A black and white photograph of a dilapidated wooden building, possibly a shack or a small house, with a street lamp hanging from a pole in front of it. The building appears to be made of weathered wood and has a somewhat chaotic appearance. In the background, there is a bright fire or explosion, and some other structures are visible. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric, suggesting a post-apocalyptic or dystopian setting.

THE QUANTUM LEAGUE

BOOK ONE: SPELL ROBBERS

BY
MATTHEW J. KIRBY

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quantum physicist Dr. Madeleine Hughes, and with his new friend
Peter he discovers the secret art of actuation — the ability to change
reality by imagining it differently — but he also finds that there are
people willing to kill for that secret.

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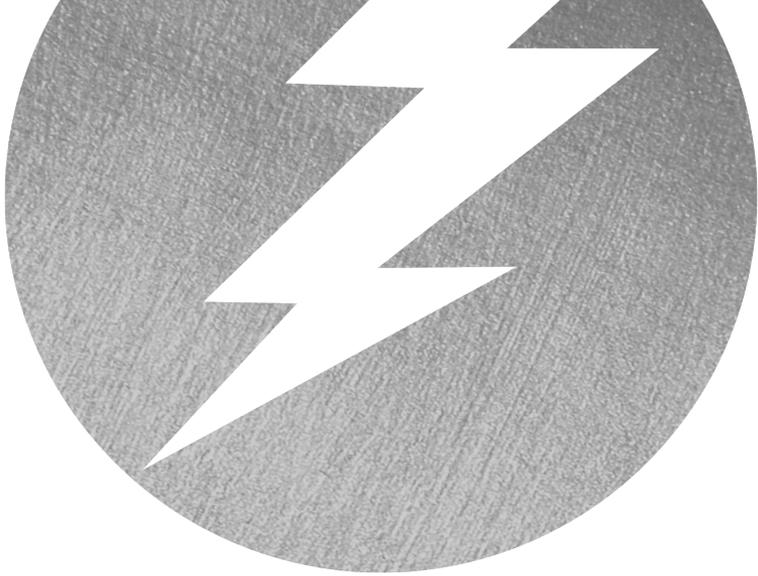
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CHAPTER

1

THE empty cafeteria table snapped in half at the middle and shot up off the ground. Its hinges shrieked as the whole table slammed shut, spinning a little on its wheels. All on its own.

Ben leaped away from it, stunned, while the rest of the students in the cafeteria fell silent. Everyone stared at the table like it might open back up and attack any one of them, including the guy who'd just been threatening to beat Ben into the ground. Ben had only been at this school for two weeks, and he'd already run afoul of the class bully. But the table seemed to have changed that, at least for the moment.

Ben felt a tug on his arm as a boy came up and pulled him away.

“Move.” The kid nodded toward the cafeteria’s double doors.

Ben followed him, but glanced back a couple of times at the table. The bully was still staring at it.

Out in the common area, Ben asked the kid, “Did you see that?”

“Yeah, I saw.” He shrugged, wearing a T-shirt printed with WANTED: SCHRODINGER’S CAT, DEAD AND ALIVE. “Perfect timing, wouldn’t you say?”

“I . . . guess so. But what if somebody had been sitting on that thing?”

“I’m Peter.”

“I — I’m Ben.”

“I know. You’re in my third period.” Peter turned and walked away, threading the crowded common area with ease, without touching or interacting with anyone.

Ben got lost on his way home.

He couldn’t find his own apartment. True, they’d only moved to town a couple of weeks ago, but still. He should’ve known better. After all the places they’d lived, he *did* know better, yet there he was, wandering the sprawling and utterly confusing campus family-housing grounds, trying to look like he knew where he was going. The apartments were clustered in two-story buildings, arranged haphazardly, a maze of sidewalks running among them.

At one point, Ben actually thought he'd found it, but realized quickly it was the wrong place when his key didn't work. Then he heard a stirring on the other side of the door, probably because whoever it was had heard him jiggling the lock, and he hurried away.

He eventually spotted a sad little playground he recognized. The sand was mixed with things that weren't sand, and packed down hard. He remembered seeing the edge of it from his bedroom window, so he figured out the right angle and headed in that direction.

When he finally got home, Ben felt and heard the scrape of cardboard boxes on the other side of the front door as he tried to push it open. His mom was still unpacking. The apartment was paid for by her scholarship. It was small, but it was newer and cleaner than some of the other places they'd lived.

"Mom?" Ben squeezed through the opening.

"In my room!"

