

# Noah's Art by JB Dukes

## Chapter 6

Isle of Dogs, Central London

April 2000

Two days after Cassy's meeting in Manhattan, she is back in her London home, the clouds gone and a morning sun casting its light and its long shadows in equal measure - a chiaroscuro drape over a familiar view. The two newspaper cuttings are still on the breakfast table - next to a cafetiere full of stale coffee, abandoned when the taxi called for her New York flight.

She had established long ago that the Tehran photo came from an Arabic daily published in Iran in the days before the 1979 Revolution. It was a poor taste 'on the scene' picture story, common in the newspapers of developing countries. The press turns up, takes explicit pictures of blood, bodies and handcuffed villains and prints them for effect with minimal commentary, with the full story coming in the next day's edition if at all. The cutting is faded and frayed at the edges with tape holding two halves together. The date at the top of the page is just discernible as the fourth day of the Islamic year, 1375 AH: November 29<sup>th</sup> 1954 in Western time. It had mysteriously come into Cassy's possession four decades after being printed - during the second year of her abortive marriage to Zach.

With the puzzle and pain of Zach in mind Cassy makes up a fresh cafetiere, filling the kitchen with a sharp aroma. She tries to relax her jaw, realising she has been

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clenching it tight for days. The radio is on and the newsreader changes his tone to sound mildly upbeat. It looks like the long awaited deal to finally disarm the Irish Republican Army is about to be struck and politicians are making upbeat statements.

*Fools. Reigning-in those who've tasted the elixir of anarchy is an impossible task.*

The thousand kilograms of explosives that had wrecked the Dockland skyscraper in her home neighbourhood in 1996 had been detonated by a rogue IRA cell disenfranchised by the first faltering steps of the peace process. She presses the plunge-filter of the cafetiere and it jams, showering steaming coffee over the tabletop. She curses the hailstorm of coffee grouts raining down on the beleaguered Canary Wharf Tower threatening to engulf it completely. Out of the window the real thing sparkles sunlight from its long-reinstated mirror walls. The reflection of a low-flying plane from nearby London City airport briefly appears then disappears.

*An American professor died cruelly after attending a conference at Tehran University. Our reporter arrived minutes after the police who examined the body in a hotel room where a member of the cleaning staff found it. The manner of death indicates this is not a robbery. The young academician was well respected in the Middle East and had been the guest of the University on previous occasions. This visit seemed destined to ill fate - he was on the BOAC flight to Tehran from Jordan last week that had to return to Amman airport after getting into technical trouble.*

Having the caption translated was as far as Cassy had got; that and discovering that the newspaper had been closed down with many others after Ayatollah Khomeini's

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return to Tehran. The envelope containing the faded piece of Iranian newsprint had since gathered dust on top of Cassy's wardrobe.

She looks out of her window at London – like Tehran, New York and so many other capitals - complex and powerful engines keeping national and global economies going. But uncontrollable, unpredictable and vulnerable.

*What kind of person becomes a terrorist? Same sort of reason why I said yes to MI5 I'm guessing.*

She had been approached as she was leaving the university one afternoon by a humourless American in a perfectly cut but unimaginative light grey suit; and then a day after, by appointment in her office, by a diffident young man from MI5. The combination of his awkwardness and the noble line of his jaw had evoked a complex emotion. She had wanted to reach out and touch him – like a museum sculpture of some ancient boy hero. Maybe *he* was the reason she took the job. Cassy had made other significant commitments on lesser whims.

The real reason, she knows, is that it appealed to her need to always be moving on; her need to be fighting someone or something. For a while, her university job was an act of rebellion. She left the house each morning with a fresh wonder at the audacity of it: *Cassy Kim, a university lecturer. Member of the intelligencia. Establishment. If only they knew.* But when the job no longer satisfied her deep need to prove she was different from everyone else, she had signed up as a 'retained expert' in Scotland Yard's forensic team, ratchetting up the irony. The renewed dissonance between who

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she knew she was and her public role had kept her going for a few more years. But it had worn off and she had been about to give up both jobs to go travelling when MI5 came knocking. The timing had been precise.

