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The Invisible Assassin

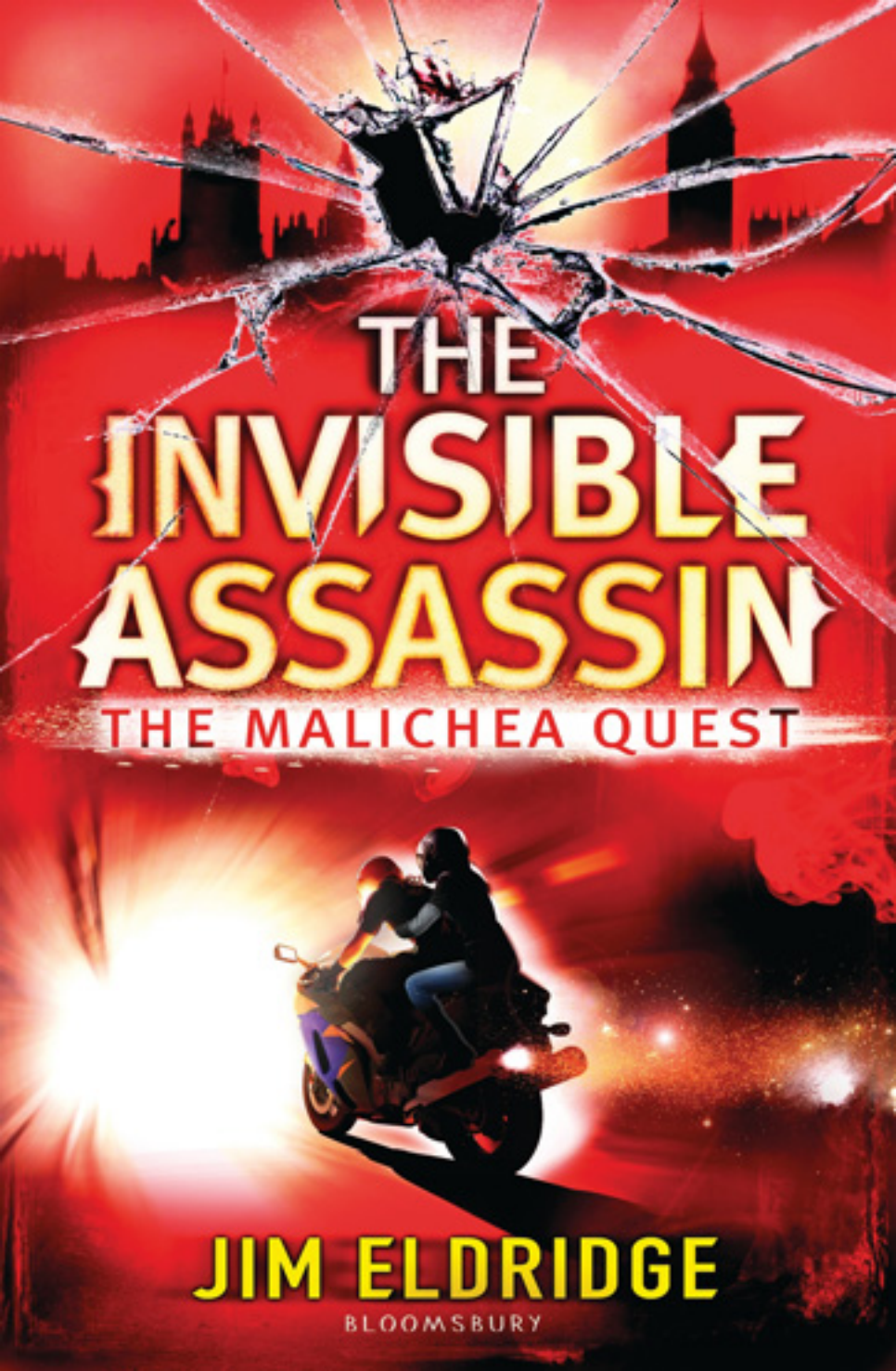
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THE INVISIBLE ASSASSIN

