

EPISODE 1: ON THE TRAIL OF AN ANCIENT SECRET

It was four o'clock in the morning: the moment of daybreak, when partygoers head home for bed, when streetwise cats try their luck in trash cans and poets seek inspiration in the early dawn.

A greenish light cut streaks across the Cairo sky. When Jonathan first saw the small monkey perched on the branch of a nearby acacia tree, he thought that the cute little visitor was pleading for food so he threw it a banana. Jonathan had a lot on his mind and it certainly wasn't the monkey that was bothering him. But, in his wildest dreams, he could never have guessed that the pleasing of this particular monkey was about to change his life. He yawned and went inside.

Jonathan O'Lochan, Counselor of the Embassy of the United States of America in Egypt did not find the moment propitious. With a mug of fresh brewed coffee in his hand to help him start the day after a troubled and sleepless night, he glanced at his surroundings. The balcony overlooked a garden and birds were already chirping through the early morning mist. The Counselor's residence was an old colonial villa in the center of Cairo, decorated with white stucco and surrounded by a small park. It was conveniently located in Tibbanah Street, and from the balcony one could see the dome of the Blue Mosque, founded by Prince Aqsunqur Al-Nassery in 1347 AD. In quieter times Jonathan would sometimes go there and enjoy the mosaics of Muslim art on its walls. For reasons of security the Administration had wanted to relocate him to the confines of a walled compound and he had fought hard to be allowed to keep this little oasis of calm. He shrugged as he peered through the mist at the Egyptian security man standing at the gate. The thought crossed his mind that maybe one day a guard such as this might empty a machine gun into his belly.

Indeed, the day before had seen yet another bloody terror attack on the streets of Jerusalem. He wondered how it was that there could be so much hate in the Holy Land, where so many prophets, even Christ himself, had walked and preached the eternal brotherhood of man? It was so hard to build peace and so easy to trigger conflict.

Jonathan was an American scholar, fluent in Arabic and Urdu. He had been instrumental in improving relationships between the USA and the Islamic countries. Cementing a peace process between Israel and its neighbors had been a cornerstone of this policy. Yet with this latest atrocity, the gunning down of the Prime Minister of

Israel as he was leaving a peace rally, it seemed to Jonathan as though history had moved past an invisible line, one that should never be crossed, and with fateful consequences for all. After all, the First World War had started with a few gunshots, when the heir to the Hapsburg imperial throne was assassinated in Sarajevo.

Forcing aside these gloomy thoughts, he took a deep breath, absorbed the freshness of the early hour and noticed the morning dew that carries promises for the new day. He sadly remembered the idealism of his youth and the words of the prophet Isaiah engraved on the circular wall of the Sharansky steps on East 43rd Street in front of the United Nations Headquarters in New York: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore.” Such had been the dream of the founding fathers of the United Nations but it all sounded somewhat naïve now; unfortunately, the reality had so far turned out to be very different.

“You’ve been ages out there on the balcony, what’s up?” His sister Tracy greeted him with a dreamy voice, hair falling in her face, as she emerged half asleep from the guest bedroom. It was so good to have her with him on a visit from home; she was a comforting presence who helped him face the stresses of these dark days.

“I am struggling with my thoughts, dear sister, those stubborn enemies,” he answered lightly, not wanting to voice his worries. He took a shower, had breakfast, and left early for the office.

The line that Jonathan had long defended for US Middle East policy, ‘no peace without justice,’ was blurring rapidly as the State Department became overrun by damage containment and, irrespective of the consequences that would entail, an apparent willingness to do business with Israel at any price. Jonathan’s attempts to focus American policy back to a ‘just peace for all’ had largely failed and the thought depressed him. He had the troubling impression that the senior Embassy staff did not want him here any longer: they were so often at loggerheads. He felt helpless and humbled.

“God please, take us out of this mess,” he muttered under his breath as he was processed through the security checks at the Embassy entrance. “The only one I have been able to help since I was posted here is the monkey who turned up this morning in my garden,” he thought as he grabbed the top layer of faxes and memos in his in-tray.

During the emergency meeting called at the Embassy in the aftermath of the assassination, his Ambassador stated that the peace process would continue as before

and he deliberately, it seemed to Jonathan, played down the impact of the tragedy. Counselor O'Lochan felt irritated and increasingly cranky: he just couldn't see the usefulness of cultivating a state of denial. He had been intemperately vocal in his disagreement with his boss -- never a good strategy for a diplomat, and his observations had been abruptly dismissed.

"The motto of my country is *e pluribus unum*, 'out of many, one.' How is it that America, a country whose citizens come from so many different nations of the world and who live there in relative peace and harmony, a country that is always trying to do the right thing, always ends up on the wrong side of the fence, being blamed for most of what goes wrong in the world?" Diplomacy was a frustrating job, thought Jonathan.

More to the point, what could he, Jonathan, do about it? He had entered the diplomatic service to play a part in expressing the solidarity of his country with the other nations of this world. Was he going to find himself spending most of his professional life in fenced-in compounds, surrounded by Marines and bodyguards? Maybe he should just forget about all this and find a better-paid, less-stressful job? Such questions had been the source of his sleepless night.

