

Noah's Art by JB Dukes

Chapter 3

Six years later.

April 2000

London, England

The pyramidal tip of London Dockland's Canary Wharf Tower peaks through a thick blanket of toxic yellow smog. Metropolitan icons from the 1990s and 50s embracing in a prophetic photo opportunity. Sitting transfixed by the photograph in the newspaper cutting is a woman with unusual eyes. Like many Asians, they are monolids, with the skin curving in gentle concavity from the ridge of the brows to the lashes without a fold. The lashes themselves, dark and strong, ride on a part of the eyelids completely concealed by a delicately sculptured almond-arch of a hood, its taut curvature formed by the resolution of opposing hidden forces like the geometry of a suspension bridge. But it is the way the fold of the hoods curve down towards the inner corners of the eyes that causes young girls to stare in awe and old gentlemen to find an excuse to look again. Each side of the nose, the stretched skin of the upper lid overlaps the lower lid to form two distinctive epicanthal folds: the beaks of two birds of pray, facing each other, bowing.

And behind the wonder of these protruding curtains of delicate flesh, large ebony eyes dark enough not to be able to distinguish iris from pupil. Cassy Kim has achingly beautiful eyes, which are currently registering a deep vulnerability as she stares at the old newspaper picture that she has retrieved for reasons that are still confusing to her.

It is history after all - torn from a newspaper on February 11, 1996, the day after an Irish Republican Army terrorist's bomb had torn the building's shiny glass city-suit

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into a million razor-sharp fragments. The journalist had cleverly captioned it '*Canary Wharf Air*'.

Next to the cutting lies another. It too, displays a photo; grainy and more faded than the first for it was taken almost half a century earlier - in another capital city, three thousand miles to the east of London. History too – even more so. But its violence is more personal and more menacing. The figures are indistinct in the half darkness but Cassy has been able to make out three of them. One is turbaned and dressed in the sort of pantaloon suit worn by peasantry from Malaysia to Morocco. The other two are wearing some kind of uniform with ridiculously large peaked hats. They are standing around something that looks as though it might be a sack of potatoes but on closer inspection is a rather more gruesome object. It could be a decapitated body if it weren't for the unnatural position of the arms and the peculiar way the top of the head seems to emerge from the neck. It had taken a long time before she had worked out what it was. The troops of the 40th Soviet Army who spearheaded the 1978 invasion of Afghanistan had nicknamed it *the Afghan-sweater* and it was one of the reasons why terrified Moscow teenagers had deserted in thousands from the front line fight against the Mujahideen. A single cut, a ruthless tear and a man was left to suffocate under the skin of his own torso. The body is lying on a bed under a framed portrait. He had died under the watchful eye of an American President.

Cassy switches her gaze to study a set of distorted miniatures of the two newspaper cuttings, arranged like a magician's set of cards in the crone of her brand new retro-toaster. Facsimiles are often more revealing. In the world of forensics, Cassy Kim knows that real things give you the detail but abstractions make for better reflection.

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She reflects as the toaster smokes, then hits the eject and shifts position a fraction to get a sharper image of herself in the middle of the magician's cards. She moves aside an uneven thick black fringe that she wears to hide those eyes, revealing a white dressing with a line of red seeping through in a pattern that indicates it is covering a wound secured by five medical stitches. The surrounding bruise is a little less obvious than in her bathroom mirror and the image slightly more complimentary, but not much.

"Bastards" she mutters, in a soft but throaty, almost baritone voice.

The imprecation is not so much at the people responsible for the wound as at the whole set of unwelcomed events that the incident represents. Scruffing the fringe back into place as if to signal an intention to withdraw from those events, and then for reassurance, running a hand up the short crop of her neck, she smiles. Her improbably mute Albanian hairdresser had surprised her with the oddly-angled cut: longer at the front than the back. 'From the rear', the Albanian's larger than life partner had told her, "the cut makes you look like a oh so handsome schoolboy!" And he had fondled her nape tellingly as he admired his partner's creation.

From the front, she notes, looking at her reflection in the toaster, she looks anything but a schoolboy. For, sitting on her own in the kitchen of her London house in the manner that is her habit, there is on her body, not a stitch of clothing.

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The head wound had been sustained on the way to the lab. The car had suddenly accelerated from behind and swerved sharply left in one calculated movement.

That was over a week ago and Cassy Kim is still unnerved. It is now Sunday morning and she is comforting herself with burnt toast smothered in butter. It has to be almost black. One of her lovers, she can't recall which, had told her it was because she takes everything to extremes.

Choral singing has just given way to a radio news bulletin. The singing is more than background noise for company – she has long been addicted to pre-classical European sacred music. A daily fix seems to anchor something in her otherwise unruly soul.

Now she reaches forward to turn up the volume.

“...a group calling itself the Human Extinction Front yesterday claimed responsibility for releasing a canister of oestrogen-rich chemicals into the Hamburg water supply. In a note sent to a German newspaper the HEF claims to have been experimenting with fertility-reducing compounds for the past fifteen years.”

Experiments on the public. Fifteen years. Cassy turns the volume up a bit more.

“A spokesman for the Hamburg police said that a woman in her twenties, thought to be a student at a London university, had been taken into custody.”

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Cassy munches on a corner of carbon and ponders a world with only a handful of survivors. The idea conjures surreal images. The notion of starting again appeals. Who wouldn't want to start again? She looks across the room to the only photo she has of the disturbed teenage girl who has so dominated her life. Next to it is another trophy to failure: Zach, the man who had been her lover then briefly her husband. In her mind, she imagines the record of her accomplishments extending, with photos of too many partners to count, filling the gap since Zach. Or filling the gap that has forever been her secret handicap. A fresh start for a tired planet? The kettle clicks itself off and a cloud of steam becomes a low mist hovering above primeval rain forests of the future - on pristine islands of a new Southern Ocean. She wonders what it would be like to step deafened over the brow of a hill, to be the first human to peer into the abyss of the mighty Victoria Falls of a new era.

Whichever way you look at it, terracide, as the eco-terrorists call it, can't justify genocide.