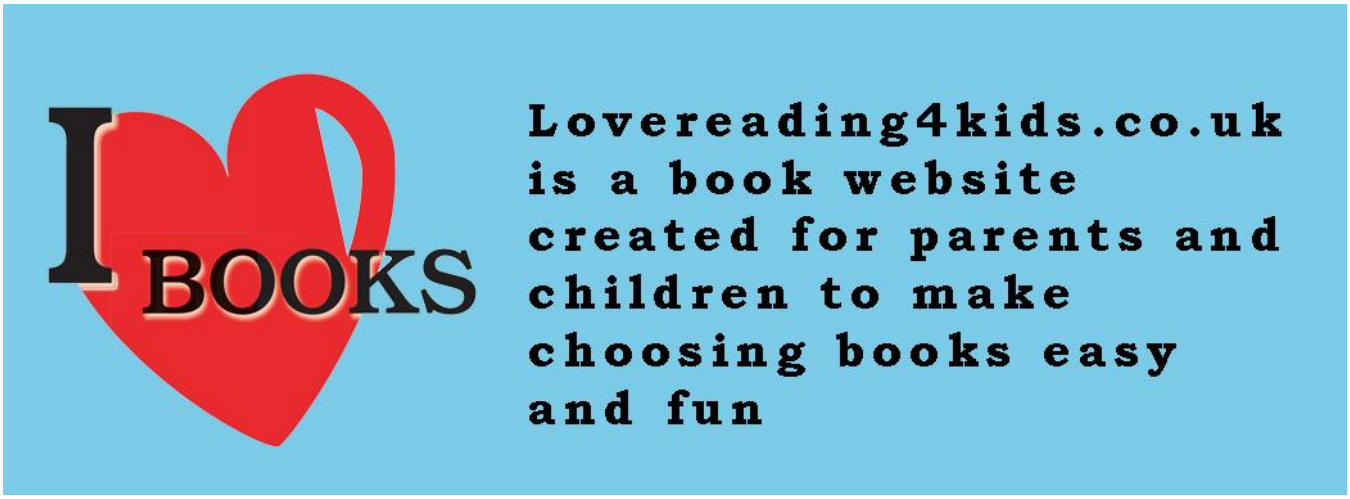


Opening extract from

Cogheart

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Peter Bunzl

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For Michael, with love.

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Malkin pressed his forepaws against the flight-deck window and peered out. The silver airship was still following; gaining on them. The purr of its propellers and the whoosh of its knife-sharp hull cutting through the air sent a shiver of terror through his clockwork innards.

The fox tore his eyes away and stared at his master. John's ship, *Dragonfly*, was fast but she had nothing in the way of firepower. The silver airship, by contrast, bristled with weapons. Sharp metal spikes stuck out from her hull, making her look like some sort of militarized porcupine.

Just then, *Dragonfly*'s rudder shifted, and she pitched

as John twisted the wheel into a one-eighty turn to swoop back past her pursuers.

The silver airship shrunk away, but within seconds she'd swung around to follow. She began closing in once more; her propellers chopping through the clouds, throwing dark shadows across their stern. When the two airships broke into a patch of blue, she fired.

A harpoon slashed across the sky and thudded into *Dragonfly*'s hull, the point piercing her port side.

Thud! Another harpoon speared into the stern.

Malkin let out a bark of alarm as a stench of burning gas filled the flight deck, and the needles in the rows of instrument panels flickered into the red danger zones. Over the whine of their stalling engines, the crackle of straining steel cables could be heard. The silver airship had begun to pull them in.

John locked *Dragonfly*'s wheel, and engaged her autopilot. He threw open the cockpit door and, with Malkin at his heels, dashed towards the engine room.

Pistons pumped, and crankshafts turned at full power, while the cabin juddered and shook. In the centre of the floor, a metal egg-shaped pod sat among a tangle of pipes.

John threw open its door. "No room for both of us," he said. "You go, Malkin."

The fox gave a whimper of disapproval. "No. It should be you, John. Humans over mechanicals. It's the law."

John shook his head. "I can't leave my ship; I need to try and guide her down safely – and you've no opposable thumbs!" He gave a half-hearted laugh and withdrew a battered envelope from his pocket. Crouching down, he stuffed it into a leather pouch around Malkin's neck. "This is for my Lily. See that she gets it."

"What's in there?"

John smiled. "Secrets. Tell her to keep them safe. She mustn't tell anyone about them, not ever. Can you remember that?"

"I think so." Malkin prodded the pouch, sniffing at it with his nose.

"Good," John said. "Make for Brackenbridge, that's where she'll be. If I get out of this alive, I'll come find her."

