melwika Chemical Company because they have flammable liquid, but nothing to put it in. Also, Roktekester just called. He tried to speak to the two armored steam wagons, but they did not answer his radio calls, but they are talking to each other and we can hear them; even my radio can pick them up. They are still heading up Route 5. They seem to be talking to Aryornu, too, but we haven’t heard his voice.”

“Interesting. Do they know about the defenses?”

“Not yet, their radios are set on army channel 5, not on World Radio. The telephone line connecting all nine gates is working correctly; I can talk to them all at once. I’m moving to the Majakwés Gate Towers. Can you get me one of those phones of yours?”

“Yes, in less than five minutes.”

“Thank you. Got to go.” Aisu hung up. Chris called Liz using Luktréstu’s phone.

“Chris, I’m in the hospital now!”

“I know. I can’t talk; Luktréstu’s keeping the World Radio host busy and I have to get back to him. Can you walk your cell phone, or Lua’s over to Aisu in the Citadel Tower and show him how it works? It’ll take two minutes. He needs it immediately.”

“Ah . . . alright. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Chris hurried back over to Luktréstu and took the phone back when he finished answering a question. The young man was articulate and enjoying the interview. Chris repeated the instructions to Melwika yet again and added some comments about the city’s growing response. Then the other phone rang. “Lord, this is Chandu, down at the Deksawsuperakwa Grange. We’re moving tractors onto the bridge and turning them so they are across the route. Is that what you asked for?”

“Yes, Chandu, that’s exactly right. How many do you have?”

“Just two; the others are out today! But we can block the road, at least a while.”

“Good. The armored steam wagons are filled with soldiers with rifles and pistols, so *do not* attempt armed resistance. It won’t work. Block the bridge as best you can. You probably have five or ten minutes at most. The steam wagons are heavy and have powerful engines, so it won’t be easy to slow them down.”

“We’ll do our best. Bye.”

Chris went back on the radio, but said nothing of the planned blockage, lest the steam wagons have their radios tuned in. He repeated the instructions to the Melwikans yet again, noting that they had repelled the Kwolone some eleven years earlier and they would do the same today. Then Chandu called back. “The wagons are here, and they’ve smashed into the tractors, but the tractors are still blocking the bridge! It’s a tough bridge, the sides are keeping the debris on the road surface and the steam wagons are having trouble pushing it forward!”

“Get everyone out of their path!”

“We have, but we have some Molotov cocktails for them as well. There goes one now, in fact! Wow, it made a big fire on the side of the vehicle!”

Chris could hear gunshots faintly. “I hear guns, Chandu!”

“They’re shooting at us, but someone has thrown a second Molotov cocktail at them. I think we had time to make only three of them. Oh! The steam wagons have broken through! They’re on their way!” Chris heard more gun fire, then a loud explosion; the soldiers must have had grenades. Then suddenly the line went dead.

“Chandu’s gone.” Chris hung up and reached for the phone; Luktréstu had been narrating everything as best he could. “We’ve lost contact from Deksawsuperakwa after gunfire was followed by a loud explosion. The steam wagons have forced their way across the bridge and presumably will reach the walls in about five minutes.” Chris handed the cell phone back to Luktréstu and headed out the door. They were on their way to the southern gate where Majakwés Rodha—Route 2—reached the city.

They had to jog fairly fast to cover the six hundred meters quickly. The main streets were crazed, with people running every which way, some bearing arms and bottles, others heading up the hill where, they presumed, the army would not go. Chris had to push through at times. World Radio boomed from every house and business that had a radio; Luktréstu could speak and hear his voice a half second later, delayed by wires and vacuum tubes.

At the main southern gate, a crowd of men was pushing a bus against the inside of the closed gate and wedging anything they could find under it to immobilize it. Guards let him and Luktréstu up the spiral stairs to the west tower. Aisu was on top. Chris looked down and was suddenly struck by how low the city wall was; a short ladder mounted on

the upper deck of the steam wagon would be sufficient to scale it. But the wall was thronging with an incredible number of men, hundreds, many with few or no weapons. More were pouring up the stairs constantly. The city had about 5,000 adult males, plus hundreds more who commuted to the city to work. It would not be easy for the men on the steam wagons to get in.

A bus was parked across the gate on the outside as well, its tires punctured and flat. “Do you have Molotov cocktails?” asked Chris.

“Only a dozen or so. You should have asked for candles and matches! We’ve had to scramble to get them.”

“I can’t believe how many men are on the walls! I hope the walkways can support them.”

“And they haven’t been inspected for three years!” Aisu looked southward and pointed. “Here they come.”

“They have grenades.”

“Then we won’t do any talking. There’s nothing to talk about anyway.” Aisu turned to the telephone on top of the tower and repeated the instructions to all the gates: hold their fire until they were close enough for Molotov cocktails. The word went out along the wall as well.

The armored steam wagons were moving fast, but as they approached the walls they slowed; they were no doubt surprised to find hundreds of men on top. The two vehicles turned one side toward the wall so as to maximize the guns facing it and a man strode up the ladder to the rooftop castle. “We are here to put Her Majesty and the Crown Prince into protective custody. Someone tried to assassinate them.”

Aisu stuck his head out from behind the wall. “We have orders to protect them from General Roktekester himself. Turn around and head back to Endraidha immediately.”

“You have five seconds, or we will destroy this city.”

Aisu stared at the steam wagons, not sure what bluff or bluster to offer next. “Oh, hell, fire!” he ordered and he pulled back behind the wall.

A hundred arrows rained down on the armored steam wagon and harmlessly bounced off. Simultaneously the wagons let go a loud fusillade. Bullets whizzed through the air and bounced off the stone walls. The lead armored steam wagon turned, accelerated, and rammed into the bus blocking the gate. Two men with grenades threw them; one was cut down by arrows. The other managed to lob a grenade at the south tower, but it bounced off the wall and exploded harmlessly on the ground.

Down came the Molotov cocktails, a dozen in two or three seconds. The steam wagon was almost instantly awash in flames as they smashed across the upper deck and spread flammable liquid. One hit the front near the driver and splashed liquid across the slatted metal surface. Two missed, but they started fires around the vehicle. One soldier on the wall rose high, aimed carefully, and tossed a bottle of alcohol down the stairs into the interior of the steam wagon, just as a bullet from the second steam wagon struck him. He went down, but clearly the steam wagon was now in trouble. The driver began to back the vehicle up madly to get away from the walls as smoke poured out of the stairway and flames danced on the upper deck.

As soon as it had retreated about sixty meters, the armored steam wagon abruptly halted, the back door opened, and the men inside began to pour out to escape from the

fire. The walls erupted in arrows as the second steam wagon emitted a covering fusillade. Some of the men ran in a panic in random directions. Others ran toward the second steam wagon, which meant running toward the city. Some were cut down by arrows. Soldiers headed to the upper deck to fire and make room for their companions as the second vehicle's rear door opened. Then it turned and headed south on Route 2.

The walls erupted in cheers and shouts. "We did it!" exclaimed Chris.

"We had the advantage; our brains!" said Aisu, smiling, and the two men shook hands.

"Melwika! Melwika! Melwika!" The men on the wall began to chant as the armored steam wagons retreated past the belt of houses that surrounded the hundred-fifty meter greenspace outside the walls. A Melwika police car followed at a safe distance to watch them and report their movements back to the world. Chris had to smile at the chant. Then he and Aisu joined in; "Melwika! Melwika! Melwika!"

Reread and edited, 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

334.

Regency

Kaiménu 7/ June 28, Yr 14/632

It took Chris fifteen minutes to make his way across town to the hospital. Luktréstu stayed at South Tower with the cell phone near the army radio so that the entire kingdom could hear the radio reports from the police cars following the vehicle. Pandemonium broke out in town as word of the steam wagon's continued retreat escaped from every other door and window. The steam wagon briefly stopped to trash the grange building in Deksawsuperakwa and had a confrontation with a fire engine from Béranagrés, which sprayed it from several hoses. Then it headed across the bridge and south toward Médhela and Mèdhpéla, Melita and Mèddoakwés police cars following. The Melwika police car reported about the damage and the dead and wounded as it went.

When Chris entered the hospital, radios blaring from almost every room, he was greeted like a conquering hero. He was led back to the waiting room where Princess Awster and Lord Mayor Kandékwés waited.

"You've saved our lives, Lord," she said, as he entered the crowded waiting room. Liz nodded admiringly at her husband.

"Not just me. Aisu, the garrison, the police force, the fire fighters, World Radio, and eighteen thousand residents of the bravest city in the world."

"It really is. Melwika is remarkable," said Kandékwés admiringly and a bit jealously.

"How are they doing?" asked Chris. He didn't have to say whom.

“My brother is dead,” replied Awster, her voice quavering a little. “He bled to death during the ride here. My mother has lost a lot of blood, but they are giving her transfusions. She’s still in surgery.”

“She is a strong woman. We must pray for her.”

“She *is* strong, but she’s also 65 years old.”

“Right now, we must make it clear who is in charge,” replied Kandékwes. “This is a fight over succession. The army will follow the legitimate ruler. The successor is also the regent when the monarch is incapacitated.”

“In theory,” replied Awster.

“Historically, the successor runs things until the monarch recovers or dies. That’s tradition. There is no question who is the successor, my dear; it is you.”

Awster shrugged a bit; it was an overwhelming thought to pile on top of an overwhelming situation.

“Otherwise I gather it’s Aryornu, and I think we can agree that he has disqualified himself,” added Chris. “After Aryornu comes Roktēkestēr. He’s head of the army. If he recognizes you, that resolves the matter.”

“Exactly,” said Kandékwes.

“I . . . can’t call him right now and demand that.”

“My dear, this is no time for weakness.”

“Weakness? Kandékwes, my brother is dead and my mother may be dying, and you complain about weakness?”

“These tragedies aside, someone must be monarch at all times. The kingdom must have a head.”

“I agree,” said Estoiyaju from across the room. He had been silently listening, numbed by his own grief, his shirt half torn off and the tatters stained with blood, as was the skin of his chest. Brébkordu nodded as well.

“We’ll telephone on your behalf,” said Kandékwes.

“Alright,” said Awster reluctantly. Kandékwes reached over and hugged his wife; she buried her head in his shirt for a moment, trying to deal with a dozen conflicting feelings and fears. Chris glanced at his cell phone; the battery still had a good charge. He handed the phone to Kandékwes, who called the operator and asked to be connected to General Roktekæster. The call went through very fast and Chris pushed the speakerphone button so they all could hear.

“Greetings, Lord Mayor.”

“Greetings, my good General. You’ve heard the news, I’m sure.”

“Of course; World Radio was the only way we could know what was happening in Melwika. We’re still using it to follow the escaping steam wagon. I am overwhelmed by the victory. I am numbed by it. One hour of preparation and two armored steam wagons were repelled.”

“Lord Kristobéru is here and I am sure he will receive much credit in future days. I am calling from the hospital. Princess Awster, Estoiyaju, and Brébkordu are with me as well. His Majesty, Crown Prince Méméjékwu has expired. There was nothing the doctors could do; he bled to death before he got here. Her Majesty, Queen Dukterésto is alive, but she is in surgery and her future is very, very uncertain. She was unconscious for the last half of the ride because of loss of blood; she was barely alive when they got her here. The doctors are doing their best. Dr. Stauréstu is on the telephone from Mëddwoglubas to

advise them, as he is the best surgeon in the world. It will be days or weeks before Her Majesty can assume her responsibilities again.”

There was a pause on the telephone. “The kingdom must have stability and leadership. Is Princess Awster prepared to assume responsibility?”

Awster looked up, startled, then she turned to the telephone. “I am, General Roktekester,” she replied, loudly enough to hear her.

“Excellent. Then I pledge my loyalty and the loyalty of the army to you.”

Estoiyaju and Kandékwes smiled, pleased. Awster remained thin-lipped; a great weight had been dropped on her shoulders. “Thank you, Lord General and cousin. We knew we could count on you.”

“You can indeed, Your Majesty. I suggest that you make an announcement immediately.”

“World Radio,” said Chris.

Estoiyaju leaned forward. “Get me a piece of paper and a pencil. Brébkordu and I will draft a statement for you to read.”

“Excellent. I think we need to stress that a period of public grief must begin, and that a state funeral for my brother will be planned right away, and that everyone should pray for the Queen’s recovery,” she said. “I must thank everyone for their efforts on our behalf, and call on the public and the army to assist us in capturing the rogue elements that perpetuated this tragedy.”

“Excellent,” said Estoiyaju.

“We must pay for a very big sacrifice, too,” said Kandékwes.

“Of cattle; I want the meat distributed to the poor,” replied Awster. “No sacrifice of fast horses; Esto has no need for dead horses.”

Liz went out to get a pad of paper and some pencils. As she was about to walk back in, she heard “Mom!” and she turned. It was Thornton, coming down the hall, with Jordan. The nice clothes of both were soaked in sweat and stinky; Jordan had a bit of blood on him as well.

“What happened to you?” she asked Jordan.

“I’m fine. A man on the wall near me got shot and I helped him down the stairs and all the way here.”

“You were on the wall?”

“Grandma, our homes and families were threatened, not to mention our sovereign! Hey, I even managed to lob a Molotov cocktail onto the top of the steam wagon! One of ten or twelve that hit it!” He was proud and excited about that.

“I was over at the Mɛddoakwés Gate, so all I could do is hear the battle on a radio nearby,” said Thornton. “We all sat around and waited, then when we heard the chant ‘Mɛlwika! Mɛlwika!’ on the radio we joined in. It was incredible, you could hear it all over the city!”

The door to the waiting room opened and Chris came out. “You’re incredibly noisy, but everyone inside’s listening intently anyway,” he said. “So, you were at the Mɛddoakwés Gate?”

Thornton nodded. “Yes. We barely managed to get it closed and get a bus up against it on the outside when we heard the steam wagons were approaching the city. It was frightening. I was listening to the telephone connecting all the gates. Only six of the

nine gates were blocked by buses when the steam wagons showed up! Only three or four had Molotov cocktails.”

Chris was startled by that. “Aisu didn’t tell me that! At least we had the gates closest to Deksawsuperakwa ready.”

“The génadema postern gate wasn’t ready,” replied Thornton. “But it’s too narrow for a steam wagon to get in anyway.”

“I saw you up on the tower,” said Jordan to his grandfather. “I was on the wall just west of you.”

“Really?” said Chris, not sure what to say.

“You were in the tower?” asked Liz, shocked.

“Of course,” replied Chris. “They threw a hand grenade at us, but it fell a meter short.”

“Did you see the guy throw the Molotov cocktail right down the stairs?” exclaimed Jordan, his voice rising with excitement. “What a throw! Then he was shot in the head; he dropped dead about five meters from me! They’ve got to erect a monument to him, he turned the tide!”

“You’re not going to be able to sleep tonight!” exclaimed Liz.

“I’ll be too scared to try,” replied Jordan, shuddering.

Just then, Princess Awster came to the door. “Let’s get the name of that man,” she said. “I’ll need the names of all the dead as soon as possible. At some point, I want to read their names on the air.”

“I think we had three or four dead,” said Jordan. “The emergency room is filling up with the wounded. Ambulances are on the way from Meddoakwés with doctors and

nurses. There's still some fighting going on because about a dozen enemies are running around outside the walls. Most are trying to hide. I heard sirens, too, I think there's a fire."

"I'll go down to the emergency room to express my thanks," said Awster.

Roktekester drove to Endraidha in a huge five-car convoy, accompanied by two other generals of the army chiefs of staff and twenty heavily armed soldiers. They drove out of their way to get there via Route 2 and the Kwolone land in order to avoid possible ambushes. General Gelawu, commander of Endraidha, was there to greet them.

"As you heard on the way down, we've recovered the armored steam wagon."

"Any idea how many of them escaped into the Kwolone grasslands?"

"The guys at the armory didn't demand a list of everyone signing out the arms for the training exercise, but their estimate was seventy-five police. They took seventy five rifles and seventy-five pistols and a huge amount of ammo. The armory quartermaster complained about the amount of ammo, in fact, but the Captain in charge—Mitru Domo-Rudhsértru—said the arrangement was they could take as much as they needed and they'd pay for it. That delayed them, which is just as well. A pickup truck left with six men about fifteen minutes before the Queen and Crown Prince, and the armored steam wagons didn't leave until fifteen minutes after them."

"Domo-Rudhsértru, huh? Do we know how many men from Old Houses were involved?"

“We don’t have a list of the provincial police; it’d be in Aryornu’s house. But the quartermaster said a lot of the men spoke with refined accents; the sort you’d expect from members of old houses and priestly families.”

“Leeches,” spat Roktekester, using the popular epithet for the old aristocratic class. “Their power is destroyed, as of today.”

“And the priests. What will you do?”

“Arrest, try, and execute. First we’ve got to find sixty armed men, though.”

“They’re probably scattered. A lot will walk home and try to pretend they weren’t involved. Some will stay together, enjoy big game hunting for a few weeks in the prairie, and then we’ll get them. But who’s in charge? That ribbon-cutter?”

Roktekester nodded. “Princess Awster. It’s not very auspicious for the kingdom, I fear. We have to pledge our loyalty to her, though. That’s the succession law.”

“If the queen dies and Princess Awster dies, who’d be next in line? You?”

Roktekester nodded. “I’m the oldest male in the collateral line after Aryornu. But don’t even think about that. This is no time to split the kingdom and cause a civil war, and for what? Greed? Ambition? I’m not that kind of man.”

“No, of course not. But another woman; another queen. If the queen dies, that is. It’s crazy. Is this the new knowledge?”

“Actually, it’s the old knowledge.”

“True. Kandékwes is in an interesting position. During the day as well as during the night, you might say!”

“I don’t know what he’s wondering about, right now. But he’s a solid manager and administrator. If he guides Awster, or if we have a good prime minister, we’ll be fine.

And if the Queen recovers she'll need a new Prime Minister, which is just as well, because it was the current prime minister that made this mess."

"Former prime minister."

"Yes. Məməjəkwu had a lot of potential, but Wərétrakester's dream had a bad ending, in this case." Roktekester sighed. "Well, never mind. Have you managed to talk to Aryornu?"

"Not a word. He won't answer the phone. He has tried to call out, but the operator won't connect him. The house is surrounded by police—my police—so he can't go anywhere."

