



Chapter I

San Francisco, USA, One Year Earlier

ARE you sure it's him?' Linette handed the binoculars back to Tiago.

The two teenagers had got as near as they could for their spying mission, lurking in the shrubbery across the road from the building that held their target.

Tiago focused through the archway on the slender, long-haired man sitting cross-legged under a magnolia tree in the courtyard, face tilted to the sky, sunglasses protecting his eyes. He compared the suspect's appearance to the photo they had printed out from the Pip Enterprises home page. It was a match—down

to the black ponytail and the scattering of white at his temples.

‘Yeah, that’s him: Mr Ambrosius, founder of the company.’

Linette wrinkled her nose with disdain. ‘But, Tiago, he is wearing socks with sandals! Not to mention jeans and a horrible old T-shirt.’

Tiago smiled to himself. His friend was half-French and could not forgive such blatant fashion sins. ‘At least the shirt looks well-washed.’

Linette puffed out a breath. ‘Charity-shop reject. *Mon Dieu*, someone should tell him that is so not a good look.’

‘From here I think it says: “Every Little Thing I do is Magic”.’ Tiago passed her the glasses so she could check it out. He stroked his little black and white terrier, Bob, under his chin.

Bob yipped.

‘I was expecting . . . well . . . more.’ Linette shrugged.

‘So was I. At least some magical defences.’ They had been able to get off the subway in Cupertino and walk right up to the shiny new company headquarters. Nestled between other technology firms, it looked like a slice of black-glass cheese, solar panels harvesting the bright light of the San Francisco Bay. It was such a new urban area with no roots in myths or legends

that it was impossible to believe they were in the right place.

‘So maybe it’s not him.’

‘Only one way to find out.’ Mr Ambrosius had seemed too obvious, hogging the business pages with his ingenious inventions. ‘Even if it’s not him, you have to hand it to Mr Ambrosius, *amiga*: he’s built the most powerful company on the planet. No digital device could function without a Pip chip. They say his is the seed from which Apple, Microsoft and the others grew.’

‘But we’re not here for an upgrade; we need a warrior magician. He doesn’t look as though he could battle his way out of a paper bag.’ Tucking the binoculars down the side of her wheelchair, Linette put her baseball cap on and pulled her dark hair through the back. ‘So what do we do now? Go up to him and ask if he’s a sixteen-hundred-year-old magician?’

‘Maybe not so blunt, no?’

‘And you’re sure about needing him?’ Linette scratched at the hole in her jeans, making it fray a little more around her knee. After months of searching, her confidence in the plan had disintegrated.

‘Surely you realize by now that setting up a Round Table is the only way we can fight magical armies? We have to use it to tap into the Fey power so we stand a chance against Oberon.’

'Not much of a chance, is it?'

'Better than nothing.' Tiago rubbed Bob under the chin. 'Let's go test the water.' He slipped his shades back on to hide his silvery eyes. 'You ready?'

Linette released the brake on her wheelchair. '*Oui.*'

They crossed the road and took the ramp up to the main doors of the building.

'I'm-meeting-my-dad-for-lunch excuse?' whispered Linette.

Tiago nodded. Linette stopped at the low section of the reception desk; Tiago hung back with Bob. Two white robots whizzed past, delivering coffees to the workstations, making happy little beeping noises.

The well-groomed man in a blue Pip T-shirt and purple chinos smiled down at her. 'Can I help you?'

'I am meeting, 'ow you say?, *mon père* for eating, yes?' She gave him a charmingly innocent smile. She was dead good at those.

'Your father?'

'Yes, yes, *exactement!*'

'Who is he? I can ring up and tell him you are waiting.' The man picked up his phone, hand hovering over the keyboard.

'E 'as ze meetings. Always meetings. We are waiting here.' Linette gestured to the sunny courtyard.

The receptionist gave Bob a doubtful look.

‘E is very good dog. No misbehaving.’

Bob cocked his head in his most winning expression.

The receptionist put the phone down. ‘OK, sure. You can wait over there. Let me know if I can call him for you.’

‘*Pardon?* I not understand.’

The receptionist sighed, deciding that letting her do what she wanted was the quickest way to deal with them. ‘Please wait there.’

‘Of course. I do zat.’