THE MALICHEA QUEST



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BLOOMSBURY

Chapter 1

The building site was much like any other, except for the small band of protestors standing outside the fence holding handmade placards that read 'STOP IT' and 'SACRED PLACE'. Jake Wells, a trainee press officer (or 'spin doctor', as he preferred to think of it) for the Department of Science reflected that, as protests went, it was pretty feeble. Five people and a small unkempt dog. Hardly up there with a mass student demo in the centre of London. Still, it was a protest, and as they were protesting against the construction of a new university science block on what they claimed was the site of a fairy ring, it came under his remit.

A fairy ring, for heaven's sake! He guessed that's why he'd been given this particular job. This was a story that most of the others in the press office wouldn't touch with a bargepole. But Jake wasn't like the others. It seemed that everyone else in his

department had come through the same route: public school, then university, mostly Oxford or Cambridge. When a national newspaper had pointed out how elitist this was, the department had acted to prove them wrong: a competition had been launched to offer an opportunity for a trainee press officer from what was called 'the disadvantaged'. Jake had entered. He fitted the bill perfectly: abandoned at birth, brought up in an orphanage and then a string of foster homes, and he had left school at sixteen because he couldn't afford to go on to further education. After he left school, he worked in a series of dead-end jobs. But always he had one burning ambition: to be a journalist. Every spare moment he had, he practised writing witty and biting articles about the issues of the day, exposing corrupt politicians. But getting into journalism wasn't that easy: he discovered that he needed a degree.

It was while he had been wondering how to get over this problem that he'd read about the Department of Science competition, entered it, and won his place. At last, his big opportunity! At eighteen years of age, he'd made it! Not quite the journalism he had dreamed of, but a proper job where he could hone his writing skills.

That had been nine months ago, and after nine months he was still a trainee press officer. The problem

was, as Jake saw it, they didn't know what to do with him. He wasn't 'one of them'; he didn't have the same Oxbridge connections, or relatives inside other government departments, so they didn't want to give him anything too 'sensitive'. Something where he could upset important people. So, instead, he was given the soft stories, the quirky ones. Like this one: the threat to a fairy ring.

But if I do a really good job on this one, quell the protest and come out of it smelling of roses, maybe they'll see I can actually *do* this job, Jake kept saying to himself, and next time I'll get a proper assignment. Maybe something controversial, like climate change. That was always a sure-fire step up the promotion ladder.

As he looked at the scene before him, Jake noticed that there weren't any TV cameras, or even local radio. Just a local journalist from the *Bedfordshire Times* who'd arranged to meet Jake at the site of the protest. Jake thought he saw her now: a woman in her mid-twenties talking to the protestors and jotting down notes on a pad.

Jake headed for the small group. Inside the fence, all was noise: heavy machinery, diggers tearing up the ground for the foundations for the new science block.

The young woman was talking to the elderly woman

holding the placard saying 'Sacred place', and Jake heard her asking the woman her age, identifying her at once as a journalist. What was the local print media's obsession with age? he thought. Every story had to have people's ages in brackets. 'Local businesswoman, Pauline Stone (37) . . .' or 'Mad serial killer, Victor Nutter (63) . . .'

'Penny Johnson?' he asked, and the young woman turned to face him, nodding. Jake smiled, his best press officer's smile. 'Jake Wells, Department of Science. We spoke on the phone.'

Before the young journalist could respond, the elderly woman brandished her placard at Jake angrily.

'You should be ashamed of yourself!' she shouted. 'This is a sacred place. Fairies have lived at this spot untroubled by humankind for thousands of years!'

'And I'm sure they can continue to live here,' said Jake, putting on what he hoped was a sincere expression. He struggled to remember the argument he'd been told to propose to the protestors by one of his senior colleagues. It had seemed pretty unbelievable, but it was the party line, and if he wanted to get on . . . 'As I understand it, fairies are other-dimensional, and the study of other-dimensional states of existence will be one of the areas being looked at by the new science department . . .'