"Then I guess it's time for me to visit my cousin."

General Gəlawu nodded. Roktekester turned and headed out of the general's office. He got in his car and drove to Aryornu's house on the south side of Endraidha. There were about thirty M.P.s deployed around the house, front and back; they saluted their chief of staff and he saluted back.

"I'm going in."

"By yourself, sir?" said a soldier, startled.

"He's my cousin. I doubt he'll try anything. I'm the only one who can talk him into surrendering."

The soldier shrugged. "You are the one to decide that, General."

Roktekester nodded and headed for the door. He walked up to it and knocked.

"Cousin, let me in." He knocked again. "Cousin Aryornu, it's Roktekester."

The door opened and Aryornu, dressed in his old general's uniform, stood there.

"What do you want, cousin?"

“May I come in?”

Aryornu stared at him, then moved aside to let Roktekester in. He closed the door. Modékwu, his son in law and chief aide, was there as well.

“Have you been listening to the radio?” asked Roktekester.

“Not for the last hour or so. Rather dramatic events today, eh?”

“Indeed.” Roktekester looked at him. “Cousin, you need to surrender and account for what you have done.”

“Plans didn’t work out as intended. But cousin Roktekester, surely you agree that the kingdom’s old order is rotting, falling apart, dying? Something had to be done. Something still can be done, you know; you command all these men.”

“I do, and they will remain loyal to the Queen. One queen or another. Because that is the will of Esto. We know how bad it was before Widumaj, with civil wars settling practically every succession. The Sumis tore themselves apart with their civil wars; that’s one reason we conquered them. Widumaj Himself said the wars were one reason Esto commanded Him to reveal the hymns.”

“But the order of Widumaj is being toppled, Roktekester.”

“One way of toppling it is to oppose the succession law, cousin. The old houses kept their power partly by ignoring the hymns, ignoring justice, ignoring the command to consult with the people, ignoring the poor. The priests were little better. Perhaps the new order this world is struggling to reach will follow those principles better.”

Aryornu shook his head. “You are letting everything fall apart!”

“Like law and order? Peace? I think those were violated today.”

Aryornu fell silent; he saw he could not persuade Roktekester. “So, what do you advise?”

“You heard me. Surrender and give an accounting.”

“And then what? I’m sure you can’t guarantee me a comfortable exile somewhere, like Moruagras.”

“No. I can probably guarantee that you won’t be crucified, like your men.”

Aryornu stared at Roktekester, saying nothing.

“There is another alternative. Traditional. Honorable,” noted Roktekester.

“There is. It would seem that is my fate, too.” Aryornu stared out the window toward the luxuriant flowers of his house’s central courtyard. He said nothing for fully a minute. “Leave me. Give me fifteen minutes.”

“Very well, cousin.” Roktekester looked at him, then rose and walked out of the house. Aryornu and Modékwu both looked grim. The sunlight was getting funny; the eclipse had partly covered the sun, and even though the sun was still too bright to look at, the light was dimming and the air cooling.

Roktekester crossed the street to a military police car. The two guards were sitting inside, windows open, listening to the radio; Princess Awster was addressing the kingdom.

“She’s giving a good speech,” said one. “Then she’ll be interviewed by Kekanu, and he has promised a telephone call from Wérétrakester.”

“Good, that will put everyone’s mind to rest.”

“What about Aryornu?”

“We’re waiting.”

Roktekester climbed into the back seat to rest, contemplate his cousin's fate, and listen to Princess Awster. Her voice was strong and her words were assuring. When she finished, Kekanu sang the hymn of the succession; there was nothing else to say. About then, the front door of Aryornu's house opened. Modékwu stood there, grim, saw Roktekester, and beckoned him in. He entered and found Aryornu in the central garden, fallen on his sword. Roktekester came back out to get help from the police.

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335.

Reorganization

Kaiménu 7/ June 28, Yr 14/632

Princess Awster was late to return to her suite at the Melwika Palace Hotel, sixty meters from the hospital. Liz sat, waited patiently, and said prayers. Finally the door opened and Awster entered. “I’m so sorry, but mother opened her eyes a little bit. I spoke to her and asked her if she knew me and she nodded!”

“How marvelous; how hopeful!”

“She’s still in very grave condition, and Lua says her kidney functions seem to be deteriorating. She’s debating whether to try a new combination of medicines; they have a limited range of choices, compared to Gædhéma. But a little bit of consciousness! It sure looks like progress!”

“It does. I hope we can pray for her together.”

“Yes, definitely. But Liz: I have to talk to you about the Faith. My situation has changed radically in twenty-four hours. I still can’t believe it. I couldn’t sleep at all last night. I can’t declare myself as a Bahá’í. Right now it would be misinterpreted; it would look like my reaction against the involvement of the priests in the assassination plot. It would also embroil the royal house in controversy just at the time when I have to bring the people stability, confidence, and certainty.”

“I understand. And I can’t say that I am disappointed. We don’t want people to convert because it is fashionable; we want them to genuinely believe. If you become known publicly as a Bahá’í, people will join out of convenience.”

“That worries me as well. You may have heard about my walk around town this morning; I stopped at the Temple to Esto, God of Light; then I stopped at the Bahá’í Temple; then I went to the top of the mountain and visited the Sumi Temple. And I prayed at all three. That has to be the hallmark of my brief reign; I have to bring people together.”

“Your speech yesterday afternoon was a magnificent example of that. I was so impressed. I had never heard so much strength in your voice! You have a talent for speaking.”

“Thank you. Kandékwes and I had a little time to talk last night and this morning; he’s back in Mèddoakwés to manage some matters and visit with the kids, who are traumatized. They’ll be coming here tonight, so our family life will be a bit more normal. But as I said, we talked briefly. I think we need to call the Consultative Assembly for next month. People have a lot of complaints; many are angry. But the cause of their anger is now over, so they need to have a chance to talk it out, release it, and let go of it. The Consultative Assembly is a good place to do that. But there needs to be an agenda of action for the Assembly to consider and approve. And considering that the previous prime minister managed to anger almost everyone, I think the position would be strengthened if the occupant of the office were approved by the Assembly.”

“That’s a big step. You’ll need to consider it carefully.”

“We won’t finalize that decision until after the Consultative Assembly starts; we have to see how it goes. When I was just at the hospital, by the way, I told the staff that they could release information about mother’s medical condition to the radio stations and newspapers as they saw fit. The public needs to know.”

“There’s been a terrible atmosphere of repression for the last six months.”

“I know. Mother did not approve, but she wanted to give Méméjékwu a chance. We need to encourage a more open atmosphere.”

“Who will you get for Prime Minister?”

“It’s premature to say. We could ask Aryéstu.”

“I think he’s too young and inexperienced, and I’m not sure the Central Spiritual Assembly will approve a Bahá’í holding that position. It’s too political.”

“Oh. A pity. There’s always Wéranolubu; if he were given more freedom to act, he’d do quite well. He might agree to another term.”

“Cleaning up the mess made by his successor would be vindication, I think.”

“It’s very strange, talking to Kandékwes about these matters. It used to be that I’d talk to him about administration when he brought it up; a few times a year he’d seek my advice. Not very often! Now I have to seek his advice. It’ll take time to get used to that!”

“Awster, you’ll do fine. Don’t let people undermine you or condescend to you. You are in charge of the kingdom right now; it’s as simple as that. If they don’t like it, that’s their problem.”

“Mother’s strategy was very interesting. The old houses were upset that a fairly well respected king was succeeded by his meek, untrained, twenty year old daughter, so she decided to make the people her allies. They loved her; they still do. They were her source of influence to counter the old houses, the priests, and the army officers. I will do the same.”

Just then the telephone rang. The lady-in-waiting answered it, then turned to Awster. “Lady Sugé.”

Awster tensed up and nodded. She walked to the phone. “Khélo, Sugé . . . no . . . no . . . please ask Brébkordu . . . look, if the two of you can’t decide on these matters, I’ll just have Brébkordu do the planning. Shall I do that? . . . Yes, I know you’re his first wife, and Ninti’s his second . . . my dear, I’m sorry, we have to be fair . . . ask Brébkordu. Goodbye.” She hung up and walked back over. “Sugé has been immensely jealous of Ninti from the moment the Prince decided to take a second wife. They both showed up at the hospital yesterday afternoon to claim his body. I finally decided Brébkordu would be in charge. Now they won’t cooperate over the funeral. And mother won’t want to look at either one of them after this incident; I know that. Their fighting has soured many family gatherings. The two of them will share a house together in the palace complex . . . a bad situation.”

“What about the grandchildren?”

“Mother will want to see them, but separately. And with Gésélékwes Tri’s dyslexia, I doubt she’ll want him to be her successor, which will introduce a whole new issue into the relationship. She can deviate from the successorship principles, but she has to do it in writing and proclaim it widely, so there is no doubt. That’s done very, very rarely, and it could set us up for another attempted coup.”

“These are terribly difficult matters to deal with, and I’m sorry they’ve been thrust on you so suddenly and unexpectedly. But I have seen you in action for quite some time and have immense confidence in your abilities. Perhaps this is a good time to say some prayers.”

“Yes, let’s stop talking, it just makes me feel overwhelmed! Let’s say some prayers.”

Two days later, Prince Méméjékwu's state funeral was held with full pomp and circumstance, attended by two hundred lords and their relatives, plus generals, ministers, palace functionaries, génadema presidents, and even a few priests; over a thousand altogether. Notably absent were members of twenty-five old houses and ten priestly families whose sons had been involved in the plot. Twenty had already been caught and imprisoned, and the others were being pursued.

The cremation was traditional as well, with the flames leaping thirty meters into the air because of the immense pile of wood surrounding the body. Afterward, Awster and Kandékwes fed everyone at the royal palace, an equally large amount of food being distributed to the city's poor. Awster sought out advice from everyone who shook her hand. She listened and had a secretary with her to take notes; she was interested in patterns of advice as well as the ideas themselves. That impressed Chris.

That evening she, Kandékwes, and family returned to the Melwika Palace Hotel, to be close to the still semi-conscious queen. They had virtually taken over the hotel, much to Awsé's delight and consternation, because she was making more money than ever before, but had to spend gobs of it to meet her client's needs. The next morning—the fourth day after the assassination—the princess called a big meeting of advisors, to plan for the future. When Chris and Liz arrived in her temporary office and conference room—a large hotel room adjoining her bedroom—they were impressed by the people seated around the conference table: Aryéstu the economist; Estoiyaju, the queen's chief secretary; Lord Mayor Kandékwes of Meddoakwés; Governor Modobéru of Sumilara; General Perku; General Roktékestér; former Prime Minister Weranolubu; and the

redoubtable prophet, Werétrakester. Those gathered included three from Old Houses, two villagers, two gedhèmes, one Sumi, one royalty, one widu, and one woman, for Awster had told Liz she didn't want to be the only woman in the room.

"I can't thank all of you enough for coming today," Awster began, once everyone had gathered and she had entered and greeted them formally. "Her Majesty, Queen Dukterésto, also thanks you. I was able to speak to mother briefly this morning. She is slowly getting stronger and is now conscious several hours a day, mostly in the mornings, though she is not in the position to do any business yet. She thanks everyone for their help at the funeral yesterday, which she deeply regrets not attending, and has offered a blessing and will pray for us."

"I was impressed by Her Majesty's growing strength," added Werétrakester. "I was able to see her for about one minute, I prayed for her, and she opened her eyes and smiled and said 'thank you.' The doctors have growing optimism for her recovery."

"The new medicine saved her life," agreed Awster. "I have made one or two decisions that will help set the agenda for this meeting. First, I will remain in Melwika until mother's out of danger and is awake most of the time; then I will return to Meddoakwés to live, but will visit her every morning. When she is in a position to return to the palace, I will be willing to travel; for example, to the Isurdhuna Festival in five or six weeks time. If necessary, I will skip the festival."

"What about the consultative assembly and the provincial assemblies?" asked Perku.

"The consultative assembly can't wait long because it will bring resolution and healing. We have to wait another week, to make sure mother's on the road to recovery,

but once we are sure of that we'll call the consultative assembly to meet two weeks later, to end just before Isurdhuna. If her health deteriorates we may need to postpone the assembly until after Isurdhuna, but it will be needed either way, so this meeting needs to lay the direction for the consultative assembly. Provincial assemblies will be held after Isurdhuna."

"Led by which governors? There's still unrest in Kerda, and growing unrest in the north and south shores," noted Perku. "Half my troops in Néfa are tied up in Isurdhuna, and we can't have that going on during the festival."

"We will fire the governors of the north shore, Kerda, Ləwéspe, and the south shore, and appoint a new Duke for Swadnoma. We will restore the dukes to authority in their provinces, but they will appoint a governor to handle day to day business. In other words, the provinces will be organized the same way as the entire realm."

"Including Sumilara?" asked Modobéru.

Awster nodded. "All provinces will be the same. The military will have no special role in Sumilara. But as governor you will stay on; the Duke of Sumilara will be able to pick your replacement when you decide to retire."

"Considering all the unrest, the provincial assemblies should be asked to approve the governors," said Werétrakester. "That's the best way to ensure they'll have legitimacy. The newspapers and the radio station are pretty powerful ways for people to hear about their governors and what they accomplish. The days when anyone could be governor and do almost anything until the people revolted are past. We have had riots in five cities in the last ten years because of problems with governors or dukes."

“You make an excellent point, widu. As much as I regret that we need to give people a central role in the process, I think you are correct. The dukes will propose a governor to the monarch, who will have the authority to reject the candidate; then the candidate is announced and the provincial assembly will have the power to reject.”

“The Prime Minister of the realm will need the support of the Consultative Assembly as well. A vote of no confidence, and he will be weakened severely.”

Awster was not happy with Werétrakester’s remark, but she reluctantly nodded. “I agree. Until confidence in the crown is restored, the Prime Minister will be subject to a veto by the Consultative Assembly.”

“Who will that be?” asked Roktekester.

Awster looked at Weranolubu. “Weranolubu, if he is willing to return.”

Weranolubu smiled. “Indeed, Your Majesty, I am ready!”

“Will you be able to attend the provincial assemblies?” asked Perku.

“I think we should guarantee a royal representative; my mother if she is well, or me, or Kandékwes, or the Prime Minister.”

“The consultative assembly, duke, and governors also touch on the responsibilities of the House of Lords,” noted Perku.

“The members of the House of Lords are appointed by Her Majesty and are replaced by her. While she is disabled, those powers fall on me. We will remove about half the members of the House of Lords and replace them with members more willing to support laws that benefit the people.”

“Why not eliminate the House of Lords entirely?” asked Aryéstu, who was a village boy and an illegitimate son of a lord.

Awster looked pensive, but uninterested. Werétrakester shook his head. “The lords are an integral part of our society because Widumaj mentioned them often, praised them, and described the virtues they should acquire,” he replied.

“But that doesn’t mean they have to have a separate consultative body,” objected Roktekester. “What does Bahá’u’lláh say about that?”

“Bahá’u’lláh speaks about the special rank and responsibility of the king, but does not speak of a permanent role of lords,” replied Chris.

“But here, Widumaj’s guidance must decide,” injected Kandékwes.

“I can’t speak for Widumaj, but I don’t think the sins of the Old Houses, in the last few days, have been sufficient to nullify their role in a House of Lords,” exclaimed Werétrakester quickly.

Awster nodded. “We are not abolishing lords or a House of Lords.”

“We need to consider seriously what penalties to assess against them collectively or by family,” noted Roktekester. “Let’s recall that the Old Houses and the priestly families have been an impediment to this kingdom’s progress since the arrival of the Menneas. They have been responsible for the Kwolone attack, Lord Chris’s stabbing, the accusation that Thornton used witchcraft to start the Meddoakwés fire, the injuring of Dr. Lua, a planned assassination of Lord Chris, and now the assassination of the crown prince and the severe wounding of Her Majesty. I think it is time to do something drastic.”

“Penalize the culprits and let the others learn their lesson,” urged the prophet.

“Generally, I would not penalize the innocent; sometimes generosity is the best way to change them. Penalizing them as a class will alienate them,” agreed Chris.

Awster nodded. “We’ll appoint the cooperative ones to the House of Lords and remove non-cooperative ones from that body. Any house where the head or the heir was involved in the plot will lose hereditary titles and hereditary rights to rents. All pensions for members of old houses under age 55 end next month anyway, but anyone involved in the plot will lose their pension or their right to a future pension.”

“There is one unfairness I would recommend we end,” said Weranolubu. “The Jérdomais Tomi is a very successful tomi and has started generating very good profits for the old houses. But Lord Kristoféru was forced to invest several hundred thousand dhanay of his own money in it and he was barred from receiving any profits for at least two years. He accepted this injustice gracefully and poured his energy into the tomi; hence its success. He should be allowed to sell his shares or receive a rightful profit for them.”

“I agree,” said Awster. “We’ll take care of that.”

“You are very kind, Your Majesty,” replied Chris. “I’d rather give the shares I have to the Məlwika Génadema or some other institution as an endowment. I’m more concerned about all the tomis set up last summer. Ləwésəpa didn’t want one, and the tomi that was forced on that province tried to take over the legitimate businesses. The north and south shore tomis wasted several hundred thousand dhanay and accomplished almost nothing. The Kərda Tomi did nothing until the governor reorganized it, and in the last few months it has actually started to move.”

“We should reorganize these tomis entirely, so their boards have competent and experienced businessmen on them,” said Weranolubu.

Aryéstu shook his head. “That’s not enough. We need to consider what the purpose of the tomis was: the economic development of the provinces. Are big provincial tomis that run scores of different types of factories best? Big tomis make sense if they are doing one large thing, like making modular buildings, or if they are industrializing a place with almost no industry, like Sumilara or Kërda. But Lëwésipa doesn’t need one; it already has dozens of successful factories. That’s also true of the south shore. Rudhisér and the north shore are in between; they’re partially industrialized. Vésipa basically had a tomi already because most of its industry was owned by Ora’s ruling family. Tutane tribes need their own tomis because the tribe itself will run it.”

“So, what would you suggest?” asked Weranolubu, puzzled.

“Lëwésipa needs a ministry of development that would disburse low-interest loans, grants, and tax deferments to new factories. The province has lots of experienced businessmen and a lot of village-owned factories. They need to be encouraged to expand. That’d work well in Arjakwés province for the same reason. The other provinces need both a tomi and a development ministry.”