Linette led Tiago and Bob to the bench at the edge of the courtyard. They were over the first hurdle.

‘Zat and ze?’ teased Tiago. ‘Linette, you speak at least three languages fluently.’

‘I know, but that was fun!’ She beamed at him. ‘OK, you listen in.’

Thanks to his Fey blood, Tiago had better ears than an ordinary human. He could hear what was going on across the courtyard without anyone suspecting he was eavesdropping. There were a few people gathering at the cafe tables in the far corner. Mr Ambrosius had been joined by a number of young office workers, all dressed in very casual clothes. They were seated on the grass in a circle, chatting to their neighbours, making friendship bands or daisy chains, as if this was a picnic, not a

meeting. Streamers in primary colours hung from the roofs of the buildings surrounding the courtyard. A breeze picked up and they rippled in the wind, adding to the festive scene.

Mr Ambrosius clapped his hands. 'Gather round, people: time for a thought sprinkle!' He flicked his fingers over their heads. Tiny silver sparks rained down on them.

'Did you see that?' Linette nudged Tiago, trying not to look as if she was looking.

'Yeah, magic. It's got to be Merlin.'

Mr Ambrosius stretched out on the grass, eyes closed; anyone would think he was about to nap rather than drive his business forward. 'Let's brainstorm, people. What's hot in R and D?'

'Research and Development,' Tiago whispered for Bob's benefit. The dog jumped on his lap and sniffed the air with interest.

A young woman began speaking but Tiago didn't understand half of what she was saying as she used lots of initials and terms he had not come across.

Mr Ambrosius sighed. 'Ah, Gemma, Gemma—I thought I told you: we've exhausted solar for the moment. I want you to look into lunar power.'

The poor woman looked to her colleagues for support. 'I know, Mr A, but we don't get what you want from us.'

‘We can’t see how we can turn moonlight into energy, boss,’ added another of the circle.

‘Not moonlight, people—moon energy!’

Bob leapt off Tiago’s lap and trotted over to the outdoor meeting. Too late to call the dog back, Tiago let Bob go see what he could do. What Bob did was thrust his muzzle into Mr Ambrosius’ right hand, which lay relaxed at his side.

‘Ah, what’s this? Hey, dude, how’s it going?’ Mr Ambrosius sat up and pulled Bob onto his lap, stroking him with absent-minded affection. ‘Gemma, tell me: other than light, what does the moon give us?’

Tidal power. Tiago saw it instantly. Gemma took far too long, a whole minute of um-ing and ah-ing before she reached the same conclusion.

‘That’s right. It isn’t just the seas that feel the pull of the moon’s presence. All materials do. What I want you to do is find a way of harnessing those tiny fluctuations to power our microchips. The drawback of solar is that we have to expose the surface to daylight; with the moon, the power is available at all times, even buried deep in a machine. Devices without the complications of mains electricity or batteries—that’s what I want you to invent for me.’

‘That’s inspired, Mr A!’ said Gemma, coming to her knees to applaud. ‘But is it possible?’

'I think so.' He coughed modestly and rubbed his nails on his shirt.

'Boss, you're awesome! Why didn't we think of this?' asked a second woman.

Mr Ambrosius' tanned face wrinkled into a grin. 'Because you're not as old as me, guys. I've been around the technology block a few times; I know this will be the next big leap forwards for nanotechnology. Pip must be the front-runner.'

'Like always,' said Gemma proudly.

'And that's why you all work for me. Go forth and multiply these ideas, people!'

Laughing, the young designers got up and hurried back to their offices, voices chattering excitedly. Mr Ambrosius watched them leave with a slightly anxious expression. Then opting for some time out, Mr Ambrosius stripped off his socks, lay on his back and wiggled his bare toes in the soft grass. Bob licked his face.

'Where have you come from, buddy? Should you be here?'

'I hope my dog isn't bothering you?' Tiago crossed the grass, Linette following on behind.

'No problem. I love animals, especially intelligent ones like this.' The inventor's face clouded as he looked more closely at Bob. 'Very intelligent. Who are you?'

‘Santiago Dulac, sir. This is my friend, Linette Kwan. That’s Bob.’