"Is there anything else?"

"And tell her I love her." John ruffled the mechanimal's ears one last time. "It's at least a day's journey from here, have you enough clicks?"

Malkin nodded.

"Take your winder anyway." John produced a tarnished key on a chain and hung it round the fox's neck, next to the pouch. "Though heaven knows who'll wind you if I'm not there."

"Thank you, John." Malkin stepped into the escape pod and curled up on the seat. "By all that ticks, I hope to see you again."

"And I you, old friend." John shut the door. With a clatter and hum the pod bay doors opened and in a jolt, the pod was free.

As John watched it through the open hatch, shrinking away in the sky, an image of his daughter, Lily, flashed into his mind. If only he could see her one last time. Tell her the truth about the past. He should've done it long ago, but he'd not been brave enough. Now Malkin would have to take care of things. Everything was in the letter.

Another harpoon smashed through *Dragonfly*'s hull, and whirring saw blades cut through the steel ribs, ripping cracks in the ship's tin chest. In a jagged screech, the cracks were wrenched into a doorway, and two silhouetted figures appeared. Their silver eyes glinted in the light. The thinner of the figures raised a stick with a skull handle, then John felt a blinding shaft of pain, and everything went black…



Lily wrinkled her freckled nose as she trudged along at the back of the line of girls. With each step, her heart beat hard in her chest, and her green eyes flicked across the dog-eared pages of her beloved penny dreadful hidden inside her schoolbook.

She was enjoying a particularly gory scene in *Varney the Vampyre Versus The Air-Pirates*, where Varney had captured the heroine in the disused attic of an Italian boarding school and was preparing to feast on her blood.

Lily had her pencil poised to mark up the gruesomest passages of the magazine, so she could reread them later at her leisure. Another dubious volume, balanced on the

crown of her head, wobbled with each step, but she didn't let it distract her from Varney.

"Heads up! Eyes straight!" With one copy of *The Oxford Guide to Perfect Poise* balanced on her head, Mrs McKracken, Lily's middle-aged deportment teacher, led the gaggle of girls in a circle around the Great Hall, her flat feet slapping across the polished wooden floor. The Kraken, Lily called her – though never to her face, that would be far too risky.

The Kraken was somewhat obsessed with posture. As for Lily, she barely gave it a second thought. In her opinion it was better to read books than balance them. That's what they were designed for, after all. And if you wanted to wear something on your head there was a perfectly good item designed for that too: it was called a hat.

Lily sneaked a brief glance at the other girls in her class. At the front of the line, Miss Lucretia Blackwell had her prim nose stuck in the air and three copies of *Sensible Etiquette for the Best Occasions* balanced on her perfectly coiffed hair.

Second came Miss Alice Harvey, who had seven copies of *Butterwick's Guide to Better Manners* balanced on her doughnut plait. With that monstrous hair-buncle, it was no surprise she never dropped a single copy.

Miss Gemma Ruddle was next. She had four precarious copies of *The Ladies' Manual of Politeness* balanced and would stop after each step and pretend to scratch her ear so she could adjust her leaning tower of literature.

Lily had long ago noticed the other girls never read in posture class. It seemed thinking and walking simultaneously was too difficult for them. She doubted a single important thought ever floated through their minds. If Spring-Heeled Jack, or Varney the Vampyre, or the air-pirates, or any of the other blackguards who roamed England, ever caught any of those girls in a dark alley they'd be dead for sure. Dead before they'd practised their conversational French, dead before they'd politely discussed the weather, or asked "Tea or coffee?"; in short, dead before their perfectly poised bodies struck the cobbles. And what use was deportment to one dead? No use. No use whatsoever.

"Stop," the Kraken yelled and one by one the girls stopped in a neat line behind her. All except Lily who, having failed to notice her untied shoelaces, tripped, stepped on Gemma's foot, and fell.

"Ouch!" Gemma staggered forward, clutching at Alice to try and keep her balance, but in vain; her four copies of *The Ladies' Manual of Politeness* slipped from her head.

"Careful!" Alice cried, dropping seven copies of *Butterwick's Guide to Better Manners.*

Thud-thud-thud-thud-thud-thud… Thud.

Lucretia wobbled from side to side, grasping at the top of her head, but she was too late. Three copies of *Sensible Etiquette for the Best Occasions* slipped from her brow and scattered at her feet in a *crash* of fluttering pages.

"Why don't you pay attention, you galumphing lump?" the Kraken shouted. "What've you got to say for yourself?"

Lily gazed up from the sea of fallen books. Was the woman talking to her? "Sorry?" she tried.