“The other thing we should encourage is interprovincial mergers and partnerships,” said Chris. “We’ll need legislation to accomplish this. Right now, every province is aiming for self-sufficiency in basic goods, like shoes, dairy products, clothing, canned goods, and pasta. Let the shoemakers join up to form shoe-making companies across provincial lines. Let one factory make just women’s shoes and another just men’s shoes. Let them share innovations that increase efficiency. This world needs two or three shoe manufacturers, not twenty or thirty.”

“Exactly,” agreed Aryéstu. “One could even see, say, the south shore tomi gain a dominance in shoe making, even though their factories are not just on the south shore.”

“That’s innovative,” agreed Awster. “I’d like to see that legislation proposed. Aryéstu, can you take the lead?” He nodded, so she continued, “I want legislation ready for the consultative assembly that gives us a new vision for the advancement of this world. After the last few months of unrest and fear, we need a clear, new direction.”

“A new plan,” suggested Weranolubu. “We’re two years into the Seven Year Development Plan. It’s time to modify it, improve it, and adjust its timetables. I assume we’re behind, where growth is concerned.”

“We will be this year,” agreed Aryéstu. “Last year and the year before annual growth was almost ten percent, but this year, with all the unrest and the bank runs, we’ll be lucky to manage five percent.”

“I’d be surprised if we get that much,” said Roktekester.

Aryéstu shook his head. “Right now, five percent is almost guaranteed. The road system has slashed transportation costs, so businessmen are constantly discovering cheaper suppliers in other provinces and are discovering they really can cash checks, make phone calls, or get on the bus and visit other provinces. Interprovincial competition is forcing increased efficiency. Furthermore, every year more workers are literate and there are more accountants around. The system has a lot of inefficiency. It’s getting cleaned out.”

“I want more benefits going to the people,” said Awster. “They’re my main pillar, if I’m going to reduce the power of lords and priests. I like the idea of a new plan; I think a new Seven Year Plan, for 631-38. Who really wrote the last plan?”

“Thornton and Aryéstu,” said Chris.

“Could Thornton, Aryéstu, and Weranolubu revise it over the next month? I’ll tell you what I want to add to it. First, the child labor laws and the compulsory education laws in the current plan that passed but never had a way to enforce them must be enforced. Second, I want a statement that our goal is to provide universal medical care. I’m not sure we can do that in seven years; that needs to be studied.”

“The current plan calls for the expansion of hospitals and clinics, and the number of doctors and nurses, enough to make that possible,” replied Chris. “If the economy doubles, there will be money to accomplish that goal.”

“Good. My third goal would be to set up a retirement system so that everyone seventy years of age and older gets a pension. The destitution of old age is a scandal, but if the economy doubles we should be able to eliminate it.”

“These are worthy goals of a monarch,” agreed Werétrakester, with growing excitement. “Widumaj’s hymns teach exactly these sorts of efforts.”

“I hope so. In the last six months, the development plan was being diverted to become a vast expansion of wealth for the rich. It has given development a bad name. I want to see development matched with goals of service that gives development true meaning.”

“These goals were impossible in the past because the consultative assembly would not pass them,” said Chris. “But after the assassination, it probably will be possible.”

“I will speak strongly in support of them,” said Werétrakester. “And I think there are priests who will argue for them as well. Widulubu, the priest who is organizing hymn

halls, is very concerned about the people, as are the priests here in Məlwika. We can rebuild the reputation of the traditional religion.” He glanced at Chris and Liz when he said that. Chris nodded; Bahá’ís were not opposed to that.

“The other matter we need to consider more urgently is the environment,” said Chris. “Deforestation, in particular, is a possible future problem. The flooded forests are beginning to rot in place; more and more trees are falling into the sea, sinking to the bottom, and becoming unusable. We have maybe two more years when we can harvest timber from the sea. I’d recommend a huge effort to cut and store as much wood as possible. We also need to pass reforestation practices. Half of Məlwika has been deforested and we’re already seeing bigger river flows after heavy rains. There is gullying in some places, which means we’re losing topsoil. In Pənkakwés the situation is worse because they have been clear cutting large areas to provide Məddoakwés with firewood. Forest must be replanted and lumbering must be regulated to protect the soil and the rivers. That’s the biggest environmental problem at the moment. Establishment of parks for animals and plants is also important. The western half of the Kwolonə lands would make an excellent park and the Kwolonə could continue to use it for many purposes.”

“Much harder to sell to the assembly,” observed Estoiyaju.

“It is, until a big flood wipes out some villages and people realize what is happening,” agreed Chris. “Let’s be mature and plan ahead.”

“I’m very concerned about Pənkakwés,” agreed Roktəkestər. “They’ll reforest it if they’re paid to do it.”

“The mountains around Kerda are probably suffering the worst,” said Perku. “The trees aren’t very tall, the climate is harsh so they grow back slowly, and the steep slopes mean there’s a lot of erosion. Governor Weranokaru’s pretty creative; he wants to extend roads into the southern mountains where the trees are taller and grow faster, and wants to build a smokestack up the side of the valley to get the smoke out.”

“He’s persecuted priests and old families excessively, but he has also done some good things,” agreed Chris.

“Matching funds,” suggested Weranolubu. “The provinces would have to pay a third or a quarter and the consultative assembly will authorize the rest.”

“We’ll give it a try,” agreed Awster. “Both reforestation and the cutting of the flooded forests.”

“We also need to spend a lot more money on studying the species here,” said Chris. “That’s an internal government commitment to create a department of natural resources. The mammoth herds seem to be shrinking, but no one is sure. If the hunters get guns, they’ll be wiped out, just like they were on Gedhéma.”

“The mammoths were wiped out on Gedhéma?” asked Roktekester, a big game hunter.

Chris nodded. “Mammoths, mastodons, sabertooths, and Irish elk; they’re gone. Éra has the last ones in existence and we have an obligation to save them.”

“We can find ten or twenty thousand a year to create a department to preserve natural resources,” agreed Awster. “I want to cancel the royal palace in Endraidha; that is supposed to cost two million dhanay over four years. We don’t need to spend money that way, we have enough palaces. The realm needs many other things instead.”

“It sounds like we have a lot to do in the next few weeks, then,” said Weranolubu.

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336.

New Plan

Kaiménu 11-12/ July 2-3, Yr 14/632

Sértroba finally hove into view. Chris slowed the rover for a moment to look at the village on its rocky island surrounded by Ornakwés marshlands, all a sharp contrast to the dusty brushland and short grass prairie around. The road—a dirt track with two gravel strips, excessively dignified by the appellation “Route 77”—cut arrow-straight across the surrounding terrain, accompanied by a line of utility poles on which snaked a single pair of electric lines and a double pair of telephone wires. Sértroba looked dusty and poor, a hamlet of several hundred people scores of kilometers from any town. Yet it was the proud center of the Krésonε tribe.

Chris drove the last few hundred meters and headed for what appeared to be the village’s three-room schoolhouse. He guessed right and found the youth team camped out in the classrooms, one of which served as day storage for their gear and two of which served as classrooms for their offerings. Thornton was busy teaching geology in one of the classrooms as Chris arrived; he poked his head in long enough to smile at his son, then went back to the common classroom, which was also where Thornton, Lébé, and the kids slept at night. Lébé and her assistant, Sugérsé, were there with Lébé’s youngest child, Jonkrisu, so he sat, had tea, and chatted.

Finally, the class ended and the hallway filled with people leaving the school. Chris watched them leave; mostly Krésonε men of all ages. Most wore manufactured shirts and pants rather than homespun or leather; prosperity was gradually touching the

remote village. Thornton stepped into the classroom a minute later. “Dad, what brings you all the way here?”

“After you and Jordan described this place several times over the last seven years, I was curious to see it.”

Thornton frowned suspiciously. “It’s pretty special; I really like it.”

“It’s peaceful,” added Lébé. “Sértroba has three hundred seventy people and they all know each other. The pace of life is slow; it reminds me of dad’s house when I was growing up. Since everyone knows everyone, we’re completely safe. We don’t have to worry about the kids.”

“And they’re gaining prosperity gradually,” noted Thornton. “The hazardous waste storage facility brings a few jobs and extra cash, winter vegetables and cattle are steady sources, the sale of horses is growing, and now the chief, Patékwu, is considering the construction of warehouses, where things can be kept almost forever in this dry climate.”

“That’s smart.” Chris looked around. “The school has glass windows.”

“They got them two years ago, when they expanded from one classroom to three. The gravel road arrived from Médhela five years ago and a dirt track to Gordha was roughed out three years ago. Power and telephones arrived four years ago, but other than a phone in Patékwu’s and lights here in the school, they aren’t used.”

“Buses?”

“Five days a week, a bus leaves here every morning for Médhela and Məlwika and returns every late afternoon. It also takes kids to their various schools strung out

along the river and drives them home. On Primdius it runs to Gordha instead, so people can go to the market.”

“That’s plenty, though, and I bet the bus barely covers its costs. Very nice.”

“But you didn’t drive two hours just to see the countryside.”

“No, though I was looking forward to that. Yesterday, Liz and I met with Princess Awster and a bunch of her advisers. The subject was what to do next. She wants a new Seven Year Plan and she wants you to help with it.”

“Oh? I’m really no expert. Aryéstu did as much work on it as I.”

“Nevertheless, she wants you involved. The committee has three members: you, Aryéstu, and Weranolubu, who is to be the new Prime Minister. The committee needs to meet right away and produce its report in three weeks.”

“Three weeks! That’s almost impossible!”

“And dad, we’re committed to staying here for five weeks!” added Lébé.

“I know. Is there any way you and the kids can stay here and Thor can go back and forth? He’d probably need to spend three days a week in Melwika and three here.”

“That’ll make it impossible to have a relaxing and peaceful stay,” groaned Thornton. “After months of rat race, I was looking forward to a change of pace; a few classes, time with the kids doing service to others, and a new environment.”

“Well, your sovereign is calling. The current plan is discredited by greed and needs updating. Awster has an excellent set of goals in mind: she wants us to enforce universal compulsory education through eighth grade, move toward universal health care, and set a retirement pension at age 70. She’s also willing to support a bunch of new laws that will improve the business environment and will establish some environmental

protection. Məməjékwu was never willing to pay more than lip service to such things. But the details will take a long time to flesh out.”

“More than three weeks!”

“I know, but in three weeks—which is the guess when the consultative assembly will convene—we need a publishable summary. A lot of the old plan can be repackaged. Aryéstu and Wəranolubu are already going over the whole thing. They want to meet with you tomorrow morning.”

“Tomorrow!” Thornton shook his head sadly.

“I’m sorry, son.”

“I know. If I go back and forth, there won’t be a pickup truck for the team to use. They’re driving to five hamlets downstream every day for health checks and classes. All five want Ruhi, too!”

“Really? That’s good. I figured you’d come back to town with me and drive your steam car back here. By the way, what’s the fastest way to get here?”

“Via Gordha. Did you come up the Ornakwés? The marshlands and prairies are really beautiful, but the road twists and turns, has a lot of wildlife crossing it, and more people on it. The road to Gordha’s deserted, so you can travel the 35 kilometers in 35 minutes, then from there to Məlwika’s a bit over an hour on Route 1.”

“I took the scenic route and got bored the last hour. I can stay tonight; I’d like to see Patékwu again. It sounds like you’ve accomplished a lot, even if you’ve only been here two days.”

“It’s been amazing,” said Lébé. “The Spiritual Assembly’s been preparing for our visit for months; the entire village turned out and they all wanted to know about the Faith.

Everyone's talking about it. We gave out all the pamphlets and need a hundred more for the hamlets. Dhrébékwas, the school master and the Assembly secretary, has been offering Ruhi classes, but very few were interested; but with Thornton or me co-teaching, a hundred showed up!"

"My ecology and geology course is packed, too, as you saw," added Thornton. "I've got sixty adults in attendance every afternoon during siesta! A commute to Melwika will mess that up."

"If you're here on Primdius, offer two classes that day, and maybe add something late afternoons. Nothing you can do about it. I talked to Dwosunu this morning; I ran into him on campus. He seemed interested in coming here and helping out. He was here once and really liked it."

"He's willing to give classes? I never would have dared to ask him, he seems so oriented around earning money!"

"I know, but the idea of returning service to a community has touched him. I think he's seen you do it a few times and is impressed. He just needed to be asked. I think we need to ask more of our non-Bahá'í colleagues to do service. Maybe he could drive here in a génadema car once or twice a week to give some of your geology classes, and leave the ecology to you."

Thornton nodded. "That'd work."

"We're thinking of building some rooms for ourselves here," said Lébé. "We were thinking of a house, but we won't get here often enough to use it, and it might look like a conspicuous waste of resources to the villagers. So we may approach the local spiritual assembly about helping them build a Bahá'í Center. It'd have a big hall, a few smaller

rooms for classes and meetings, a kitchen, and bathrooms. It'd also have a large bedroom for us and storage where we could leave some stuff. When we're not here, guests could stay in the room; Sértroba needs a place to accommodate visiting hunters and if we're going to send Bahá'í teachers here, they need a place to stay."

"Is the Assembly strong enough to support a Center?"

Thornton nodded. "I think so. The community has sixteen adult Bahá'ís, and I suspect that'll double in the next month."

"Then it sounds like a good idea." Chris looked at Lébé. "I gather your research is going well, also."

"Oh, yes! So many folk tales! We spent all morning with an old lady who had dozens of them. We'll publish a book of Krésone tales."

"Some sound like oral traditions about ancient Gordha, to me," added Thornton. "I wish we had a way to verify them. Maybe the archaeology Marku's planning in Gordha this summer will help."

"What's happening with the bad guys?" asked Lébé. "There are rumors that hunters saw some of them south of here."

"Really? Roktækester's men have captured or arrested forty-six of them and killed two more. We killed eight outside Melwika's walls and wounded and captured twelve more. Seven or eight are still at large. The arrested ones are sitting in prison awaiting trial for high treason. We've had one more death in Melwika, too; a lady who was shot by a fleeing soldier who was trying to hide in her house. Melwika lost five and had seven wounded."

"Do we know what sort of plot they had hatched?" asked Thornton.

“Roktekester told me after the meeting yesterday that three or four have started to talk. The ten gunmen in the pickup truck were supposed to kill everyone in both cars, but they got cold feet and only shot up the back of the cars, then fled. The two armored steam wagons were supposed to dash to Meddoakwés to capture the palace and kill Princess Awster; that would make Aryornu the successor. But they got delayed because the seventy five men didn’t all have access to clocks and some were late arriving at the armory.”

“And the queen?” asked Lébé.

“She’s now conscious several hours a day, but she can’t speak very coherently. It’s beginning to look like she’ll survive, but she’ll be in the hospital at least a month and will have to convalesce in the palace several months more. She was very, very seriously wounded. Lua performed miracles to save her life.” Chris sipped more of his tea. “Where are Jalalu and Kalé?”

“They went with the youth team; even at their ages, they can help with literacy and children’s classes,” said Lébé. “They’ll be back at sunset and we’ll have supper then.”

“Maybe I should go visit Patékwu now,” suggested Chris. “I want to say hello and thank him, and I’ll ask him about the warehouse idea.”

“So, when are you moving into an office in the palace?” asked Thornton, looking around Weranolubu’s office in Kandékwés’ mansion.

“I don’t know. Princess Awster’s here occasionally; more than at the palace. It’ll be a few weeks before Brébkordu can go through everything in Méméjékwu’s office. I

can't move into that office anyway! It'll be a month or two before we figure out where I'll set up an office."

"Sorry you had to be dragged from Sértroba," Aryéstu said.

"Lébé and the kids are staying there, so I hope to come here once a week, stay three or four days, then go back."

"Where is Sértroba, anyway?" asked Weranolubu, who knew geography quite well.

"It's the Krésone center, 35 kilometers south and a bit east of Gordha." Thornton sat at the table across from Aryéstu. "I don't know how we can create an entire Seven Year Development Plan in three weeks. The last plan took three or four months and we had over twenty people working on it."

"Aryéstu and I have already discussed that," said Weranolubu. "He can round up three staff and five students at the Géselékwe Maj Génadema and I can dedicate three of my staff. We talked to Bidhu; the Ministry of Census and Statistics can devote a few. Wëranu has agreed to devote a few exchequer staff, especially to the pension section. Perku has agreed to update the military section. Widéstu will devote a lot of the staff of the Ministry of Education and Health to that section. Soru's coming back to help update the section on disabilities. We need your help on the environmental section and the science and technology section."

"You guys have made a lot of progress!"

Aryéstu shrugged. "You weren't available for an entire day, so we got started!"

"I'm glad. Still, we'll never produce an entire new plan in three weeks."

“We don’t need to; we’ll update and repackage the existing plan. Basically, the original Seven Year Development Plan is being modified and extended to become a Nine Year Development Plan. The details can be finished after the consultative assembly starts to meet. In three weeks we need a twenty page summary.”

“But even that’s hard to do, because as the details are updated, they’ll change the summary.”

“I know. Never mind,” said Aryéstu.

“I’ll be sure the plan is finished and is a solid, useful plan,” added Wëranolubu. “The plan will be my mandate as Prime Minister. The Seven Year Plan was the instrument the Crown Prince used to displace me from my office and it defined his role and goals. I want a plan to secure my initial position and define where I want to go.”

“Whether we’ll get there is another matter,” quipped Aryestu.

“I’ll do my best!” replied Wëranolubu, a bit irritated by the comment. “I want to define my legacy in history. The princess has set the tone: growth for the sake of the people. That’s what the plan will aim for.”

“If you really want to provide growth for the sake of the people, though, you need to ask the people what they want,” replied Thornton. “And there’s no time to do that meaningfully.”

Aryéstu nodded. “He has a point, Wëranolubu.”

“Three weeks can give us some time for public input,” replied Wëranolubu. “Her Majesty would approve, I think. The Consultative Assembly will be announced in three or four days. How could we seek public input quickly?”

Thornton looked at Aryéstu; they were both thinking the same thing. “The Bahá’ís,” replied Thornton. “We have nine youth teams in the field, visiting about twenty-five villages. If we put together a list of questions to discuss with a large group of villagers, I suspect all the teams could ask the questions in most of those twenty-five villages.”