Mr Ambrosius sat up and pushed Bob gently back in Tiago’s direction. ‘Cool. But I have to run—conference call with Japan at twelve. Enjoy your visit.’ He was rabbiting on them, running back into his warren. Maybe he smelled the magic on Bob?

‘Excuse me, sir.’ Linette manoeuvred to put herself between Mr Ambrosius and the way out of the courtyard. ‘We were wondering if you could spare us a minute. We need to talk to you. It’s urgent.’

The inventor cast a glance around him, checking for the nearest security guard. ‘I’m a busy guy, honey. If you want to ask about internships, contact the Human Resources department.’

‘It isn’t about your company, sir.’ She reached out to catch his sleeve before he disappeared. ‘We need your help. It’s about saving the Earth from the Fey.’

His dark eyebrows winged up. ‘I dunno what game you are playing, but—’ All friendliness had dropped away.

‘No game, Mr Ambrosius, sir,’ said Tiago firmly. ‘We need your help really, really desperately.’

‘Security!’ squawked the inventor.

A dark-suited heavy appeared from behind a

smoked glass door. He looked like he ate kittens for breakfast and spent the rest of the day picking the fluff from between his teeth. ‘Sir?’

‘These kids are trespassing!’

Tiago tried to interrupt. ‘But Merlin—’

He span round, fists clenched. ‘My name is Mr Ambrosius, understood?’

Tiago glared at him.

Mr Ambrosius swung back to the guard. ‘Why were they let inside?’

‘Sorry, sir. I’ll look into that.’

‘Search them. I suspect that they are industrial spies, sent by our competitors. I want to see everything they brought into the building, no matter how innocent-looking.’

Kitten-Eater clicked his fingers. Six others of his gorilla-build appeared from every quarter—perhaps the security had not been so lax after all. A guard rapidly frog-marched Tiago into a room that was made of mirror glass—he could see out but no one could see in. Linette was taken by a female colleague to a cubicle next door. Even Bob was scooped up and placed in a third, despite his whining protests.

‘You’d better not hurt my dog!’ Tiago struggled to free himself but the grip on his neck did not falter.

The man said nothing as he patted Tiago down with professional disinterest. He removed Tiago’s

wallet, keys and the spelled seashell he used to communicate with Rick and Roxy.

‘Hey, they’re mine! You can’t take them.’ He couldn’t lose the shell—it was the only way he had to get in touch with his friends.

The guy raised a mocking brow and bared his teeth. ‘Tough luck.’

The security guard passed the objects to the man on the door. Tiago watched as the minder carried the tray to Mr Ambrosius. He disregarded the money and the keys but his hand paused over the shell before he pocketed it. Face white with rage—or was it fear?—he gestured abruptly to the guard. Tiago didn’t need to hear to know that meant ‘get rid of them’.

The guard returned and handed the keys and wallet to the Kitten-Eater who in turn gave them back to Tiago.

‘Now get lost. If I see you around here again, I’ll—’ Kitten-Eater paused to think of a plausible threat to use on a teenager.

‘What? Grind my bones to make your bread?’ Tiago mocked. He knew trolls who would actually do that so this guy’s threats did not bother him.

‘No.’ He leant forward, getting right into Tiago’s personal space. ‘I’ll take your dog to the pound.’

‘Beast,’ muttered Tiago, knowing he was defeated. For now.

When Tiago emerged from the room, Mr Ambrosius had already disappeared. Linette and Bob were waiting for him, flanked by their minders. The security guard gave them no chance to talk or plead their case. He took over Linette's chair and pushed her out of the front door. Tiago and Bob had to follow.

'If I see you here again—' growled the guard.

'You won't,' said Tiago, adding under his breath, 'see us.'

They walked slowly away on the pavement in front of the building, glancing up at the sheer black cliff of wall separating them from the person who could help save the world, if only he'd listen. Tiago would lay money that Mr Ambrosius was watching them from somewhere inside.

'It was him—I'm sure of it,' said Tiago.

'OK, so now we know: he's an ostrich,' said Linette, rubbing her arms. She sounded brave but she was shaking. 'He's burying his head in the sand.' She glared at the harsh reflections bouncing off the building. 'He'll have to listen to us eventually.'

'Maybe.' Tiago whistled to Bob. 'Let's hope he doesn't come to his senses too late.'