The Kraken huffed. "I said: *WHAT-HAVE-YOU-GOT-TO-SAY-FOR-YOURSELF?* Oh, never mind." She took *The Oxford Guide to Perfect Poise* from her head and threw it at Lily, who ducked as the heavy tome glanced past her ear.

"You've been reading. You're not allowed to read in my class—"

"I thought—"

"And no thinking either." The Kraken folded her arms across her chest. She'd turned a most putrid shade of puce; it perfectly matched her purple dress. Perhaps it was her tight corsets that made her face flush so?

The bell rang and the other girls scrabbled across the floor, grabbing their books and slamming them shut.

They piled the volumes on the Kraken's desk and lined up against the wall, waiting for the signal to leave.

"You may go," the Kraken said, waving them off with a hand, and the crocodile of young ladies filed out, whispering maliciously to one another. Lily dusted down her tights and stood to join them.

"Not you, Miss Grantham. I want words with you." The Kraken waddled towards her. "Why is it you think you can ignore my lessons in favour of these tall tales?" She plucked the schoolbook from Lily's hands and examined the gory magazine hidden inside its pages, paying particular attention to the image of a bloody corpse with bat wings.

"Where on earth did you get this balderdash?"

"Papa sent it in his last care package, Miss. He knows I like the penny dreadfuls."

"Does he indeed?" The Kraken looked unimpressed.

Lily continued. "He believes one should read a lot wider than deportment manuals if one plans to get an exceptional education. Don't you agree?"

The Kraken weighed the magazine in her hand. "No," she said. "I don't. Besides, this sort of bunkum is not approved of by the academy. It has no educational value."

"It teaches piracy and air combat."

"And what young lady needs to know that?" The

Kraken took a deep breath. "No. I'm afraid, Miss Grantham, I have to confiscate it. And if you've any similar stories, you'd better hand them over right away."

Lily shrugged. "I don't have a single other magazine of that kind."

"Nonsense. You've one there."

"I beg your pardon? Where?"

"The one you're hiding."

The Kraken craned her neck, trying to see what Lily had behind her back. Lily passed the magazine from her left hand to her right. "I don't know what you mean."

"Give it to me." The Kraken held out her shovel of a palm.

"Fine." Lily glowered, handing over *Spring-Heeled Jack and the Blackguards*.

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it?" The Kraken wedged both magazines under her sweaty armpit.

"No, Ma'am."

"Good." The Kraken handed Lily back her schoolbook. "Remember," she said, wagging a single finger, "if you've any more of these dreadful things you can be sure I'll find them. Now, run along, you don't want to be late for your next lesson. And straighten your pinny, it's wrinkled as an elephant's ear."

"Yes, Ma'am. Good afternoon, Ma'am." Lily brushed

at her creased pinny with ink-stained fingers and gave the Kraken a curtsy, but when the woman returned to her desk, Lily stuck her tongue out at her broad retreating backside. Then, with as much poise as she could muster, she flounced to the door and hurried off down the passage.



Miss Octavia Scrimshaw's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies was a cluster of wind-blown red-brick buildings that stood in a wild corner of England. The school was proud to proclaim its elegant reputation in the society papers under a scrolled coat of arms, but the truth was its reputation, like the buildings themselves, had steadily crumbled over the years and now was badly in need of repair.

Lily's father had chosen to send her to the school after she'd frustrated a number of governesses. His main criterion: it was out of the way and no one there would ask questions about her. He'd even given her a false surname: Grantham – a combination of G for Grace (from her mother), and Hartman – their real surname. He never explained why, or what he was trying to hide her from, but since the time of Mama's death he'd become preoccupied with keeping Lily's whereabouts

a secret, even moving them from London to deep in the countryside. Lily suspected he was just a natural born worrier, though he still insisted she have the life of a normal well-bred Victorian young lady.

The trouble was, Lily reflected, as she sneaked up the last set of stairs to the girls' dormitory, she didn't want the life of a well-bred Victorian young lady, she wanted the life of an air-pirate.

Which was why, after her run-in with the Kraken, she decided to skip French conversation class and hide her remaining stash of penny dreadfuls before they were confiscated or worse, destroyed – like every other vaguely interesting or illicit thing in this institution.

The dormitory door was locked, but she knew how to deal with that. She took a hairpin from her bun of red hair, straightened it in her teeth, and popped it in the keyhole. Then she wiggled the pin about, while turning the doorknob. It was a trick she'd practised many times, first learned from *The Notorious Jack Door: Escapologist and Thief Extraordinaire* – the book, not the man himself. Although she wouldn't have minded having a few words with him about advanced lock-picking if they ever bumped into one another. Anyway, according to Jack, all you had to do was listen out for the—

Click!