“All the youth teams have people who know how to facilitate discussions,” agreed Aryéstu. “And development is one of their priorities.”

“And they’re supposed to encourage the villagers to meet and discuss what they need, and make their own plans to achieve something,” added Thornton. “That’s one of their tasks.”

“Definitely, then, we should prepare some questions for them to ask a gathering of villagers,” said Weranolubu. “No one ever gets input from villagers! But if we can shape the questionnaire in the next few days and they can be trained to use it quickly, we could get written reports in two weeks, and we could accommodate them. The main question I’d ask is if we can double our resources in the next seven years, what would the people like to see us do with the money.”

“I’m sure we can break that up into a series of subquestions; what goals should we set for education, health care, transportation, work, services, etc.”

“The princess will be very pleased,” said Weranolubu. “Because if the goals we are already setting are heavily favored by the people, we can say the people set the agenda.”

“I’m sure some of what they say will reinforce our plans,” exclaimed Aryéstu. “But we also need input from the townspeople, not just the villagers. I wonder whether

we can publish an article in all the newspapers and include the questions. We could ask people to write down their answers and take them to the post office.”

“It’d be good to have meetings of some sort,” suggested Thornton.

“Too difficult, unless the three of us can do two meetings each.” Wëranolubu smiled. “Say! What if Këkanu did a show about the questionnaire! We could take telephone calls! It’d be a world-wide discussion!”

“Këkanu would do it,” said Thornton. “If we did a few meetings in towns after the show and Këkanu announced it, we’d have the input from the towns that we need.”

“And the Bahá’í youth teams could do their meetings after Këkanu’s show, so everyone would know what we want,” added Aryéstu. “You know, that would work real well!”

“It would, and with a radio show to shape the discussion, it could be done next week,” added Wëranolubu.

Reread and edited 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

337.

National Conversation

Kaiménu 17-25/ July 11-24, Yr 14/632

Jalalu left the house of his Krésoné friends with some reluctance. Thornton had to practically drag him out. “I’m glad you have friends here,” he said, as they headed through Sértroba’s darkened lanes back to the schoolhouse. “But you’ve missed supper.”

“I had some bread . . . did mom save anything for me?”

“She tried, but we had unannounced guests. That’s to be expected, staying at the schoolhouse; there are visitors constantly at practically all hours. There may be something, but I’m not sure.”

“I can always eat some of the breakfast food.”

“Then there will be less for breakfast. So, are you enjoying being here in Sértroba?”

“Yes! I’ve gotten used to the kids’ accents, and they’re used to mine, so we’re having fun.”

“You’re teaching them soccer, too.”

“They already knew it, more or less. Can we leave them a soccer ball?”

“Sure. We’re thinking of coming here often; would you enjoy that?”

“Yeah, I would.”

Thornton pointed to the western horizon. “See how fast the twilight has gone away? Just ten minutes ago, it was easy to see your way around. I wish I had brought a torch.”

“When does the eclipse begin?”

“I think a few minutes, but maybe it already has; I’m not sure.” Thornton looked up at the sky. “At least we can see the stars.”

“Skanda washes them out all the time at home. But I think I prefer to have Skanda lighting up everything at night!”

“Me, too.” Sértroba was located two time zones east of the limit of visibility of Skanda. When the sky was slightly overcast, the far western sky had a bright glow of Skandalight reflected over the horizon, but the planet’s disk was permanently below the horizon.

“So, dad . . . can I go with you tomorrow?”

“To the Weronε village? It’s a long, bumpy ride; I have my doubts a steam car can get there from here, but I’m told the dirt track has been improved enough and trucks occasionally do it. There’s not a lot to see, their village is about the size of Sértroba or maybe a tiny bit larger. But it’s much poorer; they have no power, no telephone, no decent road, no glass windows, and the agriculture’s more limited because of the cooler climate. I suspect the clothes will be leather or homespun. They do have a one-room schoolhouse, though; that’s where we’ll hold the meeting.”

“I’d like to see it, dad, and you’re traveling so much, I don’t get to spend much time with you! So please, can I come?”

Thornton considered, then nodded. “Alright, but don’t tell your sister. I can’t watch both of you and do all the things I have to do there.”

“Alright! Thanks, dad!”

“That’s okay. Let’s hurry up, the sky is pitch black, now. I think we’re missing the *World Table*.” Thornton started to walk faster even though he couldn’t see the ground under his feet very well. He didn’t want to miss the show. It was the one Kekanu had dedicated to the public’s interests and desires for the future. Sértroba had never heard the *World Table* before yesterday; the radio signal, broadcast from Pértatranisé, barely reached Məlwika. But the youth team had created an antenna out of thirty meters of copper wire extended from the roof of the school to the top of a nearby tree and with that the station was easy to hear.

The large classroom was packed with seventy adults; a substantial portion of the total. Lord Patékwu, “protector of the horse,” was there, as was his son, Mégékwu, “Big Horse,” and Dhrébékwes, “Driver of Horses,” the school’s chief teacher, who was also secretary of the Bahá’í community. The Krésone, like most tutane, loved names that ended in *ékwu* or its common plural, *ékwes*, as did the royal family and the old houses. Like many tutane, the Krésone were little influenced by the revelation of Widumaj, which had not penetrated the tribal peoples; while larger tribes often worshiped Endro, the god of war, the patron deity of the Krésone was Saré, goddess of fertility, whom they usually portrayed riding naked on a bull. That particular day Kekanu had started his show by chanting a hymn that mentioned Saré, Mitru, and Wəranu, three of the old gods whom Widumaj identified with Esto, “the one who is,” and that had immediately warmed the Krésone audience to him. Thornton could feel the audience’s interest and openness when he entered. Lébé smiled positively when he sat next to her. It was going well.

Wəranolubu was the guest and he quickly explained the matter he wanted to talk about: the need to refocus the realm on a plan for development. Kekanu, who was very

much in favor of the effort, asked a series of rigorous but friendly questions: what should be the goal of the realm? Does it need a goal at all? What are the principles behind development? What is the role of freedom in development? What can the government really do? What should it do? Weranolubu was careful to be humble and open; he spoke slowly so that the members of the various dialects could all follow his words, was succinct, and was careful not to be dictatorial. Patékwu listened carefully and was impressed.

Then the telephone questions began to come in. Thornton knew how that worked; Kékanu's wife spoke to every caller, wrote down the questions of most of them, and only let a quarter or a fifth of the callers on the air. In between, edited written questions were aired as well. It made the call-in audience sound much more intelligent than it really was and kept the show from wandering too much.

The range of accents over the radio made it clear that the people were from all over; Kékanu's show tied up a lot of the kingdom's long distance capacity. Sometimes Kékanu had to repeat the question in other words to make sure it was understandable. People asked about why education really was important, why traditional medicine couldn't be favored more, why older people needed a pension if they were living with their children, why their village didn't have a better road or a factory, why some people had to get so rich, why the lords shouldn't be abolished, why women needed the chance to work, what could be done to help farmers more, why newspapers couldn't publish more truthful articles, and why voting was necessary. Weranolubu tackled each question carefully and quickly; the answers sometimes satisfied the people in the Sértroba classroom and sometimes didn't.

As the eclipse began to reach an end, Weranolubu explained how he wanted comments from people; from everyone, in fact. Every newspaper had printed a list of questions to guide ideas. People could answer one or all. The post offices had been instructed to accept the comments without postage and send them to the acting Prime Minister's office. Groups of people were encouraged to meet and discuss the questions together; in fact, some fifty such meetings had been planned for the next few days. A group of students at Géselékwas Maj Génadema were planning to do a survey; he explained what a survey was.

As the show ended, everyone turned to Patékwu, wondering what their chief was thinking. "Very interesting," he said to Thornton. "This idea of planning everything, progress forward; it is good, but if it is overdone it becomes a new form of tyranny. People—tribes and villages, on one hand, and families and individuals, on the other—must have freedom to advance in their own ways."

"I quite agree, Lord," replied Thornton. "I think Weranolubu made it clear that he favors exactly that balance of planning and freedom. True development must come from individual and group ideas and plans."

"I suppose we are talking about the same thing. The very idea of *planning*, though, seems to me to restrict freedom. That's my concern."

"Well . . . you are right, but living in a village restricts the freedom of the individual or family, lord, because we have to consider the needs and actions of others. Planning is the same way; it's a conscious effort to move one's self and others forward."

“You are right, but I am not used to it.” Patékwu stroked his beard and pondered. “Many of the objections raised by the listeners were good. The young owe support and love to the old, who loved and supported them as children. It is only right.”

“Of course, and at Sértroba I am sure all the old are taken care of properly. But everyone knows everyone else in Sértroba. That is not possible in the large towns, and some old people have no children or relatives.”

“Even here, there are older people who live a life of quiet and dignified hardship,” noted Dhrébékwes. A few others nodded.

“I’m still not sure why so much education is necessary,” commented Saréimigu, a prominent hunter in the village. “One doesn’t need to read or write to hunt or herd cattle or raise horses.”

“I’m not so sure,” replied Dhrébékwes. “Honored Thornton has told us many things about animals that we didn’t know; things that are in books. Why should you wait for others to tell you about them? Why not read them yourself?”

Saréimigu shook his head and looked at the ground. He didn’t want to argue.

“What does Sértroba need?” asked Thornton. “If Sértroba wanted to grow more prosperous, what would it need?”

There was silence as the people looked at each other and at Patékwu, on whom they relied to know about these things. “We haven’t tried growing more coffee,” he replied. “We are told we have the perfect climate, and the trees grow wild here. We were a major supplier when it was used as a folk medicine and not a morning drink. We could sell more horses and cattle; we know that. Dhoru, what do you think of your father’s idea that we should warehouse things here? We’re way out in the middle of nowhere!”

“That’s true. This is a place for long-term storage of things only. For example, paper will last here almost forever because the air is dry and it never gets cold. So this would be a good place for cities, provinces, and the palace to store their old records.”

“I can understand that. But I wouldn’t build a place for such records unless I knew someone would pay to send them here!”

“Of course, that makes sense,” said Thornton. “I think we can help you sign some contracts.”

“Can you help us raise coffee?” asked Lujmarku, a very active farmer in the village.

Thornton nodded. “I will seek the information or send the experts.”

“But what could the village use?” asked one of the Bahá’í college students visiting the village. “A source of clean water? A water tower and some pipes would provide that, and would reduce the work of the women.”

“But if we don’t carry water, where will we gather to talk?” asked Sarané, an older woman who was highly respected and outspoken.

“You’ll have plenty of other times and places to gossip,” replied Lujmarku. “But I don’t see a need for water pipes all over the village.”

“Either we trip over them, or we do a lot of work to bury them,” added Mégékwu.

“We could use a doctor,” said Patékwu, raising a finger. “That would be of great help. If someone is sick, they have to go to Melwika or Gordha on the bus. My daughter did that last year and almost died during the bumpy, two hour ride to Melwika. We get a clinic here only once a month.”

“We are planning a very big increase in doctors and nurses,” said Thornton. “But it’ll be ten or fifteen years before there is one doctor per thousand people, and there are a thousand Krésonɛ. If you want a doctor, choose someone and send them to medical school.”

“No one here has enough education for that,” said Mégékwu.

“Then try to get a mobile clinic here more often.”

“We need a pickup truck,” said Saréimigu. “It could take hunters up into the mountains and help them haul their prey back. It could make an extra run up and down the river once a day to move people around. It could move firewood, stone, and other materials we need.”

“Two thousand dhanay,” replied Patékwu. “But we could probably afford it. That’s worth considering.”

“Start by leasing a truck for a month and seeing what you can do with one,” suggested Thornton. “At some point you might want to lease a portable sawmill, too, to cut trees for everyone.”

“I suspect if we have a truck, we’ll find lots of uses and it will pay for itself quite quickly,” urged Saréimigu. “The pickup truck the Bahá’í youth brought has proved very helpful.”

“We can try providing it for some of these projects, so we can see how useful it will be,” said Thornton. “I now have a steam car here because I have to get back to Mɛddoakwés every few days, quickly. When I don’t need the steam car, the youth can use it, so the pickup can be useful to the village.”

“We appreciate that,” replied Patékwu. “The sewing machine classes and knitting classes are much appreciated by the women. I am sure they will make many new things and we will all earn a bit more money that way.”

“But what does Sértroba need?” repeated the Bahá’í youth. “If not a water tower, what about a public bath or public latrines?”

The villagers stared at him, thinking about the fancy idea, and “impractical” seemed written on their faces. Several smiled, amused.

“A soccer field,” replied Lujmarku. His eleven year old son was Jalalu’s closest friend. “That’s what we need. There’s a big common field next to the school. We could find another place for the animals.”

“It’d be pretty easy to build,” said Thornton. “The field’s big enough.”

“That’s a great idea,” exclaimed Patékwu. “Some of us have watched the soccer games in Məlwika. The Kwolone have gotten really good. Why shouldn’t we have a soccer field? Now, that’s something we can be proud of!”

“But . . . it won’t help the development of the village,” said the Bahá’í youth, meekly, as he didn’t want to impose on his hosts.

“Who says it isn’t ‘development’?” asked Patékwu. “The show we just listened to defined ‘development’ pretty widely. If people come here for a soccer game, they’ll buy as well. And we’ll all feel proud of our achievements.”

“That’s important,” agreed Thornton, with a smile.

“To summarize, this extension of the Seven Year Development Plan—the Seven Year Prosperity Plan—will learn from our two years of experience, years that have seen a

seventeen percent growth in our total wealth,” concluded Princess Awster. She looked over the assembled members of the Houses of Commons and Lords. “The next seven years will focus the growth in wealth on the needs of the needy majority of our people, Eryan, Sumi, and Tutane. We will aim to lay the foundation for universal education, universal health care, and universal pensions for the elderly. We will focus on creating an environment where individuals, families, and communities can progress through their own creativity and hard work. And we will move toward safeguarding our soil, rivers, seas, forests, grasslands, and wildlife so that our children and grandchildren will have the ample resources they need to prosper. We can accomplish these tasks together. Through our consultation with the people, we will create unity of vision and purpose and find the will to move forward together. Her Majesty the Queen and I are immensely grateful to all of you for your support and sacrifice and look forward to hearing from both the people and their representatives as our collective plans are improved and implemented.”

Awster headed back to the throne on the stage near her as the entire audience rose and applauded. Chris, wearing the red-fringed robe of a member of the House of Lords, rose from his seat, applauded, and surveyed the crowd. The enthusiasm seemed genuine. It was a stronger response than he had seen in previous sessions. Awster rose from the throne again and nodded in acknowledgement. Lord Kandékwes, who was sitting in the front row of Lords near Chris, smiled broadly. It was a very good speech.

Once the applause died out, the speaker of the House of Commons rose and banged his staff against the floor. “This joint session of the House of Commons and the House of Lords is now at an end! The Houses will reconvene tonight to elect their

officers and begin to consider legislation!” He banged the staff again and everyone rose from their chairs.

Sitting half way back in the hall, Mitrubbéru Kanéstoi saw Ekwésu Dédiker walk rapidly toward him before the aisle filled with departing members. “Mitrubbéru! Will you eat supper with us!”

“I’m sorry, Ekwésu, but I already have dinner plans.”

“Can you change them? Lasu Turbulu and I are getting together with the entire group of members who had been disqualified from the consultative assembly last year by the Crown Prince.”

“Why? The Princess very graciously reinstated us. I don’t think we should be making trouble over a past injustice that’s been righted.”

“She kept all the replacement members, though!”

“Not all of them; two were removed because they were members of families associated with the plot. The ones that weren’t still are here. What’s wrong with that? They’re chastened by the fact they were allowed to attend. There will be an election in eight months and we’ll see who is elected then.”

“Oh, come on, Mitrubbéru!” said Lasu, hurrying over. “You’re prominent; you have a reputation. We need your help.”

“Except he’s a Bahá’í, remember. He won’t rock the political boat,” noted Ekwésu, a bit condescendingly.

“I won’t get involved in plots and partisanship. I liked the speech, but I want to see the legislation. We haven’t actually seen any bills, yet. Today is the day to applaud, be

supportive of the process, and respect our princess. Then we elect officers, roll up our sleeves, read bills, and debate them. Right?”

“Right,” said Ekwésu. “Look, can’t you at least meet with us?”

“I’m sorry, but as I said, I have a dinner appointment. I might be able to make lunch some time. Normally I’m on the air after the *World Table* ends, but tonight I have a substitute. What sort of agenda did you have in mind?”

“Just the usual; break bread together, get to know each other as fellow legislators who shared a common experience,” replied Lasu, with a shrug. Ekwésu scowled; Mitrubbéru didn’t believe either of them.

“Well, as I said, maybe another time. I’d better go. Hail, friends and honored.” Mitrubbéru turned and headed for the door.

He had had no dinner plans, but now he realized he had better make some. He looked around the room and spotted Brébéstú, one of the Bahá’ís who had been excluded by Méméjékwu; perhaps Lasu and Ekwésu hadn’t approached him because he was now a Lord and a former governor, and therefore not sympathetic to their interests. Brébéstú was talking to Chris and Werétrakester. He headed for them.

“Mitrubbéru, hail!” said Chris. “We were just discussing the opening session. What is your impression?”

“It clearly went well. I sense that the conservative forces that have held these bodies back are in retreat.”

“No question,” agreed Werétrakester. “I hesitate to call them ‘conservative,’ but I know what you mean. That suggests that perhaps they are clinging to the hymns of Widumaj and resisting new knowledge. I’d prefer to see them clinging to a selfish form

of the old religion that was never willing to consult with or care for the people. Now, the teachings of Widumaj will be respected more fully.”

“I quite agree,” said Mitrubbéru. “Perhaps we should call them the forces of greed and selfishness, then.”

“The problem, though, is finding a balance,” said Brébéstu. “Because care for the people does not mean that everyone earns exactly the same amount, either.”

“That is certainly true; economic equality is impossible and undesirable,” agreed Werétrakester.

“My concern lies with a different tendency,” exclaimed Mitrubbéru. “Ekwésu and Lasu are calling a dinner meeting of the eight or ten individuals whose membership in this body was nullified by the Crown Prince.”

“They are hotheads,” agreed Werétrakester. “I’ll plan to talk to them. I don’t know whether they’ll listen to me, though.”