In truth, she knew that it was neither the boy with the noble jaw nor her restless rebelliousness that made her take the assignment. She had taken it to exorcise herself from the ghost of Zach and all that he represented.

She touches her scarred temple and winces.

*Human society, like the human soul, is too bloody fragile.* Cassy sighs, pressing harder to feel the pain. In one way it's come a long way since Plato's Republic. In other ways it hasn't. There's always intrigue, plotting and subversion - those within the system and those who for their own reasons want to remain on its margins.

*Plato.*

Nigel had asked if any of her students read Plato.

*Cleito is a character in one of Plato's Dialogues. What am I meant to make of that?*



Cleito was a mortal woman who at the beginning of the world lived on an island surrounded by rings of outer islands. She married the god Poseidon and fathered five sets of twin sons. The eldest became king of an idyllic island kingdom 'no smaller

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than Africa and Asia joined together' later destroyed and sunk beneath the waves in a mythical or pre-historic cataclysm. Plato the ancient Greek philosopher learned of the story from an even more ancient manuscript written by Solon, an Athenian lawyer in exile from Egypt and Solon had heard it from Egyptian wise men. The chain of recantation went far back into man's pre-history.

The story is familiar to Cassy from teenage days and the smell of the great hall in the private girls school comes flooding back. The eldest of *Cleito's* sons was *Atlas* and his sunken kingdom, *Atlantis*. Plato recorded his version of the story in the dialogues *Critias* and *Timaeus*, written in the third century BC but Solon had lived three hundred years before him and Plato estimated that Atlantis had sunk 9,000 years before Solon. *Far back indeed.*

Three days after returning from New York Cassy is working late in her office in central London. She prefers it in the university at night: no one else is there. An information bulletin lies on the desk in front of her – it has arrived that morning and seems to be another attempt to initiate her into Nigel's underworld. At the top of the single page in neatly formed handwriting he has written simply *Cassandra dear - for your information*. It is headed *March bulletin* and contains several short reports.

*Leeds - London Daily Telegraph, 2nd February - A team of young Pakistani Muslims was yesterday asked to leave the country within three days. A Home Office spokesman said the youths, aged between seventeen and twenty-one, are suspected of being in Britain in connection with an extreme political movement rather than for legitimate religious reasons. Lawyers acting on behalf of the Leeds Mosque where the group has*

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*been based for the last month have lodged an appeal, claiming the government has produced no evidence to support the charge.*

The next one has similarities.

*Jerusalem - Reuters, London, 15th February - Fourteen members of a US doomsday cult were deported from Israel early yesterday after being detained by Israeli police on suspicion they were plotting violence to hasten Jesus' return, Israeli police said. "The plane took off several minutes ago, they're on their way back," a police spokeswoman said. They were being escorted to the United States by three Israeli policemen.*

*They're all bloody at it, Cassy mutters aloud. A third item seems to have something to do with Nigel's current Iraqi case.*

*New York - The Times, London, 20th February – Algerian illegal immigrant dies in New York car crash killing mother and baby.*

A hand-written note adds that the Algerian's presence in New York had come to light six months earlier during the interrogation of a Yemeni being held in a Saudi prison. His identity has been linked to a Kuwaiti citizen suspected of being a double agent working for Iraq in the late eighties. He had been put under surveillance but seemed to be lying low. Apart from once driving slowly past a container port, there was nothing to indicate his reason for renting a midtown Manhattan apartment for six years. A surveillance team was following him when he apparently lost control of his

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car and had the head-on collision. It doesn't say what had triggered the assignment of the surveillance team.

Not far away, Westminster's Big Ben strikes twelve chimes for midnight. Cassy has just finished writing a lecture and is tired and ready to go home. Instead, she turns to her computer and following a hunch types in the words *Cleito* and *120 years*. She is startled by the phone. She doesn't get phone calls at work this time of the night - not any more. She recalls the difficult days towards the end of her 'experimental' marriage. Zach had eventually stopped checking up on her. They had agreed on marriage as a fun experiment one lazy Saturday morning in bed. It hadn't come naturally to either of them. Cassy grabs the receiver to stop the noise - and the memories.