Ben tossed his backpack onto the couch that was still missing a cushion, and went past the little kitchen to his mom's bedroom. She stood by the bed, where she had laid out a bunch of clothes Ben recognized from the last time she'd gone to school. Back then it was a master's degree in art history. This time, if she finished, it was going to be a master's degree in medieval literature. She would never use either.

She scanned the bed, her hands on her hips. "I hope

these still fit. I can't exactly wear my stained overalls as a teaching assistant." She looked up. "How was your day? Still liking your school?"

"Sure."

Between the last graduate program and this one, they'd lived in an art commune where Ben's mom worked on a blueberry farm and did found-object sculpting on the side, and the overalls she wore every day showed it.

She picked up a navy blouse and held it out in front of her by the shoulders. "Make any friends?"

"Maybe. This kid Peter kind of helped me out."

"With what?"

"Just some guy."

She brought the shirt down to her waist. "This other guy hassling you?"

"Not bad."

She looked him in the eyes. He looked back. She did this thing where if she wanted to know more, she'd just sit and stare, trying to wait it out of him. Ben had learned he could outlast her. And the last thing she needed to worry about the night before starting classes was some bully at school. He smiled.

She gave up and turned her attention back to the bed. "You let me know if it becomes a problem."

"I will."

She shook out a pair of black pants. "Are you hungry? What do you want for dinner?"

Ben turned for the door. She didn't need to worry about that right now, either. "I'll go see what we have. You keep getting ready."

"Thanks."

In the kitchen, he opened up the cupboard and dug around until he found a jar of spaghetti sauce. Then he found some noodles. It took a few minutes to locate a pan in one of the unpacked boxes, but he filled it up with water and got it on the stove.

By the time the noodles were done and dished up on plates, his mom came out of her bedroom in a T-shirt, pulling the strings tight on her sweats. "Oh, good. Thanks for making dinner." Ben lifted the hot jar of sauce from the microwave with a couple of pot holders and poured it over the noodles. "Don't worry about making your lunch," she said. "I'll take care of that later!"

Ben smiled and grabbed the can of Parmesan cheese from the fridge. "All right, Mom."

They sat down at their table. And it *was* their table. His mom had salvaged it from a local burger place that went out of business. This was two cities ago, and they'd eaten there a lot — great hand-cut fries — until the owners had decided to retire and sell everything. Including the table Ben and his mom had always shared. "So tell me about Peter," his mom said.

Ben twisted some noodles onto his fork. "He seems kinda weird."

"Weird how?"

“He’s a loner.”

She smiled at the corner of her mouth. “Well, I just hope you make at least one good friend. We’ll be here for a while. The program is at least two years.”

He wanted to believe her. “I hope your classes go okay tomorrow.”

They both ate a few bites.

“Anything else happen today?” she asked.

Ben looked at his fork. “Something weird happened in the cafeteria.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. One of those heavy tables just lifted up out of nowhere and snapped shut.”

His mom put down her fork. “Was anyone hurt?”

“No.” *But almost.*

“Well, that’s good. It sounds like it could have been worse.”

“Yeah.” It could have been much worse, but the table was empty. *Perfect timing.*

“Oh,” his mom said. “I found something you might be interested in.”

“What’s that?”

“A professor on campus e-mailed asking if you’d like to attend her science camp after school.”

“Science camp?” That could go either way, but Ben was betting on it being a waste of time. “Why’d she e-mail about me?”

“She said someone at your school had recommended you. It sounded pretty advanced. Something about quantum mechanics. I don’t think you’ll be bored.”

“No, thanks.”

She leaned forward, her hands folded around her plate. “Would you at least go check it out? It would make me feel better knowing you had someplace to go after school. And it’s on campus, not too far from all my classes.”

“Is it expensive?” Ben knew they couldn’t afford any extras right now.

“It’s free.”

Ben sighed. “Okay. If it will make you feel better.”

“Thank you. They hold it in that building everyone calls the Castle. You can start tomorrow. Oh, and there’s some kind of test to get in.”

“A test?”

“Yeah, but I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

Ben already regretted agreeing to it, but at this point the best way to handle his mom would be to go at least once. It would be easier to come up with a reason to quit than a reason not to try it.

They finished dinner, and as Ben carried the dishes to the sink, he noticed a pale green pill sitting on the counter by the sink.

“Mom.”

“What?”

He pinched the pill in his fingertips and brought it to her. "You forgot again."

"Oh, right." She took it from him and swallowed it down without any water. "I set it down this morning when I spilled some coffee. Guess I forgot."

So long as she didn't forget too many days in a row, it wasn't a big deal.