“Perhaps not,” agreed Chris. “That’s what will slow down this legislation; demands to make it even more radical.”

“I doubt they’ll get much support for that,” said Brébéstu.

“Her Majesty, the Princess, plans to go on the *World Table* in three days,” said Werétrakester. “She will actually be interviewed; she has decided she has to be accessible. I’m sure she’ll speak about any attempts to modify legislation.”

“She’s not going to send Wëranolubu?” asked Chris, surprised.

“No. He’s been on the radio twice in three weeks. His appeal for the public’s advice was incredibly successful; there were several thousand responses. The effort made him very popular. She needs popularity as well.”

“Interesting,” said Brébéstu. “Sounds like the palace is adopting a new strategy.”

“Definitely,” replied Chris. “They’ve returned the fines Meméjékwu levied. The new way to deal with Lasu, Ekwésu, Ejnu, and other trouble makers is to make sure the palace has a louder and more respectable voice. The media will be free—or at least freer—to cover the news.”

“And they can legitimately be the louder voice,” agreed Werétrakester. “I advised this two years ago and the prince politely rejected it.”

“So, what do you make of your dream now?” asked Chris.

Werétrakester smiled. “Wasn’t that remarkable? I feel humbled that I didn’t just see one path for the future, but three possible paths. I was hoping that this path would not be taken. But Esto’s will was different, and He knows best. Perhaps we are now seeing the fruits of this new path.”

Reread and edited 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

338.

Conversion

Dhonménu 7-20/ July 27-Aug. 8, Yr 14/632

Thornton hurried from Sértroba's three-room schoolhouse and along the narrow isthmus of dirt that crossed the marsh to Sértroba's rocky island. He looked back across the swamp, some of which was now rice paddy, at the large commons the school had been built on the edge of. Much of the rest was now laid out as a soccer field; at that moment Jalálu and his friends were playing a friendly game in the fading summer heat of early evening. Two members of the youth team and three of the local Bahá'ís were placing stakes to mark the location of the Sértroba Bahá'í Center that would be built in a few weeks near the school.

Sértroba was a tightly packed mass of stone and mud houses, connected to the southern and northern shores of the marsh via causeways. New houses were being built along the causeways as the growing population overflowed the island's confinement; he walked past a team of a dozen men filling the marsh for the new house of a newlywed couple. The load of dirt had been hauled over to the lot earlier that day by the pickup truck.

Lord Patékwu's compound was at the rocky center of the island; Thornton followed winding lanes, once covered by gravel, to the door and knocked. He was admitted and headed into the central courtyard, onto which ten screened doorways faced—all the rooms in the compound—then turned to the doorway that led to Patékwu's

audience chamber, meeting room, and office. He knocked and Patékwu, who was waiting for him, beckoned him in.

“Come, Honored Dhorntonu.”

“Thank you, Lord. I’m sorry I’m late. The class asked many questions today.”

“I suppose that’s good. Not just on ecology, I suspect.”

“Correct. The questions today were on every imaginable subject.”

“My wife has the tea ready.” Patékwu pointed to a pot; he poured cups for both of them, then beckoned to two pillows on the floor, so they sat. “What news?”

“I spoke to the agriculture school at Melwika today. They’ll send out an agricultural agent next Tridiu. That’s only two days before we’re scheduled to leave, unfortunately, but the agent needs some time to collect information about coffee planting. He plans to travel to northern Véspa tomorrow to study their plantations and talk to people.”

“So, you’ve managed to secure quite a lot of advice for us, then. We’re grateful.”

“We’ll see whether it proves helpful. As you know, advice is not always practical.”

“Quite right. I see the pickup truck was able to help haul dirt and stones to the new house site. It’s been three and a half weeks since you made it available, and I think not a day has passed when someone in the village hasn’t benefitted. I’m pretty sure Mégékwu can devote himself to owning and driving one. He and I have reviewed our cash and we think we can buy one by the end of the summer, even without a bank loan.”

“They’re asking for cash because of the banking situation.”

“So I understand. But I don’t want a bank loan anyway; I don’t trust them yet. We’ll do the truck on a commercial basis; people will have to pay Mégékwu for his services. But we’ll keep the price as low as possible. I think the village will agree to cover some of the costs, so as to encourage everyone to use it.”

“That’s a good way to get it started. In a few years several people may have trucks available. If Sértroba forms a grange or a tomi, that organization can get a truck as well.”

“Perhaps.” Patékwu sipped some black tea. “Any news on the radio?”

“Her Majesty the Queen has left the hospital and returned to the palace. She issued a statement that until she felt well enough to resume her duties, Princess Awster would continue to reign as regent.”

“Another woman in charge; how . . . surprising. But I guess she has done fairly well, over the last month. Anything else?”

“The consultative assembly has ended. The *World Table* today will review the accomplishments.”

“Two weeks; a very quick session. But no one was in the mood to oppose the palace after what everyone has been through.”

“And after the palace reversed direction so completely. All the bills were passed. Wëranolubu was approved as Prime Minister. The budget the assembly approved included everything this time, even the budget for the army and its road building division. In the past they only had a say over certain parts of the budget, and we didn’t even know how large the rest of the budget was.”

Patékwu picked up a newspaper. “I’m looking forward to a detailed breakdown of the budget in the next issue! I suspect we’ll be surprised how much the palace gets to

spend. I wish we had representation in the Consultative Assembly! It makes us realize how small and weak we are.”

“They should make a better arrangement for the Tutane,” agreed Thornton. “For example, you and the Kaitere together would warrant one representative, so perhaps the tribes could alternate in sending a voting representative.”

“Every tribe should have at least one voting representative. Even a non-voting observer would help.”

“Suggest it to my father. They added him to the House of Lords after the Crown Prince removed him.”

“Perhaps I will. Or you should mention it to him.” Patékwu drank some tea and considered his next question. “Honored Thornton, what is the Bahá’í view of Saré? Does she exist? What about Mitro, Werano, Endro; for that matter, what about the dragon Werétra?”

“Well, Lord, Bahá’u’lláh was never asked about them, so the Bahá’í scriptures say nothing about them at all.”

“Of course, that makes sense. But what is *your* view?”

“Bahá’u’lláh talks about all sorts of spiritual beings who were never in the physical world, like Gabriel, the angel of revelation, and Israfil, the angel of death. He also talks about the Maiden of Heaven, who represents divine revelation. I don’t know whether they are real creatures or symbols. I think that is true of Werano, Saré, and Mitro as well; they are divine beings that represent divine qualities, the qualities of wisdom, love, and loyalty respectively. Widumaj says that the one true God is Esto, the one who

is, and that these other beings represent qualities and aspects of Esto. I have no problem with that idea. I feel that if I were to pray to them, Esto would listen to my prayers.”

“And what about Endro, condemned by Widumaj?”

“‘Endro, god of war’ was condemned by Widumaj. But many Tutane say that this is not a true representation of Endro. I have no problem with the idea of praying to Endro as the representation of strength, courage, and protection of beings weaker than oneself. These are good qualities of the old god that we need to continue to emulate, don’t you think?”

“Indeed. And Werétra?”

“The dragon is a character in a very, very old story about the fight between good and evil. The story is so old, in fact, that it is still found on Gædhéma in a few places. I don’t believe in dragons, but I believe in evil and the fight against it, so the story can teach me, can it not?”

Patékwu nodded. He was asking questions that Eryan often asked at firesides, and the answers were fairly regular as well. “I love Saré very much and really cannot give her up.”

“Of course, she is the ‘mother of the world.’”

Patékwu looked at him intently. “Will you pray to her with me?”

“I would be honored, Lord.”

Patékwu nodded. He sat up straight and crossed his legs in a meditation-like position, then began to chant a beautiful hymn to Saré, mother of the world, succorer of

all, merciful embracer of young and old, healer of the sick, compassionate to the wanting, source of hope for the destitute. It was a touching chant.

“I’ve never heard that before,” Thornton said.

Patékwu smiled. “Widumaj is not the only composer of hymns. What will you offer her?”

Thornton nodded, closed his eyes, and chanted a Bahá’í prayer that the Eryan believers often associated with Saré:

*Thy name is my healing, O my God, and remembrance of Thee is my remedy.
Nearness to Thee is my hope, and love for Thee is my companion. Thy mercy to me is my
healing and my succor in both this world and the world to come. Thou art, verily, the
All-Bountiful, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.*

Patékwu was impressed. “That is a worthy hymn to Saré; who wrote it?”

“Bahá’u’lláh. It sounds like he was referring to Saré, doesn’t it?”

“And it is to ‘Deo’ not ‘Esto!’”

“The original is to ‘Allah’ which could be translated either way, but it sounded so much like Saré, we had to translate it ‘Déo.’ Perhaps Bahá’u’lláh had Saré in mind; who knows? He knew anything He needed to know.”

“And He is from a land called ‘Iran.’”

“Indeed, and ‘Iran’ comes from the same old word as ‘Eryan.’ About four thousand years ago, there was a great prophet in that place called ‘Zaradhustra’ and He gave many teachings that sound like Widumaj’s. Bahá’u’lláh said Zaradhustra was a great prophet—what we call a Manifestation of God.”

“I’m sure. Gēdhéma has many Manifestations. It is interesting that so many Eryan are willing to say Jēsu, Muhammadu, Buddhu, Moséu, and such were great prophets, like Widumaj, but are hesitant to say the same about Bahu. No commitment is necessary to say Jēsu was a great prophet, but with Bahu there are commitments.” Patékwu shook his head. “But the commitments Bahu calls on us to make, by and large, seem good, even if they are not always what one would expect. Treating all people equally: I could understand treating all *men* equally, but women as well? That’s hard to understand and it is guaranteed to cause trouble. But educating everyone, encouraging everyone to have a vocation so they can support themselves and their families, and resolving all disputes through consultation and mutual respect . . . these are essential. I’ve seen too many fights in my life.”

“So, Lord, do you accept Bahá’u’lláh?”

Patékwu hesitated, then nodded. “I do. I accept him as a great prophet and teacher for this new world we are moving toward. I think the future of the Krésone lies with Him. We have never fully accepted Widumaj; the priests who demanded sacrifices were not our priests. They said we could not sacrifice our old way at our high places or recite our old hymns. But as Bahá’ís we could do those things, could we not?”

“As long as you wish to.”

“If all the Krésone became Bahá’ís, how could the Faith help us advance?”

“Materially, not much will change. We will send youth teams and help you establish projects privately, the same way we have already helped. We try not to send teams just to Bahá’í places because we want to help everyone regardless of their religion and we don’t want people to become Bahá’ís for material reasons. But if you are all

Bahá'ís, the Krésone would be on a path together, as you said, and that path will help resolve disputes, create unity, and focus energy. It would not make things perfect. Bahá'í communities are a bit better educated and a bit more prosperous than others, I think, but only a bit.”

“People are imperfect, so the perfect teachings are accepted imperfectly. So, what is the next step, honored?”

“I think that is up to the Krésone. In Melwika, individuals become Bahá'ís one by one. If a husband or a wife decides he or she believes in Bahá'u'lláh, that does not mean the other one is a Bahá'í. But in villages, often the entire family decides to declare at once, and we accept that as a family declaration. In Khermdhuna, the entire community—a long, extended series of hamlets holding three thousand people—met and discussed the Bahá'í Faith, and half became Bahá'ís. That figure is now higher. A small village south of Ora did the same thing; most, but not all, became Bahá'ís at once. But the Krésone are a tribe. I don't know whether they feel the entire tribe converts when the chief converts or not.”

“I see.” Patékwu considered the question. “For most important matters, I would say yes, but you are right, this may be different, especially because the Krésone live in scattered hamlets along seventy kilometers of river. Your youth teams have not visited everyone. I will assemble the elders and ask them to accept Bahá'u'lláh. Can your youth team stay longer to help answer questions?”

The youth team was scheduled to leave in just a few days for the Kaitere lands, but Thornton nodded. “We can stay. This is important.”

Jordan was very busily giving his class on accounting when he saw his grandfather look in through the door. He was startled; never in a million years would he have expected to see Chris Mennea in a school in Sipadananga. “This is a good time to turn to our exercise,” he said to the class. “Turn to page six of the handout, where you have a very simple spreadsheet. Page five has a list of business income and expenses. Let’s see how you do filling out the page. Everyone has a copy of the handout, and a pencil? Here, can you pass these out?” He handed a few extras to a bright student in the front row and walked to the door.

“Grandpa, what are you doing here?”

Chris smiled. “Good to see you, Jordan.” He gave his grandson a hug. “I’m sort of stranded. I had a one-day trip from Melwika to Bilara to talk to Randu. But that ran late and the bus was delayed getting here.”

“And you missed the last ferry back to Arjdhura. It left 45 minutes ago.”

“Exactly. The bus returns to Anartu in five minutes and is filling up with passengers, but I saw the pickup truck parked at the school and thought I’d run over fast to see who was here.”

“If you want to spend the night with the youth team in Galulia, you’d be more than welcome! I suppose you don’t have spare clothes or blankets, but we have blankets; we could accommodate you.”

“Me and Luktréstu; he’s watching the bus and keeping it from leaving without me. That’d be great.”

“You can probably do some business at Galulia. The industrial park has come along quite a lot! They were surveying it last summer. Now there are two factories

operating, employing one hundred twenty workers, making shoes and small carved wooden objects. Two more factories are under construction. Galulia's changing fast as a result."

"I bet. I wouldn't mind meeting some of the businessmen there, and maybe I could find some investment opportunities. But I might prefer to spend time here in Sipadananga. They need a hotel; there's nothing to accommodate visitors or stranded passengers. They're also doing a lot of lumbering. I saw extensive areas of drowned forest as the ferry approached and might want to explore some large contracts. They supply the gas plant in Nuarjora, right?"

"Yes, I think they provide half the wood the gas plant needs."

"Behruz and I have been talking about buying several years' supply of wood because the quality of the drowned trees is beginning to decline severely. In five years it'll be inadequate for gas or firewood."

"It'll be a bit cheaper in bulk, too. As you can see, this village has quite a few people interested in business." Jordan pointed to the dozen men and women in his class. "Some are pretty eager, too. The village has been talking about expanding the 'company' it already has informally to do things other than lumbering."

"Excellent. Frankly, I'd rather invest in village businesses and factories than in big tomis. I'm beginning to get back my investment in the Jérdomais Tomi; modular buildings continue to sell well, in spite of the uncertain economy. I'd like to put up to half of our investment money in granges, women's gabrulis, and other small scale operations. The big operations are self-sustaining; the wealthy people are investing in them. No one's

investing in the people directly. We may make less profit, but we'll help more people directly."

"And it'll support rural Bahá'í communities better."

"Exactly. I really need your help, Jordan. I'm not saying you should stop the summer work with the youth team, but a day or two here and there, if I can get back to Sumilara, would be a tremendous help. You already know the local people and they know you. You have a sense of who is trustworthy. That's essential to invest. We need to help local people set up granges, women's gabruli, and businesses that we can invest in. I need your help on an expanded timber contract."

"I've been talking to dad about how this island needs gas, too," said Jordan. "It's the largest province without it, and it has a lot of towns and large villages."

"It has a concentrated population." Chris began to think about that idea. "There are some towns on the mainland that need gas and are too far for a pipeline, such as Gordha, Medhpéla, Sullenda, and Sumiuparakwa. We need to build a standardized gas plant. I'll have to think which tomi can do that."

"You are back to large industry, again."

"Well, everything can't be small scale. When this class is over, can you introduce me to the people here in charge of the timber operation?"

Jordan nodded. "Sure; no problem. Can you give a talk to my class in a few minutes? I'd love to introduce you and have you say a few words about businesses and investments."

"Yes, I can do that."

"And tonight in Galulia, too, we can arrange something."

“Which means tomorrow morning the local businessmen will want to meet me. It sounds like I had better clear tomorrow’s schedule. Let me find Luktréstu and tell him of our plans, then we’ll be back here to meet your class.”

Jordan nodded. Chris headed out the door and hurried back to the docks, where the bus was ready to go. Chris and Luktréstu walked back to the school, where both spoke to the business class. Then the several classes the team was conducting ended, the pickup truck took most of the youth back to Galulia, and Jordan took his two guests to talk to Sipadananga’s Lord Adapa. Two hours later, as the sun set, they left with a tentative agreement for four times as much wood from the drowned forests for three times as much money. They debated about the business wisdom of such an arrangement on the way back to Galulia. “Right now we’ve got the money to buy the wood, and we have room to store it,” Chris concluded. “The gas company will make more profit later.”

“You mean, it’ll *finally* make *some* profit,” quipped Jordan.

Chris smiled; Luktréstu laughed. “Alright; we’ll have money to extend the pipelines later, then,” Chris concluded.

His cell phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket and looked at the screen; it was Thornton’s number. “Hey, Thor,” Chris said. “It must be after midnight in Sértroba; I’m surprised you’re calling! Excuse all the noise, I’m sitting in the back of a pickup truck.”

“Pickup truck? I thought you were at the closing ceremony of the consultative assembly!”

“No, I skipped the whole thing and drove to Arjdhura. I’m sitting with Jordan and Luktréstu and a youth is driving us from Sipadananga to Galulia.”

Thornton laughed. “I had no idea. Put the phone on speaker so Jordan can hear this.” Thornton paused. “I just spent seven hours talking to Lord Patékwu about the Faith. He has declared. Not only that: as far as he is concerned, the entire Krésone tribe is now Bahá’í.”

“What?” said Jordan, surprised. He had visited Sértroba a half dozen times; he had helped get its school books and study guides.

“Wow!” said Chris. “Did you tell him what we did in Khermdhuna?”

“I did. He doesn’t want a big meeting of everyone, or a gathering of elders, which was his first idea. He wants the youth team to stay an extra month and visit every single hamlet, and he wants to accompany them to explain the Faith personally.”

“That’s a thousand people!” said Jordan.

“That’s what worries me. If all these people become Bahá’ís at once, we just can’t consolidate them and we’ll end up with the same problems we have in Khermdhuna and a dozen other places, with people saying they’re Bahá’ís but breaking moral laws, spreading misinformation, disrupting meetings, and *not changing their lives*.”