Only one prospect cheered his somber mood: he had a meeting planned for that evening with his dearest friend, Lakshman Kharadvansin, an archeologist, who was in Cairo after a short visit to southern France. He would come with his cousin Lakshmi Vani after an eventful exploration that had taken them deep into the Sahara desert.

A month ago Lakshman had sent Jonathan some artifacts of potentially earth-shattering archeological importance that he had discovered in a remote desert location. He knew that Jonathan had access to CIA facilities and that he could count on his discretion.

Preliminary results of carbon dating were astounding: the objects, indicating great artistic and technical sophistication, dated back some ten thousand years. When informed of their age, Lakshman had pleaded on the phone that, for reasons he said he would explain later, at this stage he did not want the archeological or any other authorities to become involved. He could hardly contain his excitement and this was indicative of something most exceptional, thought an intrigued Jonathan, because Lakshman was normally rather circumspect, not given to exaggeration or displays of superfluous emotion. Lakshman did not want to talk in detail on the phone but had

promised to tell him everything when they next met.

More surprises came in. The day before, Jonathan had received a rather beguiling fax from his friend. Lakshman had sent him copies of a few pages from an old manuscript that he had found in a remote abbey in the south of France. He had highlighted a passage of the text entitled *Chronicles of Provence*, the memoirs of the Count de Provence, one of the great barons of the kingdom of France in the Middle Ages. The faxed pages related a strange event.

One Christmas Eve, the Count and his escort, were traversing a dense forest, seeking to find refuge from a fierce snowstorm. Suddenly, a lone knight barred the way; he was guarding a bridge over a small river and wanted to extract a tribute from the travelers. The knight's mantle was in tatters but, from the cross adorning it, the Count deduced that this grim figure had once belonged to the order of the Knights Templar. Foot soldiers from the Count's escort attacked the bold challenger but were swiftly repelled. The Count, in no mood for fighting on such an inhospitable and holy night, reported in his memoirs that he had addressed the lone warrior thus:

“Greetings my friend, don't you have more holy work to do on the eve of Christmas than to extract a ransom from the Count de Provence? Behind me are five of my best archers. They will easily put a term to your insolent pretense. But, you seem noble and brave. Tell me who you are, what is your errand, and I shall spare your life.”

The knight did not expect such courtesy and thus responded sadly: “ My lord, my name is Renaud. I lost my family, land, and honor and I have resolved that I shall perish here or take a ransom. Hear the sad plight of a lost knight. Years ago, when we were young, my friends and I went to the Crusades to find the traces of our Lord Jesus in the Holy Land. We, in the order of the Temple, wanted to free his birthplace from the presence of the infidels and to prepare the conditions for his return. I wanted to defeat those who are cruel and false, but in the process, I myself became cruel and false. It was my original intention to fight evil and to spread goodness but in the process I killed fair and gentle people and became infused with evil myself. It is a great enigma that in desiring so much to do good, I did so much wrong.

“This may be true, but the mystery of sin is the human condition, there is no answer to this paradox, ” responded the Count with an emerging sympathy for the knight-turned-robber.

“There is, sire,” responded the knight defiantly, and he added unexpectedly,

“I threw my sword at the feet of the Archangel Michael and asked him to take away my sins. He told me my sins would be washed away if I could unveil the mystery of Dagad Trikon.”

To Jonathan’s frustration, the text stopped there. Lakshman had not sent any more of the story of the encounter between the Count and the knight. The words ‘Dagad Trikon’ had been underlined and there was a single comment, written feverishly in the margin: “Jonathan, some of the Knights Templar knew about my discovery. Wait until I am back. This is so big!”

This laconic reference to the tale of the knight robber had whetted the diplomat’s curiosity. Why had Lakshman bothered to send him this piece of archival material?

His cousin Lakshmi Vani had spent the afternoon on a shopping mission to the Khan Khalili bazaar. Comprising an array of shops dating back to the fourteenth century, the bazaar is renowned for its indigenous character and for the magnificent variety of gold and silver works, embroidered clothing, leather goods, and hand-carved woodwork to be found there. The shopkeepers and taxi drivers of Cairo are as sweet as Turkish delight but twice as sticky, and a shopping trip could easily result in a huge bill. But Lakshmi was not easy to persuade, and she’d returned with only the items on her original list. She was particularly pleased with her purchase of a fine example of an onyx statue of the sacred falcon Horus, the tutelary bird deity of ancient Egypt.