Ben had been on plenty of college campuses before, sitting in libraries and study rooms, when he was younger and his mom couldn't find or afford a babysitter. So he felt pretty comfortable walking across the Quad to the Castle after school.

He was headed for an old three-story brick structure with granite window casements, towers, and a high peaked roof. The building's nickname was appropriate, but not terribly original. It had to be the oldest building at the university.

Inside the Castle, dark, rich wood paneled the walls hung with old black-and-white historical photos of buildings that looked forever haunted, and men and women who never seemed to smile and had shadows for eyes. The Castle's floors looked like they had once been tiled with marble or stone, but were so scuffed and dingy, it might as well have been linoleum.

The directions told him to go to the basement level, which Ben guessed could be called the Dungeon. He found a staircase and went down to the basement level, where there

were no windows — just the kind of fluorescent lighting that buzzed and gave Ben’s mom headaches.

He followed a long hallway, his footsteps echoing, and ahead of him Ben saw an open doorway. Light and voices spilled out through it, and he figured that was where he was supposed to go.

Ben rounded the door and went into a larger room than he had been expecting. It looked like the university had knocked down a few walls and combined several classrooms into one. Around the space, strips of colored tape on the floor marked off different stations and areas. Tripods mounted with what looked like little satellite dishes stood in circles around the areas, and wires snaked across the floor, creating a web between the dozen or so computers scattered around the room.

This already looked different from any of the after-school programs he’d attended.

Off to one side, a woman stood in front of a semicircle of six folding metal chairs. She was small, with short gray hair, smooth skin, and big round eyes. Ben’s mom would have called her “elfin.” Two of the folding chairs were empty. In the others sat two girls and two boys, all about Ben’s age. They turned to look at him, and Ben was surprised to see Peter, the kid from school, among them.

The woman had been talking as Ben walked in, but turned her attention to him now as he stood in the doorway. “Are you Ben?”

“Yup.”

“Wait in the hallway, please,” she said. “I’ll be right with you.”

Ben frowned. “Okay.”

As he stood outside the room, unable to hear what was going on inside, he thought about just taking off. Before he made up his mind, the woman joined him.

“Thank you for your patience, Ben.” She carried a sensor wand that looked a bit like the chirping, squealing metal detectors they used in airports. “I’m so sorry for the wait. I am Dr. Hughes. Welcome.”

“Thanks.”

“I was the one who contacted your mother, based on Peter’s recommendation. You know him from school, I believe?”

So that was what had happened. Maybe it wasn’t an accident that Peter had helped him out. “Yeah, I know him.”

“Wonderful. Now, before I admit you to the program, I just have to run a simple test.”

“What kind of test?”

“An aptitude test.”

“Aptitude? Like an IQ test?”

“I suppose so. But I am a quantum physicist, not a psychologist.” Dr. Hughes raised the sensor wand. “This will be a simple visualization exercise in which you will picture something I describe for you. I want you to use your imagination to make it as detailed as you can. Your eyes will be

closed, but I will be using this device to measure the environment around us. This device is not measuring you or affecting you in any way.”

This was weird. “Okay . . .”

“Close your eyes.”

Ben hesitated. “What does this have to do with science camp?”

“All will be explained. Please close your eyes.”

Ben did.

“I want you to picture the hallway in front of you,” Dr. Hughes said. “Just as it was before you closed your eyes. Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

“Now, I want you to picture a small spark in the air. As if someone has just struck a match. And the spark is beginning to grow. It’s consuming the oxygen in the air, getting larger, hotter. Now, it’s a ball of fire.”

Ben tried to imagine what she described. It was hard at first, because he kept thinking about her wand thing waving around him. But he worked to put it out of his mind and concentrate. He imagined the fireball hissing and crackling, sucking up the air around it. He could see the colors, blue at the center, then yellow, then red at the edges of the flames. He imagined the heat it was throwing off, and could almost feel it against his face. He started to think that if he opened his eyes, the fireball would be right there in front of him, churning and scorching the air.

“Open your eyes, Ben.”

He did.

No fireball.

Dr. Hughes lowered the sensor wand. “Excellent!”

“Did I pass?”

“Indeed, you did. Very strong indications of aptitude. The highest I have seen to date.”

That sounds good, whatever it means. “So, what happens now?”

“Now we begin. You may join the others.”

Ben nodded and reentered the classroom, but stopped short a foot into the room, stunned by what he saw. Peter stood in the middle of a circle of tripods, holding out his hands. Between his hands burned a small fireball the size of a grapefruit.

Not an imaginary fireball.

A *real* fireball.