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QUANTUM OF MENACE

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Prologue

INSIDE A LARGE, FORMLESS GREY building, as forbidding as any ogre's keep in a fairy tale, a man in a dark suit hurried through night-time corridors.

Arriving at a room on the building's uppermost floor, he nervously adjusted his tie, then knocked on the door.

Moments later, he was speaking with the room's sole occupant, a small, blunt-headed man in a white shirt and grey tie, seated at a shiny desk, a collage of papers spread before him. And a half-eaten pizza, set beside a glass of what might be whisky. 'Sir. I have the recording you requested.'

The man slipped a USB stick from his pocket and inserted it into the USB port of a desktop computer. 'This is from a speech made by Dr Peter Napier two years ago at the Symposium on Quantum Computing held at MIT – that is, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the USA.'

The seated man raised an eyebrow. 'I *have* heard of MIT.'

An image flickered to life on the monitor. A dark-haired white man speaking at a podium. The accent: English. '*How can a man be both dead and alive? This question was recently posed to me . . . by a priest. Quantum science is one of those rare phenomena where faith, science and fiction coincide. Religion tells us that man never truly dies.*

The body fails, but our essence – call it the soul, if you like – lingers on, eventually finding its way to heaven, hell, nirvana, or off to haunt some old country pile back in England. [Laughter, from an unseen audience, off-screen.] *‘Fiction goes one step further. The body – and brain – die, but, with a little ingenuity, might be reanimated. And so we have vampires, zombies . . . and undergrad students in morning lectures.*

‘Science – now, this is where it begins to get tricky—’

An interruption as a bearded man clambers onto the stage and throws several eggs at Napier, whilst shouting anti-tech slogans. Security personnel appear, and the protestor is led away. Moments later, Napier continues. *‘The quantum computing revolution will change the world. Some, as we have just seen, are terrified by this prospect. The truth is that any new and powerful technology is open to misuse. But it’s not the tech that’s evil. After all, we don’t blame the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park for chomping on a few humans. Blame the humans for building bad cages!’*

‘People say quantum science defies logic. In the quantum realm, the classical rules that govern physics break down . . . and so cats – and humans! – can be both dead and alive. But the truth is that even uncertainty has its rules. Soon we will master those rules. And then we will truly change the world.’

Grey static.

The seated man lit a cigarette. ‘Our . . . partners in England believe this man can deliver what they have promised?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Very well. You may proceed.’

After the underling had left, the seated man continued to look at the image of Peter Napier on the screen. *The man is either a liar or a magician.* If the latter, the world would face the consequences soon enough.

He picked up a slice of pizza, bit off a large mouthful. Anchovy and sauerkraut. *Delicious.* His gaze fell to a photograph in a

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golden frame, a dour-faced woman looking at him disapprovingly. Setting the photo down flat, he doused the cigarette in his whisky glass and resumed his work.

So much to do. So little time.

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Two Years Later

ZAK HADN'T ANTICIPATED THE RAIN.

Rain was something he would never get used to. Back in Syria, rain, when it bothered to turn up, tended to be quick, violent and messy, like a bad case of the runs.

The runs. There wasn't much he liked about this country, but the English certainly had a way with words.

He walked along the deserted street until he came to the house he was looking for.

He knew that the pebble-dashed McMansion was empty. Police tape still cordoned off the property.

A glance over his shoulder; and then he clambered, catlike, over the low iron gate, landing on the far side with the deftness of a gymnast. Staying in the crouch, he looked up at the house.

Why had they sent him to steal a car from a dead man?

A late night fox paused its investigation of a battery of bins, aimed a possessive eye at him. *Bugger off. This trash is spoken for.*

But Zak had bigger things on his mind than rummaging through Peter Napier's rubbish.

Napier. The man's name brought up uncomfortable memories. Napier had visited Zak's school, soon after he had set up his lab

on the edge of town. To deliver a lecture. Quantum computing. Zak had been fascinated. There had been a lot of maths. Maths had been about the only subject Zak had ever cared for. Maths had rules. Rules that didn't suddenly change, pulling the rug out from under you.

Napier had noticed Zak. Had told him he had *potential*. Quantum computing was the future. And Zak could be a part of it.

The cars were parked in the garage. A Range Rover Sport, a Jaguar and a Bentley 100 XT.

Just your basic runarounds in an age of austerity.

Zak slipped his kitbag off his shoulder, twisted his baseball cap back to front and got to work. He had made the box himself. You could order the chip online. Plenty of places on the Dark Web.

The box beeped, and the Bentley's locks sprang open.

Bingo.

Minutes later, he was roaring down the road. Nought to sixty in four-point-four.

This was when he felt alive again, when the past loosened its grip and the future seemed almost bearable. The thought brought with it a prick of guilt. He imagined his mother, her never-ending angst.

But why should he feel guilty? He hadn't asked to be here. Hadn't asked for the war back home. At seventeen, he was a man, and a man made his own decisions.

Besides, it wasn't stealing when you took from the rich. Especially the dead ones.

The 100 XT had a self-drive function. He jabbed a button; the steering wheel took on a life of its own.

His thoughts returned to the dead man. Peter Napier.

Napier had talked about changing the world. But Zak came from a world that had already changed beyond all recognition. Most days, Syria was a half-remembered dream. Vivid pops of colour set beside charcoal drawings of a nation under siege.

Soldiers at check-posts in Damascus's Old Quarter. A man trembling against a wall, rifles pointed at his chest.

Why couldn't he remember his father's face?

For an instant, Zak imagined Peter Napier's face superimposed on the shadows that made up his father's head. And then the image of the conjoined man wavered, dissolved and was replaced by a darker one, from the night Napier had died.

Zak thought about what he had seen. What he knew. What he had *done*.

Perhaps he should have gone to the police.

But real gangsters didn't talk to cops.

It began to rain, a violent squall like a bucket of water thrown at the windscreen. The wipers erupted to life . . . to reveal a small, dark shape huddled in the middle of the road.

Instinctively, Zak grabbed the wheel, swerved the car to the right, fighting the self-drive function. His foot jabbed downwards. The car bucked under his hands, then seemed to speed up of its own accord. In the split-second before he lost control, it occurred to him that he had stabbed down on the accelerator instead of the brake pedal.

The last thing that flashed through his mind, an instant before the car hurtled through the gates of the chapel: *quantum entanglement. Two bodies acting on each other from an impossible distance . . .* It seemed that Peter Napier had found a way to get to him, after all, even from beyond the grave.