‘Don’t you patronise me, young man!’ shouted the woman. ‘No good will come of this! He who disturbs this land is cursed!’

The other four protestors nodded in agreement, and the dog, held on a rather loose leash by one of them, growled at Jake. Jake, who was never fond of dogs at the best of times, especially small snappy ones, forced a smile. This wasn’t going well.

‘I’m sorry you feel like that,’ he said. ‘And the department is doing its best to minimise the disturbance to the site . . .’

‘Minimise!’ echoed the woman, incredulously. ‘Minimise!!’ She pointed her placard towards the building site, and Jake and the young journalist turned to see a huge JCB dig its bucket deep into the soil and rip it up. ‘Do you seriously call that minimal disturbance?!’

‘Well,’ began Jake, forcing himself to keep his smile in place, ‘I do agree that it *looks* as if there is a lot of damage being done, but a building can’t just be put up overnight . . .’

Whack! The woman swung her placard and hit Jake over the head with it.

‘Ow!’ said Jake. ‘Now look . . .!’

Whack! The placard swung once more, and again he felt the impact, but this time he managed to get his arm up to protect his head.

‘There’s no need for violence!’ he protested.

‘Oh yes there is!’ said the elderly woman. ‘This sacred piece of land is being violated by you and your lot!’

Jake realised that she was drawing the placard back for another bash at him, and that the leash holding the growling dog seemed to have loosened further.

‘I’ll go and have a word with the diggers,’ he offered hastily.

With that he moved nimbly away and headed for the fence and the diggers. He was aware that the reporter, Penny Johnson, was by his side.

‘I suppose being attacked is an occupational hazard for you,’ she said. ‘After all, you are part of a very unpopular government.’

‘I’m not part of the government,’ said Jake. ‘I just work for them as a press officer.’

‘You defend them,’ said Johnson.

‘I would never defend them if I thought they were wrong,’ insisted Jake. Inwardly, he reflected that he was glad this wasn’t *Pinocchio*, or his nose would be growing longer.

Most of his job so far seemed to consist of defending the government’s taking yet another wrong decision.

They had reached the fence now, and the wooden security hut by the entrance gate. Jake took out his ID card and held it open for the security guard on duty to examine. He gestured at Johnson and said, ‘She’s with me.’

‘Where are your hard hats?’ asked the security guard.

Damn! thought Jake. I knew there was something I’d forgotten. ‘I didn’t realise we needed them at this stage of construction,’ he said. ‘After all, they’re just digging for the foundations.’

‘No hard hats, no entry,’ said the security guard. ‘Those are my orders.’

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake spotted a couple of hard hats lying just inside the hut.

‘We’ll borrow those two,’ he said, pointing.

The security guard frowned, then shook his head.

‘Those belong to the company,’ he said. ‘Company use only.’

Johnson began scribbling something in her notebook. Jake could guess what it was, something along the lines of ‘Red faces at protest. A top government official was refused entry to the site where the controversial new university science block is under construction . . . blah blah blah’. Not that he was a ‘top government official’, but it sounded better than ‘trainee press officer’. Jake realised if he wasn’t to come out of this looking like a complete idiot, he had to do something, exert what little authority he had on this situation before he lost control of it completely. It was time for a bluff. Once again, Jake took out his ID card and held it out to the security guard.

‘If you read this card properly, you will see that I am representing the government minister responsible for this particular project,’ he said firmly. ‘My orders are to make an inspection today and report back. Now, if you refuse to loan us the use of those two hard hats and let us into this site, I shall telephone my department head and have this whole site closed down immediately, until such time as authority is given to supply us with the necessary hard hats. That will cost the company many hundreds of thousands of pounds and will also prejudice other contracts they have on tender with my department.’

