

THE TIME ASSASSIN JAMES BLAKELOCK

The bar was half-empty. Soldiers came in, drank a glass or two of yellow lager and went out again. It was a hub, a transit bar, and no-one stayed for long. There were spaceships to catch and new worlds to conquer. Only two men had been in the bar for more than two drinks. In fact, they had been in the bar for an awful lot of drinks. It seemed to the barman as he brought them another round of ersatz whiskies that they were either putting something off or waiting for something to happen; maybe, if such a thing was possible, both.

The Time Assassin James Blakelock drank another shot. He winced. "Fake whisky," he said. "No more Scotland. My fault."

His companion raised an eyebrow.

"Scotland? Don't know it," he said. "Sorry, not really a history person."

"It'll be called something else now," the Time Assassin James Blakelock said. "*Nordland*, I expect."

"*Nordengland*," said his companion. "OK." He signalled for more ersatz whisky.

The bar was getting full now, and crowded. A ship had just come in, bringing some of the biggest men the Time Assassin James Blakelock had ever seen, all of them over two meters tall.

"Steroids or born this way?" he asked his companion.

"Both," said the other man, making way for another giant.

"All my fault," sighed the Time Assassin.

It was a warm summer's day. Outside the lab, students wheeled bicycles and mopped their brows. Birds sang in the trees and there was a general sense that nothing had changed or ever would change. Somewhere down the corridor there was a flash and a small bang, as though an explosion had just been born.

A moment later the Time Assassin James Blakelock walked into the lab. A woman stood alone at a wooden bench pouring liquid from a test tube into a flask. There was a steeliness to both her hair and her manner. He went up to the woman and, with some difficulty, dropped two large holdalls in front of her.

"Margaret Hilda Roberts," said the Time Assassin James Blakelock. "There are eight million pounds in gold bars in these bags. It took me five years to collect but you can have it on one condition. Stick to chemistry, Miss Roberts, and whatever you do don't go into politics."

The Time Assassin James Blakelock strode out again. A flash, a small bang and then silence.

"But I'm not Margaret," said the young woman to the empty room. "She's at home with the flu."

She opened the first bag and the glow from the gold made her gasp.

"So," said the Time Assassin James Blakelock, "I decided to up the ante, as it were. Turn the screw. Turn the heat up."

His companion signalled for more drinks by raising two fingers then, remembering he had lost a finger in single combat with the Death Engineer Mary Longworth, switched hands.

The barman brought two more glasses of ersatz whisky.

They drank. They winced.

"Think big," said the Time Assassin James Blakelock. "Think very big."

"Again?" said the young man. His face flushed with anger to match his hair and beard. He looked, thought the chancellor, like a strawberry you might want to steer clear of.

"Again, your Grace," said the chancellor.

"Are you sure?" the young man asked.

"The doctors' examination was very thorough," replied the chancellor.

The young man threw a book at him. The book had a bejewelled cover and when it struck the chancellor – fortunately only on the shoulder – several small rubies and sapphires fell off and rolled into a corner. The chancellor made a mental note to return later on with a dustpan and a small bag.

"Is there –" he began, when a stranger entered the room. He was dressed in the exotic clothes of a foreigner, a Spaniard perhaps or a Frankishman.

"Who are you?" shouted the young man. "How did you get past the guards?"

"Henry Tudor," said the Time Assassin James Blakelock. "I am here not to kill you but to warn you. If you divorce Catherine, you will plunge your kingdom into disorder and religious discord. You will lose the protection of Rome. And England's empire will last but a few decades. The glory of Henry the Conqueror will never be seen by mortal men. Also," he added, "You will spend a lot of time getting rid of wives."

And then, to the astonishment of the two other men, the stranger climbed on a table. A hole seemed to rip in the air above him and the stranger hauled himself into it. There was a not entirely blinding flash and a small bang, and then the hole vanished again.

The two men stared at one another.

"A demonic visitation!" said Cardinal Wolsey.

"It happens," shrugged Henry VIII. "But did you hear what it said?"

"I did, your Grace," said Wolsey. "And my advice is –"

"Divorce," said Henry, wonder in his voice. "I never even *thought* of that."

"I mean, what's the point?" asked the Time Assassin. "What. Is. The. Point?"

"Shh," said the barman and pointed up at the TV. An old black and white newsreel filled the screen. Bombers pitting a concrete sky, men marching, tanks grinding their way across smashed landscapes, rockets launching from platforms in space, planets terraforming into prisons.

"Another repeat," said the Time Assassin, but quietly. He didn't want to annoy any more people than he already had. He waited for the clip to be replaced by some awful song about a happy wanderer, and went on: "All this time I'd been calling myself the Time Assassin but I'd never actually, you know..."

The trench was filthy. Warped wooden planks half lay, half floated. in muddy water. Soldiers, dressed in uniforms that resembled nothing so much as old rags and dirty swaddling, stood about, exhausted, sleeping on their feet or smoking. The sky above was dark with billowing smoke that seemed to mock the actual rain clouds gathering in the sky, just as a distant fiery glow mocked the sullen red of the late afternoon sun.

Somewhere to the West, a fresh bombardment began, filling the air with noise and light. The men in the trench paid it no heed: it was just another set of explosions. Had they been paying attention, they might have noticed a smaller bang and flash closer to home, a

few yards away in an old part of their trench. They might have run towards it fearing an intruder and, finding that intruder, they might have fired their guns at him.

But luck was with the Time Assassin James Blakelock that day, and nobody saw or heard his arrival. His uniform – stained and dirtied – was the same as everyone else's, and so nobody looked up as he made his way down the trench, looking for his target. – whom, luck being still with the Time Assassin, he found almost at once, a resentful man standing alone by some sandbags, pondering who knew what dreams of home or fears of the present.

The Time Assassin hesitated. Things had gone so extraordinarily to plan that he almost did not know what to do next. He had had a few words prepared, but something told him that this was not a time for speeches, rather a time for action. And he was right: a minute later, unknown to the Assassin, a new platoon would come marching round the corner, fresh from the heart of the Empire, armed, eager and more than capable of disarming any would-be attacker.

The Time Assassin James Blakelock did not know this, of course, but for once – for the first time in his life, perhaps, he was guided by an iron certainty. He coughed to get his target's attention. The target raised his weary face and looked half-curiously at the Time Assassin, who had already begun to pull out his gun.

“Wer – “ he began.

James Blakelock shot him in the middle of his forehead and he fell to the ground, dead. A moment later, exactly forty seconds before the new platoon rounded the corner, his time portal opened and he stepped into it.

The Time Assassin's companion looked at his watch. He was the Senior Extraction Operative Andrew Pitman and his sixth sense had a sixth sense of its own.

“Time to go,” he said. *“If we don't get out of here now, the Reich Net will sense our presence and we'll be toast.”*

James Blakelock sighed and downed his drink as his companion set the co-ordinates for the escape portal. Already he could hear the SD robots clanking up the stairs.

“Typical,” he said. *“You kill one Hitler...”*