"Yes I'm still here." She answers irritably, suppressing a yawn and combing a hand slowly through her dishevelled hair.

The security guard has seen the light in her room and worked out whose office it is to save himself the climb. Cassy walks over to the window and waives blindly towards the gate lodge far below. The building is dark apart from an office-white glow from the lodge and the reflection of her window in the wing facing her. The colleges of the University of London are housed in many buildings all over the capital. This one is an awful 1960s monument to Europe's modernism project – twelve floors of low quality glass and dull grey cladding with horribly textured concrete forming the concourse at ground level. The thought that someone once thought it a good design depresses her.

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Putting the phone down she turns to the computer and hits return. Within half a second, billions of words and six continents later, a result flashes up on the screen. She smiles, hunch rewarded. It is why she is a good forensic scientist - hunches don't usually travel in straight lines. There is just one occurrence found on the entire Web.

The screen has turned deep turquoise and white, bathing the room in a phosphorescent glow. The white at the top of the screen fades into the turquoise-blue like an exotic cocktail topped with an ice cream float. On this background are several lines of writing in an elaborate gold-coloured script.

*'We sent Noah a long time ago to his people, and he said, O my people! Serve God. Then We inspired him, saying: Make the ship under Our eyes and Our inspiration. Then, when Our command comes and the water gushes forth, plead not with Me on behalf of those who have done wrong. They will be drowned. So the Ark floated with them on the waves towering like mountains and Noah called out to his son, who had separated himself from the rest: "O my son! embark with us, and be not with the unbelievers!". The son replied: "I will take myself to some mountain: it will save me from the water". And Noah's son and Noah's wife were consigned to hell.'*

*So. Noah's wife didn't make it, Cassy tutts, shaking her head. Was it her wickedness, lack of faith in Noah's carpentry, or did she simply enjoy the company of her girlfriends too much? She snorts at the thought of Mrs Noah missing the boat partying.*



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The next bit is in a larger font and fills up the lower third of the screen.

*'I will not strive with man's wickedness forever, I will give him another 120 years'*

*Bingo! The 120 years match.* Without warning, her pulse starts racing. Cursoring down reveals more in a similar vein. Another piece emblazons itself across the screen:

*'Just as it happened in the days of Noah so it shall be in the days of the Son of Man. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away'*

And then a paragraph in the smaller script:

*'In the folklore of all continents there is found a memory of the ancient land that sank beneath the waves and of the righteous survivor. The Babylonians called him Ziusudra or Xisuthras, son of Oliartes. The Chinese called him Yao or Fo-Hi. The Indians call him Satyavatra, the sun-born monarch. The Greeks and Egyptians called him Atlas, eldest son of Clieto and Poseidon. Others called him Prometheus, Deucalion, Heuth, Incachus, Osiris, Dagon. He is a portent, a sign of the second judgement. Let those who have ears to hear and wisdom to understand; let them hear and understand. Let the prophet who was dead speak life. Abide in the good teacher. Before the time of the second judgement days of great evil will come upon the world. The light of Isa and other good prophets will seem to fade and a great shadow will*

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*rise in its place. The sign of the king has been given. We await the final sign. Then the end shall come.'*

There is one more paragraph, which she now is having difficulty reading, her vision blurring with rapidly swirling emotions:

*'With the breaking of the Seventh Seal comes the Seventh Day. New Heaven. Eden re-created.'*

*Noah again*, she whispers to herself slowly, trying to calm a rising panic by breathing slow and deep, hands stretched out palms down slowly patting the air.

*It's bloody happening again.*

She is wearing a loose-fitted black cashmere sweater that comes down just short of the top of her jeans and in a fit of determination she grabs the waist-band with both hands and reaches it over her head, sweat running down the elegant spinal channel formed by toned back-muscles. Her arm twists up behind her so that her hand can reach the scars, gently touching them, one by one. Always one by one. In the same order. And always gently.

They are the link with her past. Her known past and her unknown past. The ragged scars have long-since healed but the methodical gentle finger massage is her way of pretending that the pain lying not so very far below the reddened skin has also gone. It is a pretence, of course. The pain was the reason for signing the MI5 contract.

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