



Chapter One

LONDON

The north wind was whistling through the rigging, batting the wolf's head flag against the top of the mast. Fingers of pale sunlight crept across the polished wooden deck, up and over an orange hammock that was swinging from the front boom of the boat.

Nat lay dozing inside, cocooned in her sleeping bag, dreaming she was still in Hong Kong.

“AHOY there!”

A booming voice came blasting through the thin fabric.

“Yeouch!” A red-hot poker of pain shot up her arm.

Her eyes snapped open to find a pair of amber eyes flashing through a fug of smoke.

“Sorry,” said Fizz. *“I didn’t mean to burn you. I set my intruder alert to ‘high’ last night when we entered the river.”*

Nat pulled down the top of the bag and a gush of icy air greeted her. She squinted in the early morning dawn. Her arm really hurt, with a red whip-like mark

forming across the skin.

“Zoinks, Fizz. I’m not an intruder!”

Her dragon robot lowered his snout and swept a green-scaled wing across his chest, taking a deep bow.

“Forgive me, my lady. I’d perchance set myself to be too sensitive in my effort to valiantly protect thee,” he said, his voice low, in an accent that was a million miles away from his normal, digital one.

“Why on earth are you talking like that?”

He raised his head.

“An ad came up last night in my BotBox for a ‘free British accent and mannerisms download’ for foreign robots. ‘Give yourself a classy edge and act like a local in London.’”

Nat sighed.

“*You don’t like it?*” asked Fizz.

“Just stay the ku dragon that you are. There are enough crazy changes happening right now.”

“I just want to fit in.”

She did too, more than anything – to blend in, not to be noticed.

“AHOY!” The booming voice came again.

Nat clapped her hands over her ears. *Rats’ tails...* She swung her legs over the side of the hammock and jumped down on to the rain-slicked deck. Her teeth

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chattered as the damp cut through the old purple kung fu suit that she'd repurposed into pyjamas.

"Voice overboard, starboard thirty-two degrees," said Fizz, still in the hammock.

"Would have been *ku* if you'd detected that before you burned my arm," Nat muttered, stepping over a coiled mooring rope to reach the side of the boat.

Leaning over the brass rail she found a navy-blue Rocketboat cruising alongside on the murky brown river below. The word "POLICE" was stamped in bold scarlet letters on the hull.

On deck stood a policeman wearing a black top hat and a long navy frock coat with shiny gold buttons, with a bushy beard down to his waist.

"How many crew are you, young lady?" he bellowed through an old-fashioned hand-held megaphone.

"Three and one robot!" she shouted back, wondering why he needed to know.

The policeman frowned. "You should have more crew to handle such an ancient vessel."

"This is an 'oversize replica of a Ming Dynasty treasure ship'!" she shouted, using Jamuka's words. "It's only fourteen years old and runs on a MaxEdge computer. It can sail without crew."

The policeman let out a low whistle and turned to

speak to his colleague at the helm.

Nat yawned and looked over at the riverbank, which was lined with rows of brick warehouse buildings and glass office blocks. It was all much lower than Hong Kong's spiky skyline.

"Request to speak with your captain immediately!" said the policeman, still holding his megaphone.

She stepped away from the rail and turned to Fizz.

"Go and find Jamuka, quick."

"*Aye, aye,*" he said.

She watched the little robot take off, shooting through the air like a green arrow. She still wasn't used to the idea that he could fly.

The air tasted different from when she'd gone to sleep. They'd been crossing the North Sea then. Now they were on the Thames and it wasn't just salty, but musty too, reminding her of Ken's kung fu studio. It'd be a long time before she was back there again.

Burnt coffee wafted up from the open hatch that Fizz had passed through. Jamuka must already be up. She guessed he was probably in the kitchen, watching the horses from Hong Kong on his FastPad. His horse, Dragon Khan, would be getting warmed up for his race.

She shivered. Maybe she should go and grab her

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Slider jacket. She reached the hatch just as Jamuka stepped out on to deck, fully dressed in his customary long, midnight-blue mandarin suit with silver buttons. His grey hair was plaited into a ponytail, tied off with a black ribbon, and his eyes were shielded by round mirrored sunglasses. In one hand he held a steaming cup. In the other he was carrying the bamboo cage containing his prized green and white songbird, Gobi.

Fizz had perched on top of her cage. Gobi had her head back, looking up at him, singing in her high, chirping voice. She'd only started doing that since Fizz had his flying upgrade.

The smell of burnt coffee was so strong now it made her stomach churn.

"I thought you'd given up Vietnamese weasel coffee?" she said, wrinkling her nose.

"I need it to draw strength, Bao Bao. Dragon Khan went lame in the race. Now, I hear we have visitors."

She pointed over at the police boat. Jamuka handed her Gobi's cage and strode across to talk to the policemen.

If Dragon Khan was lame Jamuka was going to be on calls to his vet and trainer for hours. Maybe they'd have to fly back to Hong Kong to check on him, then she wouldn't have to go to this silly school in London.

She could stay with her best friend, Wen.

The boat's engines cut. Their low hum was replaced with the droning sound of city traffic.

"We're off autopilot," Jamuka called. "The river police want a manual entry. Dock rules, Bao Bao."

Nat gulped. "Manual?"

She had a sudden flashback to the last time they'd manually docked the boat, and the brass band running out of their path as Jamuka reversed straight into the pier at the Harbour Club regatta using full throttle reverse by mistake.