“Thor, don’t worry about those things so much,” replied Chris. “The traditional lifestyle and the traditional morality are eroding, and the rate of erosion is accelerating. People—men especially—have money and can get on buses, so they can go somewhere to drink, carrowse, and violate all sorts of traditional taboos, then go home. We can’t wait until Bahá’ís become perfect to teach others and begin to correct this behavior. Change is accelerating, people feel it, and they are becoming disoriented. They need the Faith. That’s why enrollments this year are climbing even faster than last year. We have to bring

them in and help them fall in love with Bahá'u'lláh. That will help them transform themselves.”

“But . . . I know you’re right, dad, but the task is just too large! And it violates all the plans for systematic growth!”

“It does, but we can’t refuse to enroll people who want in because we’re not ready for them. Your youth team didn’t go to Sértroba just to bring people into the Faith; you went with all sorts of classes in useful skills open to everyone, including some Ruhi classes and basic classes on the Faith. People responded by becoming interested in the Faith and wanting to know about Bahá'u'lláh! So be grateful, get a good night’s sleep, and get to work in the morning!”

“I suppose you’re right, dad.”

“If you’ve got the energy, call Modolubu and make a thorough and detailed report. He’ll write it all down, get it typed up with a ditto stencil, and all nine members of the Central Spiritual Assembly plus your mother will have a copy in a day’s time. She needs to come out and give talks about Bahá'u'lláh. All nine of us have to come through to meet the Krésoné, give talks, and answer questions. That’s what we did with Khermdhuna, and it helped a lot.”

“It did. Okay, I’ll call Modolubu right now, before I drop from exhaustion and before he leaves his office for the day, and give him a thorough report. I’ll call mom, too.”

“Good, and call me again if you want.”

Chris and Thornton completed their conversation and Chris closed the phone.

“Another thousand Bahá’ís.”

“We could manage close to that on Sumilara this summer. People are very, very interested. Like you said, they find themselves in a total different situation and the old culture doesn’t work any more. The entire island is less than an hour from Anartu. People can spend a dontay and be there to shop, gossip, drink, or whatever. They can send a letter to someone or read a newspaper or send a telephone message for two kentay. They can learn to read if they want; they can listen to a discussion about evolution or Marxism on the radio. All of a sudden, the old polytheism seems outdated and superstitious. That means traditional morality is being undermined.”

“All these religious systems, left to themselves, will mostly adapt in a few decades. But let the people become Bahá’ís and let a Bahá’í culture arise that adapts instead. The Bahá’í principles will help immensely.”

“But it still won’t be smooth.”

“Of course not! And don’t think it won’t be violent, too.”

“We’re developing a new opposition here. There’s a priest in Anartu claiming to receive revelations from Enlilu. He says Enlilu is angry the people are turning away from him and the other gods and is threatening another volcanic eruption if it continues.”

“But is that specifically against the Faith?”

“The revelations condemn Bahá’u’lláh as a false prophet.”

“Oh.”

“We’ve already had thirteen declarations in Sipadananga, eight in Galulia, six in Kugananga, and nine in Gadauru, and momentum’s building.”

“Randu’s team has had about the same number in Bilara, Anartu, Anarbala, and Agalaru. All our teams are averaging thirty declarations a month. I’m visiting them all in the next month. Have you met young Bahá’ís we can invite to the génadema?”

“I can introduce you to some.”

“Set a goal for your team of finding six or eight young Bahá’ís we can invite. If we can send a hundred young Bahá’ís to génadema every year, we’ll train the future leadership the Faith needs.”

“The problem here is they don’t speak Eryan.”

“They can go to Arjdhura Génadema. Randu and I are coordinating that.”

“Good. What will all this growth do, in terms of political opposition?”

Chris shook his head. “No problem, right now. We’re freer now than we have been in several years. The enemies of the Queen wanted to destroy the Faith; they got destroyed instead and that weakened and discredited all the enemies of the Faith. In Kerda we can now teach freely, and people are responding eagerly. The Princess has set a whole new tone anyway; there will be no more press censorship and no efforts to influence elections. The big danger now is economic instability. People worry the Princess will be weak and vacillating. Banks still have to restrict withdrawals and limit their hours. Growth this year will be sluggish. House prices in Melwika have dropped slightly and interest rates remain high. That may cause instability.”

“I think the princess is doing a pretty good job. I don’t listen to the radio much, but I gather she’s on it a lot!”

“She’s good on the radio and she knows it, and Kekanu wants to help her all he can. She’s decided that popularity is the best guarantee of her legitimacy. Weranolubu’s

pretty popular, too, and he's been a vigorous Prime Minister. I think the political crisis will fade in another month or two."

Mitrubbéru pushed through the thick crowds around the Isurdhuna performance field to get to the stage. He was late. He had just spoken to the Isurdhuna Bahá'ís at Estobaisu's house and the event had gone long. Now he had to hurry, because he was one of three chanters who were scheduled to chant the sacred hymns of Widumaj that afternoon.

Fortunately, there was time; barely, but it was adequate. When he got backstage, one of the other performers was in the middle of *Mendhri Luktrui*, the Hymn of the Lamp, one of the most poignant and moving of the hymns. Mitrubbéru began to warm up his voice, for his piece, *Mendhri Isurdhunai Wékho*, the Hymn in Praise of Isurdhuna, was a long and complex one, with several major changes in chords. He had a very good voice, but not an extraordinary one, like Kekanu; he had to work hard and pay attention to excel.

Gawwidumaju—"invoke Widumaj"—completed his hymn. He was the son of one of Kerda's most renowned priestly families and had done very well; fifteen thousand people rose to their feet and applauded in appreciation. When he exited the stage, he was clearly very pleased. He glanced at Mitrubbéru rather skeptically; he didn't like nonbelievers. Mitrubbéru chose to ignore the glance. He straightened his robe—a special one in white edged in gold, worn by sacred singers at the performance of the entire Widumaj cycle of hymns—then walked onto the stage.

It wasn't a long piece if one read it aloud—a bit more than one printed page, thirty-two verses, 306 words—but with repetition of syllables, words and entire sentences

it took twenty minutes. The tune was one of seventeen classical tunes and was used for only two other hymns; it was particularly difficult. He had sung it a hundred times and had practiced the three hymns he was scheduled to deliver that day for months. When he finished the audience erupted with appreciation. He smiled and bowed slightly—one had to be careful to take applause because the focus had to stay on the sacred word, not the deliverer—then headed off stage. There was now a five minute break before the next singer. Three of them would alternate on stage for three and a half hours.

Several dozen people came forward to greet him as he stepped off the stage. Gawwidumaju saw the fans and was not pleased; there were a lot of them because Mitrubbéru was also the host of a well known radio show. He shook hands and humbly accepted thanks. One man—older, toothless, mostly bald—was holding back a bit to be last and he wondered why. The man looked slightly familiar, but he couldn't place the face. Finally he was the last one and he stepped forward, both hands extended.

“Honored Mitrubbéru Kanestoi, it is such a privilege to see you again. I am a new Bahá'í down in Dachawdomas. I saw you there yesterday when you spoke to us about Bahá'u'lláh and was so impressed and moved. I just want to thank you so much for coming and mixing with the people and telling us your experiences.”

“Oh, thank you so much. You are very kind.” They shook hands and the old man savored the moment. “What's your name, honored?”

“Mitru, honored, like so many other people! Mitru Véspagrais, so called because my family owns the westernmost fields of our village. My father was Mitrubbéru, though.”

“I’m so glad you enjoyed the presentation, Mitru. I was very moved to speak on the subject and the audience’s response moved me even more. And meanwhile, during the speech, the army was blasting that new road down the cliffs, so I was talking while there were loud booms in the background!”

“That was funny, honored, but we were fascinated. And you’re coming back, right?”

“Indeed. I have to sing tomorrow as well, but after the Festival ends I’ll be back at Dachawsdomas and other southern villages for two or three days, then I’ll speak here and on the western side of the valley for another week. The Bahá’ís are so eager to learn and it is a real privilege to meet them and share.”

“We are privileged, honored. I look forward to seeing you again.” Mitru Véspagrais turned and headed back to the audience.

Mitrubbéru turned back toward the stage and saw Gawwidumaju staring at him. He couldn’t judge the man’s concern; possibly that he was associating with ordinary people, which priests and old houses were loath to do. But Gawwidumaju loved to shake hands with fans as well.

“You shouldn’t be allowed to participate in this Festival, Bahá’í,” he finally said.

“I beg your pardon? This is *sacred* music; *sacred* for me as well as you.”

Gawwidumaju shook his head. “*Sacred*? Then you must follow it and not Bahu.”

“I’m not going to argue with you, Gawwidumaju.”

“But I will.” They both turned; Kekanu was nearby and had overheard the exchange. “How dare you say that, Gawwidumaju? May Esto strike dead all narrow minded and bigoted priests.”

Gawwidumaju waved his finger at Kekanu. “Esto will remember everything you do and say, Kekanu, and Esto knows you warmly associate with Bahá’ís. Esto’s people won’t forget that, either.” Then the priest’s son turned and stomped away.

“Don’t pay him any attention, he’s ignorant,” said Kekanu.

“Don’t worry about me, I have a thick skin. I just hope he comes back, he’s on stage in half an hour.”

“If he isn’t back, I’ll sing his hymns, and he’ll never take the stage again during this festival.”

Reread and edited, 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

339.

Tragedy

Abelménu 14-15/Sept. 4-5, Yr 14/632

Khwanu Khermdhunai parked the pickup truck near the Isurdhuna Palace Hotel and stepped out. He looked both ways to see if anyone was watching him; a week earlier, someone had pelted the truck with stones, though fortunately no one in the open back had been hurt. Bahá'ís had to be careful in Kerda, in spite of several months of relative freedom.

He walked to the hotel's grand entrance and entered the lobby. Mitrubbéru Kanéstoi was sitting in a chair reading *Yoros Nus*, or *The New Times*. He looked. "Ah, Khwanu. Alláh-u-Abhá."

"Alláh-u-Abhá, Mitrubbéru." They hugged rather than shook hands.

"I'm glad you made it safely. How was the bus ride?" asked Khwanu.

"Fine, though the bus from Pértatraniséer reached Néfa late and I almost missed the Isurdhuna bus. I'll be here through Primdiu evening, then back to Pértatraniséer for my radio show. Tomorrow morning I'm conducting it over the telephone from here again."

"Wow, that's risky."

Mitrubbéru shook his head. "The phone lines were reliable last week and the sound of my voice was fine. The music will be played in Pértatraniséer, so it'll sound fine. I selected it all this morning after my show ended. The week after there's a concert on Penkudiu and I have a substitute for it."

"Did Sarémigé come with you this time?"

“No, she stayed at home with the baby. She has a cousin visiting this week, so it won’t be so hard. I’ll have to stay at the hotel tonight, but after that, I can stay with the youth team. I just need to be back here late Primdiu afternoon. I promised the Spiritual Assembly to give a talk before I take the bus home.”

“Great! You’re very popular, obviously, and when you sleep on a straw mat on the floor, it impresses people.”

“It impresses my back, too! But don’t worry, I’ll do it.” Mitrubbéru tapped the newspaper. “This rag says the priests here in Kërda have formed an organization, ‘Defend Priests Rights.’ I walked around the market a bit to buy some food and I saw posters all over the place! Most are pro-priest.”

“I get to Isurdhuna maybe twice a week, and my impression is that in the four weeks since the festival, the number of posters affixed to walls has tripled. They’re all over the place. There are some anti-Bahá’í ones, too.”

“Really? I haven’t seen any of them. I’ll have to peel one off a wall on Primdiu and take it to the Central Spiritual Assembly meeting with me.” The two of them started to walk out of the hotel, toward the pickup. “Anything new from Moniké?”

Khwanu shook his head. She was his fiancée. “Not much. She said that the youth team is really helping Khermdhuna a lot. They’ve been running hot water pipes from hot springs to heat houses and wiring them for electricity and even phones in a few cases. That’s on top of two Ruhi classes, one Bahá’í education class, two literacy classes, an accounting class, a mechanics class, and a sewing class.”

“And there how many youth? Five? They’re busy, then.”

“So are we.” They climbed into the truck and Khwanu sent steam to the cylinders.

“We’ve started a fourth Ruhi class and a second general Bahá’í class, so we now have them plus three literacy classes, two health classes, an agriculture class, and two canning classes. But there are five of us and we’re mostly doing classes; no pipes and wires!”

Mitrubbéru chuckled. “Any trouble?”

“There are anti-Bahá’í sermons at the hymn hall in Albagras every two or three days, and pressure has caused many people there to stop attending our classes. But Dachawsdomas and the three other villages are more isolated from the sermons and there is still some receptivity. But it’s hard; the southern end of the valley’s very conservative.”

“People are proud of their religious heritage. Any more declarations?”

“Not since last week. We’re up to fifty, which may be all that can be consolidated anyway. I think we’ll finish this month and move to the northern end of the valley for our last month here. The local spiritual assembly of Lápawsnétha wants us to come.”

“I spoke there last week. They’re a small community, but solid; they can follow up, and they’ve made a lot of friends for the Faith. It’s a good idea to go there.”

“It’s a shame there isn’t a northern entrance to the valley; I figure Lápawsnétha is about forty kilometers from Khermdhuna! We’re almost due north of Kerda, but we have to travel over a hundred kilometers to get here.” Khwanu glanced at the newspaper on Mitrubbéru’s lap. “So, what’s new in the world? We don’t listen to the radio much.”

“Oh, you’ll want to borrow my copy of *Nus Yoros*, then. Do you remember that an underground newspaper started to be mimeographed over the winter? The police made a concerted effort to find the writers and jail them, but they never found them. The

underground newspaper disappeared four weeks ago, and then this started up three weeks ago. And if you read the articles, they're in the same frank, almost biting style."

"So, they're the same people. Where from? Tripola?"

"That was everyone's guess! No, they're a bunch of high school teachers and génadema students and professors in Ora. No one dares advertise in this thing, but it doesn't need the ad revenue because they're being snapped up! Not only does this issue have an article about the priests in Isurdhuna; it describes a new organization being formed in Sumilara, 'Brothers of the Palisade.'"

"Palisade?"

"That's the wooden wall the Sumis built to stop the army when it reconquered the island twelve years ago. The organization is for veterans of the island defense. That's shocking and utterly unthinkable even a month ago. The issue promises future articles about the Sumi exiles in Moruagras. That means interviews of and articles by them, I suspect. There's an article about Gordha's claims to the monarchy in here, too!"

"And they haven't been shut down?"

Mittrubbéru shook his head. "Nor fined. Either the palace is letting them hang themselves, or freedom of the press really has arrived. The other newspapers have started cautiously publishing stories of this sort as well; they're worried about declining sales! The *Néfa Yoros*—which is mostly the *Melwika Nues* with some local news—just published an interview with some of the Kwolone who attacked Melwika ten years ago."

"That's amazing. So, it sounds like the Faith is going to be much freer."

"I think so."

"It really is a new day!"

They drove southward on Route 1—four lanes and concreted—then continued south on two-lane graveled Route 44, which ran to the southeastern end of the valley. As they neared Albagras, the largest village in the south—it had 1,300 inhabitants—they reached the area where the army was blasting a new entrance into the valley’s eastern cliffs. They had to drive by the Hymn Hall—one of four established in the valley by the priest Widulubu—and several people near it waved their fists at the truck and insulted them. Khwanu just shrugged.

The youth team was staying at Albagras’s eight-classroom school—one for every grade, the high schoolers being bussed daily to Isurdhuna South High School. Mitrubbéru immediately began to draw a crowd—some people had heard his show that morning—and by suppertime quite a crowd had assembled. Once the pickup truck finished picking up the other youth team members at three other nearby villages, Khwanu got to work setting up a string of light bulbs over a makeshift stage against a side wall of the school. Kerda was so far west, Skanda was never visible, so the valleys’ inhabitants never saw an eclipse and its night skies were pitch black.

As the twilight deepened, about two hundred people gathered to hear Mitrubbéru speak briefly about Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings. They asked questions—many provocative and difficult—for almost two hours. Albagras had heard plenty of anti-Bahá'í propaganda, so Mitrubbéru had to deal with accusations that equality of the sexes made women promiscuous, that Bahá'u'lláh had murdered people, that Bahá'í elections didn't work, and that Esto was angry with the world because the people were sacrificing fewer animals. People left impressed by his answers and his openness and honesty, but no one

was convinced. Khwanu drove Mitrubbéru back to Isurdhuna full of ideas how they could encourage people to explore the Faith further.

Mitrubbéru didn't sleep well; he asked the front desk to wake him at 4 a.m. so he could listen to the *World Table*, because he often commented on Kekanu's show on his own, but he wasn't confident they would do so. He was awakened near the time he was supposed to rise by the sound of police sirens racing past the hotel and heading south. He dragged himself out of bed—the front desk did call him at the right time, a half hour later—washed and said his prayers. He was listening to the *World Table* when the phone rang. He suspected his assistant in the studio would call him.

“Khélo?”

“Honored Mitrubbéru? This is Váranomigu, Chief of Police for Kerdá. I'm afraid I have terrible news. I'm not sure how to break it to you, but I need your help. About two hours ago, some people broke into the school at Albagras and murdered the five Bahá'í youth sleeping there.”

Mitrubbéru gasped. “What? Are you sure?”

“I am very sure; my men are there right now. We received a telephone call from a local person about ninety minutes ago and dispatched both police cars to the scene. All five were killed with swords. Naturally, we suspect the local Hymn Hall.”

“This is . . . horrible. I'm in shock!”

“I'm sure, and I regret having to call you like this, and at such an hour of the morning. But I need your help at the crime scene. We have to identify the bodies and contact their kin. I hear you were there last night; you may be able to say whether anything has been stolen or moved around.”

“Of course. I’ll be glad to help that way. I know all five of them. I don’t know the next of kin, but Modolubu, Secretary of the Central Spiritual Assembly, has all that information. I’ll call him right away.”

“I want to stop by and take you to Albagras in ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes!” His radio show! “Alright, I’ll be ready. I’d better make some calls, then.”

“Goodbye.”

Mitrubbéru hung up, feeling numb. This was an unbelievable situation. He knew Khwanu the best. He was a brilliant medical student, a doctor of great potential, and a steadfast Bahá’í. The loss was almost unbearable. There had to be a funeral. The five had to be buried within an hour’s drive of the place of death, based on Bahá’í law; that meant the southern valley, because even Isurdhuna was barely an hour away on the bad roads. And he was the member of the Central Spiritual Assembly present . . . a literature student with a two-year degree and a good singing voice but no qualifications to handle an emergency. But he had no choice.