Before the security guard could respond, Jake took out his mobile phone, poised his finger over the dial button, and continued smoothly but firmly: ‘Or perhaps you’d prefer to talk to the minister yourself, and explain to him why the site is being closed down, and he can then explain that to your boss.’ Jake nearly added, ‘So what’s it be? Come on, punk, make my day,’ but refrained. As it was he was trembling inside, terrified that the security guard would call his bluff and make him look even more of an idiot.

The security guard hesitated, then scowled and reached inside the hut. He produced the two hard hats, which Jake and Johnson put on. The inside of Jake’s stank of grease, and part of him regretted

insisting on being given it, but it was too late to back down now.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

Then he and Johnson walked through the gateway and on to the site.

‘Very macho.’ Johnson grinned. ‘I thought you said you weren’t part of the government?’

‘Hmmm,’ said Jake non-committally, and kept on walking, repeating to himself the mantra the senior press officer had driven into him on his first day: be careful about any comments you make when reporters are around.

The site was alive with activity and noise: huge yellow machines digging, dumper trucks running to and fro laden with dirt and rubble. If there were any fairies here, they’ll be long gone, thought Jake.

A shout above the noise of the machines caught his attention. It came from a hole not far away. Jake headed towards the hole, Johnson tagging along just behind him, notebook and pen at the ready. A huge digger was poised at the edge of the hole, and the driver had withdrawn the equally huge claw-like bucket to the rim. One of the building workers had jumped down into the hole and was scrabbling with his hands at something half-buried in the earth.

Oh, please, God, don’t let it be a body! groaned Jake inwardly, especially with a reporter at the scene.

But no, it appeared to be a parcel of some sort, wrapped in what looked to Jake from this distance like some kind of oiled leather.

Don't let it be a head, prayed Jake silently. Not even a head from ancient times!

Television news loved pictures of skulls being dug out of the ground. And the bunch of loonies with their placards outside the fence would love it as well; they'd claim it was the head of a fairy king, or some such nonsense. Jake reflected that it was lucky there were no TV cameras here, after all.

But it wasn't a head. The building worker stood in the hole started to unwrap the worn leather casing, and revealed what looked like some sort of big old book. He began to open it.

Jake heard a gasp of alarm from Johnson.

'Shouldn't you stop them?' she asked. 'That could be really ancient. He might damage it.'

'Yes.' Jake nodded. 'I was just about to do that.' Aloud, he called to the worker in the hole, 'Hey! You shouldn't have opened that!'

The man glared up at Jake.

'Why not?' he said.

'Because . . . ' began Jake. And then he faltered. Why not? He was sure there was some Act of Parliament or other preventing it, but he couldn't remember what it was. It was something to do with the Queen. 'Because

. . . all property found on this land is the property of the Queen, and as the representative of Her Majesty's Government on this site . . . '

Jake never finished. The building worker's expression suddenly changed from one of contempt to one of fear as he dropped the book, and then he was shaking his arm as if trying to throw off a creature, like a spider or something.

And then Jake saw the man's hand began to change, turning from a skin colour to a faint green, and the green began to blossom out, like a plant sprouting leaves at rapid speed, but these weren't leaves, they were . . . fungus. A kind of green fungus was enveloping the whole of the man's arm, creeping upwards, spreading out.

As Jake and the others watched in horror, the man ran for the edge of the hole, trying to scramble up the sides, but whatever he was trying to escape from had already got hold of him. Before their eyes, the green fungus spread, covering the man's chest, spreading rapidly downwards over his thighs, his legs, and upwards to his neck, and his head. The man was screaming in fear, but then his screams were cut off; he had disappeared and been replaced by a mass of writhing green fungus.

The weird shape tried to move, to the left, to the right, struggling, and then it collapsed. The next second

everyone was yelling and running away from the scene, desperate to put distance between themselves and the mass of what had once been a human being.

Everyone except Jake, who was rooted to the spot in spite of himself, just staring, goggle-eyed, at what was happening.