

Noah's Art by JB Dukes

Chapter 1

January 1950

South-west Turkey

The two young men stand like ancient seafarers on white steps roughly carved out of rock and leading down to an old stone quay. They are looking out to sea and scanning the narrow gulf for signs of a boat. They don't know what kind of boat. He hasn't told them that. Only the day and the place and the flag it will be flying. It has taken them the best part of a month to make their way by foot, donkey carts and for one grateful day, a motorised logger's truck, from the eastern border of Turkey to the Aegean coast. Now they are here. A fisherman they met in the town of Mugla, half a days mule ride away and where they had spent the previous night, offered to guide them down from the mountain plateau to the ruins of the ancient harbour. *Roman*, he had confided with pride. They found it hidden amongst the pine trees to one side of a tiny fishing village that he called Akyaka – meaning *white*.

White. Pure. Most fitting.

The original port, the fisherman said, had been destroyed by an earthquake centuries ago; now the only vessels moored to the ancient granite blocks are a few old fishing boats. It looks less than a mile across the Gulf of Gokova, but distances are deceptive as dusk approaches. With the sun already sunk behind the high mountain they have just descended, the water is merging into the darkening shadows of the low-forested hills on the other side. Somewhere over there perhaps, the boat is waiting. *It will have to be bigger than these tiny craft to carry us safely to our destination.*

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The taller of the two, wrapped in a roughly woven cloak against the January chill, his proud and handsome young face framed in a white head-dress made of a softer fabric, turns as he catches the distant sound of their guide's mule-cart clip-clopping back up the mountain path. He catches a breath of wind carrying the menthol scent of pine mixed with eucalyptus and laced with just a hint of mountain sage. He breathes deeply. Eyes closed, facial muscles relaxed, he nods in slow motion, as though settling some great matter.

The guide had not accepted payment. His service had been offered gladly because although his passenger is young – still in his teens – his reputation has spread far. He is a holy fighter. But not just any. He is a holy man first and a fighter second. Most unusual. Already a leader in the resistance movement some say. The guide might have guessed that the visitors to his hidden harbour are on their way to the newly occupied Palestine. Or he may have believed them to be touring his country's coastal cities preaching the young seer's strange and potent blend of devotion and militancy.

When the seer turns back towards the sea the boat is there. A heavy looking wooden gulet with three sails of brown canvass has slipped silently into view – perhaps it had been moored in the next bay. Or perhaps it had been there all along, camouflaged by the shifting shadows of the light waves. It is making its way towards them. His friend sees it at the same time and they grip each other's arms in unspoken solidarity then instinctively utter quiet prayers of thanks.

Neither of them has executed a man in cold blood before.

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It will be different from killing at a distance, as they both have done alongside the Palestinians. The idea of a symbolic killing is surely more acceptable than ritualistic killing. He has had a problem with that for a while. But now that he has put a line between the two ideas he has a peace about it.

In a way, all death is symbolic. Has not the one who gives breath drawn a line in the life of a man after which it will be taken away? Why could life not have gone on for a hundred and fifty years? Or more. It is a judgement. A mercy even, given mens' propensity to go the way of impurity. So if it is the will of Allah to curtail the human span for his own purposes, why should he not ask one of his faithful to execute his will. *To execute*. And why should the righteous object? He knows it is wrong to doubt. It will be easy. All that Allah has ever asked him to do has been easy. There is always the strength to accompany the task. *And have we two brothers not lived since the day our mother stopped suckling us, under the daily discipline of only doing what the Holy One asks?*

They had not chosen this way. It had been chosen for them. Who knows where it will lead. For now, all they know is that they have important people to meet and a job to do. First in Palestine and then in Tehran.

For a moment, he lets his gaze dwell on the gathering darkness within the bay but finds himself disturbed by the grey opaqueness of the sea. A flicker of doubt again, quickly suppressed. He looks to the west where a few remaining gilded lines edge ribbons of sky that are still bright blue. Like the golden-blue universe hidden in the eyes of an Afghan fighter he once lifted half dead from a wadi floor. His thoughts

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drift to the many millions of people much farther west than where he stands, upon whom the sun is still shining from its zenith.

It will not shine on you for very much longer. When it comes, night will draw in rapidly.

With a revived sense of certainty and purposeful symbolism, he turns his back on the infidelic millions, moving a step or two so he has a clearer view eastwards, beyond the giant eucalyptus trees bordering the old harbour. The wide valley that feeds its rivers into the sea here, is flanked by mountains that are now only discernible in partial silhouette. Just below the crescented moon, one snow-capped peak has the symmetrically convex profile of a volcano, and he tries to imagine the Anatolian Peninsula being shaped and reshaped by cataclysmic events. He imagines his home several hundreds of miles beyond the horizon and he thinks of the power of Allah to create and to destroy.

At the Day of Judgement, will he willingly submit when the end comes? Will he raise his hands in welcome submission as Allah's terrible devastation comes upon him? He knows that he will. Couldn't be more certain of it as his heart wells up inside him. It is as though he is not only being asked to submit to the inevitability of Judgement Day but to share in its divine purpose. He finds himself breathing quickly, eyes moistening as his spirit is caught up in a quiet ecstasy that is now his frequent companion. As he turns to his friend he finds himself muttering his own version of Hafiz, one of his beloved Persian poems:

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Why do preachers commend penitence when they seem so disinclined to repentance? Possibly they think no Judgement Day will visit them and no judge punish them for their fraudulence.

“They will be judged brother.” His friend says, touching his arm gently, understanding his mood perfectly. “They will all be judged.”

As they turn in unison towards the approaching boat he knows with utter conviction what he must do. The brothers who have tried to dissuade him from his present mission are misguided. What would they think of the bigger purpose he has just silently committed to? He has not seen it quite so clearly before. But now that he knows what he must give the rest of his life to he realises that he has known all along: even these, his brothers, belong to the fraudulent preachers. He will make his path without them. With them, but separated. Set apart. It is what ‘holy’ means.

Then as they step onto the granite quay to await a tiny rowing boat now making its way toward them, he stops, arrested by another profound and life-changing thought. Perhaps it *is* a ritual killing after all. Like the prophet Ibrahim preparing to offer up his son Ishmael. And the animal that he bled in his son's place. Is not Eid ul-Adha a ritual killing ordained by Allah himself? Then another thought re-triggers his elation. Allah had used no human intervention at the time of Noah. Surely the great Flood was a ritual too was it not? A wiping clean and starting again? Purely divine. Awesome in its scale and majesty. He looks at the blackness of the sea again and this time feels no unease, only a sense of oneness with the Divine Judge.

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