He picked up the phone and asked for Pértatranisér 2553; the station’s private line. A minute later there was an answer. “Khélo?” It was Deresé, Kekanu’s wife.

“Deresé, this is Mitrubbéru. I . . . can’t do the show today. There’s . . .”

“What? You *can*’t?”

“There’s been a murder here in Kerda. I just got a call from the police. The five Bahá’í youth members of the team here in the valley were cut down in their sleep. I have to go down to the crime scene with the chief of police.”

“That’s horrible! Mitrubbéru, I’m so sorry! Yes, of course, we’ll manage! Kekanu can extend his show. Can we get some news about this event?”

Mitrubbéru hadn’t thought of that. “Ah, Dérésé, I’d better not say anything, I’m still in shock about it and I have to call Modolubu about it. I feel so horrible . . . I’m still numb. You remember Khwanu Khermdhunai, he was interviewed by Kekanu about rural health once. He was head of the team.”

“I remember him; a bright young doctor! He’s dead?”

“He was one of the five and I’m told the five were killed. But I’ll know more when I get to Albagras. They were staying in the village school.”

“Albagras? Okay. I’ll pull Kekanu’s interview with him from the archives and we’ll run it during part of your show. It’s only fitting. Call us with news.”

“I will if I can, and now I’ve got to run. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Mitrubbéru hung up and then asked for Modolubu’s phone in Mëddwoglubas. He repeated the basic information again and exchanged shock with the secretary of the Central Spiritual Assembly, who promised to call the other Assembly members and assemble contact information for the next of kin. Then the front desk interrupted; Váranoimigu was waiting. Mitrubbéru hurried downstairs to an uncertain situation.

It was a particularly dark eclipse in Mëlwika; there was a power failure and the Mennea house was illuminated with candles. The radio in the great room, however, was run on a battery. Liz had it on while she worked in her office, which was part of her mother’s old bedroom. Lua was listening as she sat at the dinner table drinking tea and helping

Rostamu, her twelve year old son, with some summer homework. Kekanu was wrapping up his interview with the Lord of Sulléndha about developments in Penkakwés province.

“That finishes up today's *World Table*,” he said. “Thank you, everyone, for listening today. Tomorrow we’ll talk with Ékwukordu, leader of the Red Clan of the Kwolone and expert horse breeder, about the horse business. If you’re thinking of buying a horse, tune in! He’ll give us tips about what to look for and why the price of horses has started to drop in the last few months.

“I’ll be back after a word from our sponsor, Home Improvement. The Mitrubbéru music show will not be held today. Mitrubbéru is in Isurdhuna and was planning to do his show from the hotel there, which has an excellent and reliable telephone connection. But he called us half an hour ago to report that the Kerda police had just called him to report the murder of five members of the Bahá’í youth team volunteering in Albagras. We have no further information about the incident, but will provide it to you when it becomes available. Meanwhile, we have heard that one of the members of the team was Khwanu Khermdhunai. We have *not* heard whether he was among the victims, but we will rerun an interview I conducted with him five months ago about rural health. Because of his many months of travels with the Bahá’í youth teams, he has become an expert on rural health. Let us hope he is alright.”

Lua stood when she heard the beginning of Kekanu’s explanation and remained rigid as a statue during the whole thing, not daring to shout to her mother lest she miss something. But Liz heard from her office anyway and rushed in. They stood side by side until Kekanu’s closing music came on.

“By Esto, this is no way to hear news like this!” said Liz. “Mitrubbéru must have called Modolubu! Why hasn’t he called us?”

“Maybe he will. There are seven members to call, then you.”

Just then the front door opened and Chris hurried in. “Liz! Liz, where are you?”

“We’re in the Great Room, dear!”

“Liz, the youth team in Kerda’s been murdered!” He hurried into the great room. “Modolubu just called me! He asked me to call Randu.”

“We just heard it on the radio! Kekanu announced it because he’s substituting for Mitrubbéru!”

“Of course, that makes sense. Listen, we should pack and head west in the next two hours, before it gets completely dark. We can at least get as far as Pértatranisé before we get too tired; it’d be about midnight here where we get there, and it’d be afternoon there. I think the Central Spiritual Assembly will have to meet, and maybe all of us should attend the funeral.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“I think you should go,” agreed Lua. “I’d like to go as well, if Khwanu was killed.”

“Khwanu!” said Liz, shaking her head in grief.

“He had so much promise,” agreed Chris.

Just then, Kekanu came back on the radio. “As I said, this is a three-hour continuation of the *World Table* because of a terrible incident that just happened a few hours ago in Albagras, southern Kerda. I believe we have now established a telephone connection with the Albagras school. Is this Váranoimigu on the line?”

“It is Honored, of the Kerda Provincial Police.”

“Can you tell us what you know?”

“Yes, Honored. At 3:55 a.m. local time we received a call from a resident in Albagras who was living across the street from the school and who had been awakened by terrible screams emanating from the classrooms. He went outside and saw four men run from the school, swords in their hands. The neighbor didn’t have a telephone, but another neighbor did, so he ran there, awakened the household, and called us. We dispatched two cars and four officers to the scene immediately; at that hour they made the drive in half an hour. They went inside and found five dead people.”

“Do we know who the victims were?”

“Yes; they are the five Bahá’í youth who were staying in the school. The commotion woke various people and when we arrived a dozen people stood outside. They had met the youth and identified them. The two women were in one room. Two of the men were in another. The third man was in the hallway and apparently was cut down attempting to escape.”

“Was one of the dead Khwanu Khermdhunai?”

“That is one of the names we have, honored.”

“Any idea who perpetuated this crime?”

“The widespread speculation, honored, is that members of the local Hymn Hall were involved. The Albagras Hymn Hall is fairly large and quite active; it serves the entire southern end of the valley. Anti-Bahá’í talks had been occurring in the hall every week and threats had been made, so we have been told.”

“Does this strike you as the proper response of the old religion to the Bahá’í Faith?”

“Certainly not, Honored, and not a response the provincial police can accept or tolerate. We will investigate this crime, arrest suspects, put them on trial, and bring the murderers to justice; that’s our job.”

“The youth team was carrying out various acts of service, were they not?”

“Indeed, honored; we have heard of literacy classes, sewing classes, health education, and such.”

“Does the hymn hall offer anything similar?”

The policeman hesitated. “I’ve never heard of any Hymn Hall offering services.”

“And I am sure the Bahá’ís weren’t preaching against the old religion or Widumaj.”

“I’ve never heard of them doing that either, Honored.”

“So, we have this picture: people who say they are following Widumaj’s injunction to love and serve, instead, are preaching against and possibly murdering another group, which is preaching love and carrying out acts of service and is not badmouthing anyone.”

“Well . . . that’s the tentative picture, honored.”

“Thank you, Váranoimigu. We’ll call you back later.” He closed the line. “We are now calling Lord Viduféru of Albagras to see whether he’ll have any comments. It is now a bit after dawn in Albagras, a large village in the southern end of the Kërda Valley.”

There was a clicking sound at the other end, then the phone picked up. “Khélo?”

“May I speak to Lord Viduféru, please.”

A pause. “This is Viduféru, who is this calling me?”

“Lord Viduféru, this is Kekanu calling. Have you any comments about the events in your village earlier today?”

A brief pause. “They were leading people away from Widumaj and got what they deserved.”

“So, do you advocate killing Bahá'ís? Is that the way of the hymns?”

“Are you recording this?”

“No, Lord, we are on the air right now.”

“On the air?” Viduféru hung up; a faint click came over the radio.

“Khélo? Khélo, Lord Viduféru? He seems to have hung up on us, ladies and gentlemen! A prominent member of the aristocracy, a member of the House of Lords, and he has no words of condemnation for the shocking murders that occurred in his village a few hours ago! Well, perhaps he will call us back with some. We are now switching to an interview I conducted five months ago with Khwanu Khermdhunai, who apparently was one of the five victims last night. He was an impressive and articulate young medical student who devoted himself to the health of the people of the villages. He has an unusual accent that may take some time to grasp. His first name, ‘Khwanu,’ is that of a prominent follower of Jésus; it is also pronounced ‘Jonu.’ Khermdhuna, his home village, is a Christian village and represents the followers of the gedhému Kristanë priest Pablu, who appeared here some five hundred years ago. It was completely isolated until eight years ago. In many ways, this recording is a fitting memorial to the victims; it reflects the spirit of service they embodied. We’ll gather more information for you and report it after the interview is over.”

Chris turned to the others. “Viduféru must be pressured to resign as lord, for a cold blooded remark like that. Werétrakester must be having a fit right now.”

“It was shocking,” agreed Liz.

“We should make the funeral as big and public as possible,” said Lua. “I’d broadcast it over the Bahá’í radio program.”

“The Central Spiritual Assembly will have to consider all these options,” agreed Chris.

Just then, the phone rang. Chris walked over and answered. “Khélo?”

“Lord Kristoféru? This is Estoiyaju at the palace. Her Majesty Princess Awster wants to speak to you and Lady Liz.”

“We’re both right here, Estoiyaju.” He motioned Liz to come over and lean close. There was a pause.

“Lord Kristoféru, this is Princess Awster. I’ve been listening to Kekanu, as I am sure you have as well. I can’t tell you how terribly shocked and saddened we all feel here, and we promise you that the murderers will be brought to justice. We are preparing a statement for public release right now.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. We are in shock here. We have only started to think about the implications.”

“Will there be a public funeral?”

“Probably, Your Majesty.”

“I would like to attend. The kingdom cannot tolerate actions like this.”

“Your Majesty, that could raise the issue of your . . . beliefs,” said Liz.

“Let it. This is too shocking. It requires a strong response.”

All of the members of the Central Spiritual Assembly except Mitrubbéru rendezvoused later that day at the Pértatranisé Bahá'í Center to begin planning the funeral. The next morning they moved to the Isurdhuna Palace Hotel, where Mitrubbéru joined them, and planning accelerated for the next day's events.

Charter buses poured into Albagras starting the next morning. Mitru Miller made as many buses available as needed at a nominal fee; since school was still out for the summer, buses for moving thousands of students were available to move thousands of Bahá'ís. Half of Khərmdhuna came. Every major local Spiritual Assembly arranged a bus, as did most of the youth teams. Two hundred Sumi Bahá'ís came, the first time Kerda had seen any number of Sumis in a thousand years. Over a thousand local people—Bahá'ís and neighbors—came. A big tent was hauled in from Pértatranisé, where it normally hosted folk music concerts for two thousand people. More watched from outside. The fancy sound system from Pértatranisé made the event easy to hear hundreds of meters away and captured the event for live broadcast over the Bahá'í radio channel, over which they acquired rights for the entire day.

Kekanu chanted both Bahá'í and traditional hymns. Werétrakester recited passages from stories about Widumaj and spoke briefly about love and tolerance. Modolubu and Aréjé offered moving tributes to the five martyrs. Khwanu's father Mariu, owner of a small store and a Bahá'í, spoke of his son's dedication. A few short Bahá'í songs familiar to all the Bahá'ís were sung. Then a procession carried the five caskets to a grave site nearby, an attractive piece of land donated by Lord Viduféru to repair his damaged

reputation. As the Bahá'í congregational prayer for the dead was recited by Mitrubbéru, the caskets were lowered into the graves.

A reception, hosted by the Central Spiritual Assembly at the tent, followed for the families and various VIPs. Princess Awster addressed them briefly. “I think we will all have vivid memories of these events,” she began. “We have collectively borne the pain of this terrible tragedy and have accompanied our lost ones on their journey as far as we can go. I hope that we have also made a statement today about mutual love, tolerance, and respect. It does not matter which prophet one follows: Widumaj or Bahá'u'lláh. Both have brought us wisdom and insights about how to live and how to prepare for the next life. Both call on us to love our neighbors and treat them the way we want them to treat us. Both condemn acts of violence. Both have lived lives that command our attention and have given teachings that are worthy of our consideration. Today, we have acted in a way both would approve.

“As many of you have heard, yesterday the police arrested three suspects. They are seeking several others and are receiving more and more cooperation from the public. You can be sure that the crime will not go unpunished. On the contrary, this crime requires a clear and unambiguous response: that this kingdom will not tolerate attacks on people because of their religion or background. We are all on Éra together and we have one monarchy to bring us together in peace. I spoke briefly with Her Majesty the Queen this morning, before leaving for Kerda, and these were her thoughts and convictions. She and I are determined to demonstrate them in action.

“Yet in spite of all these words, my heart still yearns to comfort the parents and loved ones of those whose lives have been taken from us. I have already greeted and

sought to offer comfort to you. I cannot begin to express the depth of the sympathy I feel. It has been just two months since my brother suffered the same fate as your child, brother, sister, or cousin. My mother is still recovering from her physical and psychic injuries. I have suffered a similar loss to you and know how it feels. We are called on to build on events such as these and through service to others, give them meaning. It is my dearest wish to all of you that you will bring a little light to the world in your responses to this tragedy.”

The princess stepped down from the podium to warm applause and headed straight to the long table where the families were seated. She went down it, shaking hands with and speaking to everyone, and even hugging many of them. She was followed by the VIPs and others present in a show of support and comfort.

Afterward, Lord Viduféru approached the princess. “I’m so relieved to hear Her Majesty is making progress. Is she up and out of bed yet?”

“Yes, she walks a few steps every day. The doctors are urging her to go farther each time. She can now read an hour a day as well. I think she’ll recover sufficiently to reassume her royal duties in a few months.”

“Please convey my highest regards to her. Your Majesty, I was most interested in your comments. I fully agree and support your call for tolerance and nonviolence. Let me assure you that my inadvertent remarks on the radio were in no way intended to endorse or support violence. Please accept my apologies for any offense I caused.”

Awster nodded. “I much appreciate your statement, Lord, but you need to apologize here, to the people here, and to the families, not to me.”

“Ah . . . I see what you mean. That’s an excellent point. I would like to augment my donation of land for the graves in some way; perhaps a major sacrifice at the Isurdhuna temple on behalf of the victims, since the Bahá’ís won’t accept contributions from non-members.”

“Considering that a contribution to the Temple might be misunderstood, perhaps a more neutral charity would be more appropriate, such as a hospital, génadema, or the school for the deaf and blind.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion, thank you, Your Majesty. It is most unfortunate that a sacrifice to the Most Sacred Temple would be misunderstood. What’s this world coming to! And I fear that comments that make Bahu equal to Widumaj may make that worse. I think you would agree that we need to support the temples, priests, and their sacrifices.”

“Considering that the murderers came from the local hymn hall, and some of the murderers of my brother came from priestly families, I’m afraid I do not view the situation the same way you do.”

“But Your Majesty, surely you don’t believe in Bahu as a prophet?”

“Lord, I spoke very carefully today, and I feel no need to elaborate on my remarks or correct them in any way. If you want to support the temple and the priests, then exemplify the peaceful qualities Widumaj sang about. The Bahá’ís are winning because they exemplify love and service. I am confident the traditional religion can compete with the Bahá’ís spiritually if the followers of Widumaj try to do so, rather than stoning and stabbing Bahá’ís and burning down their buildings.”

Viduféru looked at her face carefully, trying to read her thoughts. Then he nodded.

“Very well, Your Majesty, let us see what the lovers of the hymns can do.”

Reread and edited, 6/11/13, 8/23/17, 11/24/24

340.

Arson

Abelménu 15-20/ Sept. 4-9, Yr 14/632

Chris hurried out of the main tent holding the reception with the families toward a smaller tent where all the youth teams were gathered with representatives of all the local Spiritual Assemblies in Kerda and selected other invitees. He brought with him Lord Patékwu of the Krésonɛ. “I much regret that we have to meet this way, hastily and at a time we cannot talk,” said Chris to him. “I have been traveling literally for the entire six weeks since you declared your desire to become a Bahá’í, except for about two days a week in Melwika to keep essential business going there. But the travels are about to end and I hope to get to Sértroba in the next month.”

“We will warmly welcome you. Lady Liz has been immensely helpful, and of course Thornton, Lébé, and the youth team have brought us what I can only describe as a gift of life, and with great love and patience.”

“I understand they have visited every hamlet.”

“Correct. I went with them, hamlet by hamlet, spending an entire day in each. I explained who Bahá'u'lláh was, what the purpose of His revelation was, and how it provided the tribe what it needed in this new day. They all accepted; the entire tribe has declared. The youth team then left someone behind to give classes for three or four days almost continuously, and Lady Liz came to speak to gatherings at four different places along the Ornakwés. People had to walk or ride less than ten kilometers to get to the nearest one. Many came to her talks.”

“She told me. Of course, five or six weeks is not enough; it takes a year or more to really accept and understand.”

“People are coming along slowly. But what we really want to know, Lord, is what we should *do*. I am not referring to core activities. We will gradually learn how to do them. What I am referring to is the material progress of our tribe. We need to focus on that as well.”

“Material progress, like spiritual progress, takes time. It cannot be accomplished in a day or a year. And it must come from you and your people. The tribe can borrow money or enter into partnerships with others to acquire the means to develop. You and Thornton have already been talking about some ideas. When I come to Sértroba, we can talk further. But right now, Lord, I have a different matter to discuss with you. I am hoping that Thornton and his youth team can stay here in southern Kerda for the next month. They are experienced and capable, and we must replace the team that was murdered immediately. It will demonstrate our determination.”

“I understand.” Patékwu sighed. “Thornton and his team were scheduled to leave for the Kaitere lands last week and they extended their stay further. But we can do without them. We will need a team visiting us at different times; we are not ready to be alone in our faith.”

“We will not leave you alone. We can send youth teams from Melwika for two days every week for most weeks. We are also working to find individual youths who can move to Sértroba or the hamlets for six months or a year. We’re hoping they can help with the schools during the day and offer Ruhi classes and deepenings at nights and on Primdius.”

“Not too young, please. We need experienced ones.”

“We’ll see what we can do. I’m hoping we can send you students with two or four year degrees, but we’ll see. It’s difficult to arrange; the Eryan are not used to volunteering in this way.”

“I understand. Lord, the lord of the Wurone, Endranu, is my first cousin; my mother was the daughter of his father’s father. I want to go teach them about Bahá'u'lláh as well, because they badly need the revelation. They are isolated and poor; they have a dirt track, no telephone, not even a post office. But they will need your help as well.”