The evening brought a welcome relief from the oppressive heat of the afternoon as she hurried to find Lakshman on the terrace of the Sheraton Hotel. He had obtained a table by the Nile, where he was now relaxing while awaiting the arrival of his friends. The colossi of stone watching over this ancient river in the gray mist were no longer sphinxes or pyramids; now, their names were Intercontinental, Meridian and Sheraton. The reflection of their lights, dancing on the surface of the river, signaled that these were indeed the temples of the modern age. At a nearby embankment, tourists were boarding a cruise ship where they would enjoy fine Lebanese food, the breezes of the Nile, and the traditional skills of a belly dancer. In the Sheraton, the waiters served scented mint tea and gorgeous Arab pastries that explained perhaps the plump contours of the ladies from Cairo’s high society who were gossiping at a nearby table. The cousins ordered two fresh limejuices. A strong bond of friendship had brought Lakshman and Lakshmi together since early

childhood. The cool of dusk provided a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. While they waited impatiently for the arrival of Jonathan O'Lochan, they chatted happily and reviewed the events of the past weeks.

Lakshman and Jonathan had been friends since their time at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington D.C., after which they had followed very different paths. Jonathan had pursued a career in the U.S. Administration whereas Lakshman, having graduated in archeology, had specialized in that discipline. Somewhat unusually, Lakshman was a European child who had been adopted at the age of eight by a rich jeweler in Mumbai. He could now afford to follow his passions and had enough money to do what really pleased him. The information he looked forward to sharing with Jonathan carried more than its share of excitement.

Over the past few years Lakshman, with the help of his cousin, had focused his attention on some ancient Sanskrit manuscripts that contained descriptions of lost civilizations. His research had led him to explore the temples and pyramids of Egypt. In the temple of Abidos, which probably dated from the time of Seti I, he had discovered a beam, between two high columns, about twenty feet off the ground. The original overlaying panel bearing Egyptian hieroglyphics had crumbled and fallen away, revealing an even older panel behind it. This older panel contained carvings of unknown origin, many representing flying chariots, figures on flying horses or geometric figures and numbers that, after some further investigation, appeared to correspond to flight trajectories. With this information, Lakshman had identified an area in the midst of the desert that seemed to be the hub of what he was forced to conclude, after much double-checking, reluctance, and skepticism, was the origin of the flight paths indicated on the beam.

He had decided to travel to this location in the Sahara and had invited Lakshmi to join him from Mumbai, as Lakshman valued his cousin's resourcefulness and enjoyed her company too. Now however, he confided in her a strong sense that he was under surveillance. He was certain too that his computer files had been searched and after discussing the matter together, they decided not to trust anyone except Jonathan.

Lakshmi had a light brown complexion that she had inherited from her mother, and lustrous dark hair. Her face was gently sculpted, well proportioned, and slightly round. Her eyebrows were thin and well groomed. She had a small and

delicately fashioned nose and her slender figure, wrapped in shyness, exuded great charm. But all the gifts nature had given her paled in comparison to her eyes. They were, liquid, shaped like long lotus petals and shone with shades of green and blue. For those who knew her, she didn't always have to speak, for her eyes could express what she felt far better than words.

Lakshmi, for her part, had pursued divergent interests, having studied bioscience and ancient religions. She too didn't fit into a convenient stereotype and, like her cousin; she was able to enjoy the best of all cultures. At a Mumbai party, for example, she would be one of the few women still dressed in traditional fashion, looking beautiful in a silk sari, or she might be found on a beach at sunrise, offering flowers to a sand statue of the elephant-headed god Ganesh that she had molded artistically by hand. She was, at the same time, a modern woman, who excelled at horse riding and flying aircraft. Lakshmi's perspicacity and stamina were precious to Lakshman, who enthusiastically involved her in his research. This latest archeological venture seemed to be the most promising to date; indeed it had the unmistakable potential to be the high point of his archeological career. Together, they reviewed their recent discovery.

As they approached their destination in a rented Fokker plane, a spectacular sight had greeted them. From the expanses of the Sahara's sands, a huge mountainous complex arose before them. They were surprised to find curved canyons and chiseled peaks and they admired three protruding monoliths that glowed in the sun with a fiery red hue. This ragged landscape was an otherworldly sight: in the midst of these ever-shifting desert sands, such a dramatic arrangement of rock took their breath away. Lakshmi slowly lowered the plane as she searched for a suitable landing place. Lakshman was completely engrossed by what he saw, as their descent revealed more and more details of the spectacular landscape unfolding beneath them. He sensed the rich archeological promise of the place and his eyes were lit with childlike wonder. Lakshmi landed the plane on an unusual flat granite table that afforded a suitable airstrip.

They were surprised to find no mention of this particular mountain system on their topographical maps but it took them some time to realize that there was something extraordinary in the fact that they had managed to reach this place at all, equipped only with hunches derived from the Abidos temple. After a few days of searching, they had found grottoes and chambers that had traces of ancient human

dwellings. They had then begun to explore the labyrinth of caves and corridors leading to the bottom of a canyon. They were soon rewarded: they found pieces of artifacts which, when examined by Lakshman, revealed the existence of an ancient race who predated the ancient Egyptians.

They found inscriptions that at first baffled Lakshman. However, with growing excitement and after a number of failed attempts, he successfully deciphered a few with the help of a table indicating a connection to Egyptian hieroglyphics.

He discovered that these long-extinct people had called themselves the Avasthas and that they had known this desert mountain site as Dagad Trikon.