

Noah's Art by JB Dukes

Chapter 2

Forty-four years later

April 1994

New Orleans, USA

There are four of them seated around the oval end of a long boardroom table. At the head sits a tall and lean man with the handsome features of a high caste Indian or Central Asian nobleman and eyes of startlingly deep turquoise-green that are surveying the little group with what could be mild amusement. He has the alertness and bearing of someone not yet past the prime of life, but the sagging tanned skin at the base of his neck, visible above a collarless shirt of fine white linen, suggests he could be considerably older.

To those familiar with the Middle East, he speaks with the gently rounded soft consonants of an Iranian. The Persian linguist in the CIA's National Clandestine Service who listened in on a fragment of phone conversation a few days earlier had thought she heard hints of a highly palatanised West Iranian dialect. It could have been the Dimili dialect common in eastern Turkey, but there again there was something quite Gilaki about it - from quite a different area altogether, near the Caspian Sea. She had been puzzled, but the fragment, which had been intercepted on a Belgian network, had been so short it was not worth transcribing.

To the untrained ear, however, the Iranian's English is impeccable. To his left sits an American of similar build but younger and with much less handsome features made weaker by a large moustache and glasses too big for him. The American shifts in his chair uneasily, eyes fixed on a stapled sheaf of papers placed on the table in front of him. To the right of the Iranian sits a man and then a woman both in their early

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thirties. The man is wearing a tight fitting tee shirt under an expensive suit. He is thin but muscular with a shock of thick fair hair and has just spoken, using a cultured Russian accent. In one hand he holds a cigarette between his forefinger and thumb and with the other he grips his copy of the report that sits in front of each of them. His gaze follows a trail of cigarette smoke spiralling upwards toward the giant wooden fan that revolves slowly in the room's high ceiling. The woman is a less healthy specimen altogether, with a pale face pockmarked with scarring and framed by thin mouse brown hair. Her grey eyes are sunken, hardened and distanced, and they are locked on the Iranian's hands as they move in carefully controlled circles on the richly polished tabletop. At the brief introductions - hers was monosyllabic - she had spoken like an American but with the hint of a European accent. The begrudged exchanges had been at the invitation of the Iranian and now he is speaking again.

"Gentlemen." Then turning with an affected bow of the head, "And ladies. I think we all know why this meeting was necessary."

There is a pause while his hands each make a single circle in opposite directions.

"I am honoured to be your host and grateful that you have made such an effort to oblige each other. We shall not be more than half an hour at most and then, Insh'allah, you may return to your various, ah, responsibilities."

He speaks slowly with precision and looks at each in turn. Only the Russian refuses to return eye contact.

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The Iranian has made only the smallest acknowledgement of the distances they have come. He himself has travelled over the previous three days from Singapore with a flight to Paris Charles de Gaulle; train to Brussels and a short flight from Brussels to London's Stanstead Airport. From there he had taken two trains and a black cab to London Heathrow and flown to New Orleans with a connection at Chicago O'Hare. The Russian's journey has been no less circuitous, starting in Moscow and arriving in Louisiana via Madrid, Argentina and Mexico. The woman has flown in that morning from LAX - Los Angeles' International Airport - and the American with the moustache, who has had the shortest journey of them all, has driven down the day before from Chattanooga, Tennessee. It is he who has organised the venue – the clubhouse of a luxurious golfing resort at a place called English Turn, named after a decisive battle in the War of Independence. For some in the meeting, the location has ironic significance.

“We have all read our friend's report.” The Iranian gives a slight wave towards the American with oversized glasses, although he is still looking at the Russian as though willing his attention. “It is intriguing I think – I hope to everyone's approval?”

The American is the first to respond.

“May we know *anything* about the origin?” The issue has clearly been raised on some previous occasion.

The Russian carefully lowers his gaze from the ceiling to look first at the Iranian and then, with obvious contempt, at the questioner.

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“The trade embargo doesn't stretch to pieces of stone. There are many corrupt officials in Saddam's cultural bureau.”

The Russian's pronunciation of 'bureau' has a touch of upper class, indicating, either a good English boarding school or mimicry of BBC radio presenters.

“An unprotected site in Southern Iraq? Do we know which?” The American with the glasses again.

The Russian only lifts an eyebrow.

“But it's been immersed in sea water for a very long time. Look at paragraph 23.” The American flips over a couple of sheets, takes off his glasses and scans the page holding it so close to his face that it looks as if he might be trying to smell the salt.

The Russian shrugs as if the matter doesn't interest him.

“But it is authenticated to your satisfaction I think?” The Iranian speaks, tilting his head slightly for the American's confirmation.

The American nods, putting his glasses back on, slamming the report onto the table and, then as if reconsidering something, shifting it 45 degrees. “All the characteristics of the earliest cuneiform script but with some unaccountable differences compared to the best known examples.”

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"Dated." The Russian is now sitting forward, apparently moving into business mode.

It is a question but comes out like a threat.

"Its all here" says the American, awkwardly fumbling his way to the middle of the report and flattening the central fold to keep it open. "Three different methods giving an average of approximately..." and he looks up nervously, "6,000 years"

A silence follows in which each of the four seem to be calculating the significance of this information to their own particular interests.

"It's impossible," says the Russian at last. "but his results match ours. A Japanese and a Moscow lab came up with the same."

There is another long silence and the Russian resumes his interest in the ceiling fan while the others leaf through the report.

Eventually the Iranian folds his hands in a priestly gesture and looks slowly at each of his guests as if inviting dissent. Then staring down the long table to a golfer on a green outside, golf club raised above his head, says:

"Then the deal is struck?"

Immediately he turns and looks directly at the woman.

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Her lips are pursed and she is staring to one side of him where one of two immaculate American flags of heavy cloth and elaborate white rope-work regale the darkly panelled walls. The second flag is on the other side of the Iranian, giving him the appearance of some senior Washington official or perhaps a past American president in a waxwork museum.

Awkwardly, she shifts a fraction in her seat so that her back is partially turned to the Russian although she is still looking past him at the Iranian. She glances at the American opposite her for a brief moment in what could be unspoken communication and then nods to the Iranian:

"Deal" she whispers. Then coughs nervously.