“I understand. If you can wait until after the winter is over, we’ll be better able to support the effort. Better, by then you will have Krésone who can go teach them. We don’t want to be your teachers; we want to raise you up so the Krésone can be teachers of the Faith and take it to others. As much as we wish we could teach everyone at once, we are strained to reach just a few people.”

“Of course. Your words are wise.”

They had stopped outside the tent and had finished their conversation in whispers. Now they entered. Stauréstu had finished a talk about the absolute importance of the Bahá'is being nonviolent and not retaliating; some local Bahá'is, however, feared looking weak. Stauréstu emphasized that nonviolence was not weakness, it was moral strength, and it was something the newspapers and radio would notice. The youth teams felt insecure and Stauréstu emphasized the importance of them being open and warm to everyone, but also being smart and alert to possible threats.

They listened for fifteen minutes while the questions gradually were answered. Then the meeting ended and everyone headed for refreshments. The members of the

youth team were excited to see each other and exchange experiences. Unfortunately, most of the buses had to leave in less than an hour, so they didn't have much time.

Chris hurried over to Thornton, who was busy talking to Jordan, Budhéstu, and Soru at once. He signaled him to step aside.

“What is it, dad?”

“I'm sorry we won't have any time to talk. I was just meeting with Patékwu for a few minutes; no time to talk to him, either. But I asked him and he agreed that you and your team could be spared, if you are willing. The Central Spiritual Assembly really needs you all here in southern Kerda. We need a replacement team right away, a strong team and one we can count on.”

“I see.” Thornton thought about it. “We will really hate to leave the Krésone, and they'll hate to lose us. But we've been there over two months and we were about to move to the Kaitere lands anyway. And I could use a change of scene anyway. We'll need to get our things.”

“Send some members of the team back to get them, and some members should stay here so you can get started right away. You heard the discussion. The Bahá'ís don't understand that there must not be revenge or a counter-attack. The Bahá'ís must learn discipline; that is what will impress others. We have to respond to this attack by redoubling our efforts at service.”

“I was surprised by the comments. Okay, I'll stay. Lébé and Sugérsé are still in Sértroba; they can collect the kids and the luggage and drive here in the car. The rest of us can stay here and get started.”

“Excellent. The Central Spiritual Assembly will be immensely grateful. We’re planning to write to the Mēlwika Spiritual Assembly and ask them to assist the Krésone, and we’ll look for people who can move there for six months or a year to assist. Ideally, they should volunteer either in the schools or to provide health care.”

“The Krésone need material as well as spiritual assistance. I can’t stay here an entire month, remember; I need to be in Mēlwika a week before the fall term starts.”

“We know. Four weeks is enough; we need to prove to people we aren’t retreating in the face of danger, we need to reinforce the local understanding that Bahá’ís don’t retaliate, and we need to wrap up the work here.”

“Okay.” Thornton smiled. “Good to see you, dad, even if it is quickly!”

“Next month, once the fall term starts, we’ll be able to spend some time together.”

“Good.” They hugged quickly, then Chris hurried to find Modolubu. Thornton rounded up the four other members of his team who had come to Kēda to break the bad news. One agreed to head back to Sértroba to get their possessions; the others would stay, though it wasn’t clear where they’d sleep that night. So Thornton searched for the secretary of the Dáchawsdomas Spiritual Assembly, which was the nearest assembly; Albagras, though a large place, had never been able to elect an assembly because of the opposition to the Faith from the local hymn hall.

“You can’t stay here in Albagras,” pointed out Mazhéstu. “The police still have the school sealed off; they’re making a thorough study of the place. They’re even photographing the rooms. And there’s no other place, unless you want to talk to Lord Viduféru. But we can put you up in Dachawsdomas.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Definitely. We have a six-classroom school and it’s unused over the summer, except for classes the youth team taught. You could stay there. Lord Luchéstu has a large home and might be able to accommodate you and your family, also.”

“We can stay in a classroom in the school; that’s what we’ve been doing all summer at Sértroba. Does the school have an outhouse?”

“Yes, and no running water.”

Thornton nodded. “We can handle that. Our team has two people with mechanical experience; with your village’s permission, in return for accommodation at the school, we can install piped water and maybe an indoor bathroom. And we can teach local men how to install the system when they help us build it. That’s the sort of arrangement our teams often make; it’s a way we can pay for accommodations.”

Mazhéstu nodded. “I think the village would be happy with that. We’re also planning a Bahá’í Center; maybe we can install water there as well. The village really could use a public bath, and the assembly has been talking about the idea for over a year. Khwanu managed to convince the lord to spend some money on it. But since the youth team was based here at Albagras, it couldn’t devote much of its own money to the project.”

“That’s something we could do. What’s your sense of the danger a Bahá’í might try to retaliate; throw a rock at a hymn hall person, for example, or insult them?”

Mazhéstu shook his head. “We have a few proud hotheads, but they understand that the community does not condone such behavior. I think they’ll come around. You may want to come here to talk to them, they mostly live in Albagras. The bigger problem we have to deal with is Bahá’ís pulling away from the community because of pressure.

The murders frightened a lot of the non-Bahá'í members of our families. They're pressuring us to be less active and not be a visible problem to the community."

"On the other hand, the murderers have been arrested. Surely the opponents of the Faith feel chastened."

"Yes, they do, but the arrests make them hate more, not less. They will remain a constant source of pressure and discrimination. And we are not used to the idea that love is the best response. Unity is a difficult goal to imagine when the village had unity before we accepted Bahá'u'lláh!"

"That's true. That's why we must prove through our service that unity and harmony remain our goals. Then the disharmony and disunity comes from the other side, and most people will see that and see we are trying to create harmony. It is a hard path to follow, but it will work."

"Especially as long as the police prevent attacks!" agreed Mazhéstu. "What time is it for you, anyway? You look rather tired."

"Sértroba is fourteen hours ahead of Kërda, so my body thinks it is a few hours before dawn right now. Essentially, I haven't slept at all for the night. I'll try to stay awake until sunset, then go to bed."

"I understand. Perhaps the spiritual assembly can meet with you tomorrow morning at dawn, before several members go to their fields for the day. You should be fresh then. Will you drive the youth team's pickup truck?"

"I'll ask Mitrubbéru about that."

“Shall I ask the Spiritual Assembly to propose talks and classes for your team? We know what the previous team was doing, and we were helping to plan their activities.”

“Yes, that would be great.”

“We’ll also ask for several volunteers to sleep at the school. We have a few Bahá’í youth who would enjoy that. We’ll make sure you stay safe.”

“Thank you, we’d appreciate that.”

Soru hadn’t seen Estoiluku, the blind boy in Lewéspadéma, for almost a year. Now twelve, he had grown quite a lot. He had started wearing eyeglasses with the glass tinted very dark so people couldn’t see his blind eyes. When Soru entered the room, he turned straight toward him. “Thank you for coming, Honored Soru. We are always so grateful for your efforts.”

“We really are,” added Galésé, his mother. “Do you know about the bus, yet?”

“I’m sorry, but no; still no bus. We will be opening a school for blind and deaf students in Pértatranisér. The provinces of Rudhisér and Véspe have agreed to pay to send their students twice a week. I wish we could get students from farther away, but so far, it’s just not possible.”

“That’s too bad.” Galésé shook her head, disappointed. “Maybe we can get him there once a month, though.”

“He’d be welcome any time. Estoiluku, how’s school?”

“I got straight As last year! But the kids still tease me.”

“Even in my presence,” added Galesé. “It’s very sad. But Ləwəspadéma’s not used to *seeing* blind people. They’re supposed to stay at home, out of sight.”

“That won’t change quickly, but you’re strong as well as smart, and you’re changing people.”

“Not much!”

“It took twenty years to change attitudes on Gədhéma, and we’ve only started here. Don’t worry; you’re making an important contribution. I brought you something.” Soru picked up a bag and pulled out a rectangular clay model. “This is a clay model of a map of Éra. Here, feel.” He put the model down on the floor in front of Estoiluku, who ran his fingers over it. “Start over here; this is the western shore,” said Soru. “This long bumpy high spot; that’s the Spine. Then going east, you can feel the Long Valley, then the Snowy Mountains, then the land drops down and you can feel the circular smooth area; this is the sea.”

“And here in the middle is an island; that’s Sumilara?”

“Very good! East of it you can feel this long east-west valley; that’s Arjakwés. It ends at the Gordha Ridge, then you have a series of ridges and valleys, ending with the Spine again.”

“So the Spine is on here twice?”

“Exactly. This is very crude, but it’ll give you a pretty good idea.”

“I suppose I can move his hand around it and tell him where the cities are,” said Galesé. “This will be very helpful. Geography was one subject he couldn’t really do at all.”

“If you can’t get to our school, we can try to get some of the teaching materials to you. We’re working on all sorts of items. How’s your typing?”

“It’s gotten very good! Mom would say what letter I typed as I typed it.”

“It was pretty tiring, but I only had to do it for a month.”

The servant brought in tea, bread, and jam. Just as they began to drink their tea, the telephone rang in the other room; Estoiluku’s father, Estoivékhu, was a shoe manufacturer and thus had a phone. The servant went and answered it. He returned a moment later. “Honored Soru, it is for you.”

“Oh? I wonder who it is. Perhaps my wife has some sort of emergency.” Soru rose and walked into the next room, which was an office. He took the phone. “Hélo?”

“Honored Soru, you don’t know me. I am Lord Viduféru of Albagras. I was speaking to Duke Yusbéru yesterday and he suggested I give you a call. I would like to make a donation to your school. We have deaf and blind children here in Kerda who need assistance, and you can provide it.”

“Lord Viduféru, what a surprise! Duke Yusbéru was very kind to mention my school to you. Indeed, we could use assistance. We have a brand new school; it opens in Pértatranisér in a few weeks. But we have no bus to get the children to it.”

“A bus? I could provide that. It would be an honor. I have long been looking for a charity I could commit myself to, and a school for needy children seems an honorable and worthy choice. I have long sought to be a servant of all, and this is an excellent opportunity.”

“Thank you, Lord. This is providential! I have set out on a journey to visit children who need help from our school from as far away as south of Tripola. You have reached me in the house of one of those students.”

“I called your school and they said I should ask to be connected to the ‘house with the blind child in Ləwəspadema.’ That worked.”

“Praise Esto!”

“Can you come to Albagras tomorrow or the next day to finalize the details?”

“Indeed I can, Lord. It would be a great honor to visit and show you what we can do.”

“How about Kwéterdiu at 12 noon, then? You should be able to get here by then.”

“Thank you, Lord, I’ll be there.”

“Excellent, see you then! Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Soru hung up the telephone, stunned by the development. He walked back into the sitting room with the others. “We may be able to get you to school twice a week after all,” he said.

The clock in Isurdhuna’s main square was striking 8 p.m. when Thornton and the other Bahá’í youth left the palace for the day. The pickup truck was still parked in the square where they had left it that morning; a section of the square had been reserved for vehicle parking. The five of them loaded up the firebox and within a few minutes there was enough steam, so Thornton put the pickup into gear and off they went, bound for Dáchawsdomas and a good night’s sleep.

The sky was clear, so the usual twilight had faded away completely, two hours after sunset. Thornton had to put on the headlights as soon as they left the city, for Kerda was beyond the reach of Skanda and the sky was dark and star-filled. He felt exhausted; after almost a week, he had not quite adjusted to the 14-hour shift in time zones. To keep himself alert he called his father in Melwika, where it was 10 a.m.

“Hey, dad, I just left the trial,” he said, after exchanging quick greetings.

“Really? What was it like?”

“First of all, it was long; it’s 8 p.m. here and the trial started at 10 a.m., ten hours earlier. The court room was packed and there were soldiers there to maintain order. The five defendants made a crucial mistake for the first hour of the trial; they took the position that killing Bahá’is was approved by Widumaj, therefore it was legal and a trial was unnecessary. Wérgéndu set them straight by making it clear that he considered such a crime premeditated murder punishable by crucifixion or, at best, swift execution. After that, they changed their tune and rather shrilly proclaimed their innocence!”

“But it sounds like it was too late by then.”

“I’d say so. They basically confessed. Váranomigu, the chief of police, couldn’t believe the contradictions in their claims. Wérgéndu wasn’t amused, either.”

“What sort of evidence do they have?”

“Bloody fingerprints; apparently this is the first time fingerprint evidence will be used in a trial. None of the villagers can identify them because it was dark, and they’re too scared to, anyway. Anyway, we’re expected to be there, so we’ll go every day. I think it’ll be over in three or four days.”

“Well, be careful. From what I hear, things are pretty tense. Mitrubbéru’s coming back to Kërda next week to get a report personally.”

“Good. The classes are very strange. Many were scared away by the murders, but others came out of morbid curiosity. The number of people who are friends of the Faith is definitely up, but no one dares to declare their belief. People don’t seem to pay attention to the subject discussed and ask questions that have nothing to do with it. We can’t wait to leave.”

“Well, be patient. It sounds like the season for youth teams in Kërda is almost over, anyway. How are Lébé and the kids?”

“They’re fine. The kids are having a lot of trouble understanding the southern Kërda accent. They’ll probably figure it out about the same time we leave! They can’t wait to get home, too. I’ve promised them we’ll drive home via the Long Valley and the Spine Mountains, so they’re all excited at the idea of driving all the way around the world. Any news from mom?”

“I talked to her last night; it would have been morning, your time. She’s in Gordha meeting people and giving a series of classes about Bahá'u'lláh’s writings. The conversion of the Krésone has gotten out and intrigued a lot of seekers in Gordha. She’s on her way to the Kwolone tomorrow, then the Kwétékwone, then the south shore. I’ve got to run; I’ve got a meeting in five minutes.”

“Okay; bye.”

“Bye.” Thornton hung up, disappointed he couldn’t talk to his father longer. He called the *Melwika Nues* so that the reporters could interview him about the trial; that gave the hometown newspaper a scoop. In the middle of the call, two fire engines raced

by him, heading south. Not long after he hung up they could see an orange glow on the southern horizon.

“It’s the Hymn Hall!” exclaimed Dhuganu, the youth seated next to him in the pickup’s cab. The others were sitting in the back.

“I think you’re right,” said Thornton. He slowed and turned left onto a lane that would take him past the hall. “Let’s take a look.”

He drove slowly toward the hymn hall, and within a hundred meters they could see the two fire engines that had raced past them stationed at spots where their crews could pour water on the flames. But it appeared to be too late; the whole building was aflame.

“Should we stop to help?” suggested Thornton.

“There’s not much to do,” said Dhuganu, pointing out the crowd loitering around the building.

“True, but the offer might be appreciated.” Thornton drove over to a group of men and rolled down the window. “Can we help?”

The men took one look at him and jumped to their feet “Arsonist!” they shouted. One reached down to grab a stone and tossed it at the pickup. The others reached for swords or staffs.

“I guess not!” replied Thornton and he turned the wheel sharply and gunned the engine, getting them out of there fast.

“Sounds like there’s a misunderstanding!” said Dhuganu.

“I guess so!” replied Thornton.

Thornton drove back to Route 44, turned south, and gave the engine all the steam he could. He wanted to get away as quickly as possible. It only took ten minutes to reach Dáchawsdomas. The school was on the northern end of the village, so they reached it first. Two police cars were parked outside the school and there was a very large crowd. “I wonder what happened?” said Dhuganu, worried.

Thornton nodded, afraid for his family. He parked the truck, but before they could get out the police hurried over. “Get out of the truck slowly,” commanded Váranéstu, one of the policemen. “You are all under arrest.”

“Under arrest; why?” asked Thornton.

“Arson.”

“Arson for what?”

“Albagras hymn hall.”

“We’ve been in Isurdhuna all day! When we were driving back we were passed by the fire trucks!”

“You can tell that to the judge. A dozen witnesses say they saw the pickup truck next to the hymn hall when the fire started and they saw you drive away from it as the smoke and flames appeared!”

Thornton’s voice rose. “And we have about fifty witnesses who can say we were in Isurdhuna all day!”

“Including Wérgéendu,” added Dhuganu.

“And Váranomigu! Why don’t we call him; he’ll tell you!”

Váranéstu was taken back by that and hesitated. “Very well. There’s a phone here in the school, right?”

“There is,” agreed Thornton.

They all walked into the school. Lébé was standing by the door, looking frightened; Mazhéstu, the Assembly secretary, was worried. “They got here ten minutes ago and searched the school for you,” he said to Thornton.

“How could we be here when we were in court all day?” demanded Thornton, angry.

“Calm down, honey,” said Lébé.

He nodded and calmed himself. This was no time to behave irrationally.

They went to the principal’s office, where the phone was on a long cord. Váranéstu called the Albagras operator—she handled the entire area—and asked for Chief of Police Váranomigu. The Isurdhuna Police Station referred her to his home, where he answered.

“Chief, this is Lieutenant Váranéstu. The crowd gathered outside the hymn hall fire reported to us that they saw the Bahá’í youth leave the blaze in their pickup truck at about 6:30 p.m., when the fire started.”

“Six thirty? They’re lying. They were at the trial at that time.”

“All day?”

“I think so. I wasn’t watching them every minute, but I saw them in the courtroom all the time. If they had left for two hours, I would have noticed. Come to think of it, I remember they walked out when the judge adjourned the court for the day.”

“When was that?”

“Just before seven.”

“Then they couldn’t have set the fire?”

“No.”

“So, what do we do?”

“Go to Albagras and arrest all the witnesses who claim to see them leave the fire. Possibly some of them were the ones who really set it. Do the fire engines have the fire under control?”

“We’re in Dachawsdomas right now, but when we left Albagras it looked like the hymn hall would be a total loss. The roof was burning and I’m sure it’ll collapse. But the fire trucks can prevent the fire from spreading.”

“Go back to Albagras, arrest the so-called witnesses, and bring them to Isurdhuna. I’ll meet you at the jail to interrogate them. The Bahá’í youth were in the courtroom, so it wasn’t them.”

“Alright. Thank you.” Váranéstu hung up the phone. “I apologize to all of you. You are free, but it may be wise to stay in the valley for a few days.”

“We’re here for several weeks, so you’ll be able to find us easily that entire time,” replied Thornton.

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