There it was. Quietly, Lily pulled open the door and crept into the dormitory, her boots squeaking across the floorboards. Ticking radiators warmed the room, and Lily heard the voices of the other girls chanting French verbs in the downstairs classroom. A pale November sun hung above the opposite buildings, sneaking occasional beams of light in through the frost-covered windows to caress her face.

Lily stopped beside her bed and pulled her penny dreadfuls from the drawer of her side table; she was about to push them under her mattress when she heard a faint muffled sobbing.

She glanced about. It seemed the dorm wasn't empty after all. Through a thin dividing curtain at the end of the row of beds, Lily glimpsed the silhouette of a hunched figure sitting on the corner of a mattress. She walked over and peered round the edge of the drape to find Molly Tarnish, the mechanical maid, sitting softly crying to herself, her metal shoulders shaking beneath her starched white pinny. Beyond her, the door to the servants' staircase stood ajar.

Molly raised her head and snuffled away an oily tear. "Sorry, Miss. I didn't hear you come in. I should probably go."

"Oh, no need," Lily said. "I'm not supposed to be

here either." She pulled a grubby handkerchief from her sleeve and handed it to Molly, who blew her nose with a sound as loud as a steamhorn.

"Thank you," Molly mumbled, returning the hanky to Lily.

"Please, pay it no mind." Lily stuffed the damp rag, now covered in engine oil, back into her blouse sleeve. "But whatever's the matter?"

Molly held up a bright pink sheet from a pile behind her. "I put these in the washer with the school blazers and they all changed colour. Miss Scrimshaw's going to kill me when she finds out. She'll have me sent down the cog-and-bone merchants. Or worse, she'll strip me parts and melt me down like poor old Elsie." Molly burst into more inconsolable tears.

Lily patted her back. "Don't cry, Moll. We'll think of something. Maybe I could write to the school board on your behalf?"

Molly gave another choking sob. "Oh, please, Miss, don't get them involved, I beg you."

"Well, all right then." Lily examined the row of iron bedsteads, thinking. "I know," she said, "why don't we use your dyed sheets on the bottom of the beds, then we can use the old white ones as top sheets to hide them?"

Molly sniffed. "D'you really think so?"

"I don't see why not," Lily replied. "Come on." She unfolded a pink sheet and pulled the covers off the nearest bed. Molly watched her for a moment, then stood to help.

Working together, it didn't take them long to change the majority of the beds, and once the blankets were on you could hardly tell the bottom sheets had been dyed the wrong colour. They'd nearly finished, and were making up the last mattress at the top of the dormitory, when a noise made them both whirl round.

Alice Harvey was standing in the doorway with Lucretia Blackwell, their faces scrunched into sneers.

"Look, Miss Harvey," Lucretia said. "Lily's helping the help."

"What are you doing here?" Lily asked.

"Madame Laroux told us to bring you to class," Alice replied. "We're doing chapter twenty-two in *The Art of Making Polite Conversation* in French."

"I'm not coming," Lily told her. "I don't feel like it. Anyway, Madame wouldn't know polite conversation if it bit her on the behind." She threw a sideways glance at Molly, who bowed her head and stifled a wheezing laugh.

"How dare you!" Lucretia grabbed the last of the

sheets from Molly, and threw them on the floor. "Look what you've done, you stupid mech, you've dyed them pink!"

"I'm sorry, Miss," Molly mumbled back.

Lily balled her fists. "Why don't you leave her alone?" she said, stepping forward to shield Molly from the two girls.

"What business is it of yours?" Alice asked.

"She's a friend of mine."

"She? *SHE?*" Lucretia folded her arms across her chest and gave a disdainful laugh. "It's not alive, Lily. Mechs aren't living."

"Besides," Alice scuttled closer to Lucretia, "everyone knows mechs and humans can't be friends. Mechs have no feelings."

Lily sighed. It was exhausting dealing with such idiots. "Don't be ridiculous," she told them. "Of course they have feelings. They're no different to you or me."

Lucretia tutted at her. "Oh, Lily, Lily, how wrong you are. Let me show you." She whipped out a hand and struck Molly round the head.

Molly's eyes flared, but she didn't respond.

"You see?" Lucretia said. "It didn't even flinch."

Creakily, Molly rubbed her head. She bent down and gathered her dropped sheets and stepped to the

servants' door. "Please, Misses, don't fight on my account. I am sorry, but I must go, I've work to do."

"Go then, mech," Lucretia spat. "Run along, before you're thrown on the scrap heap." She smiled triumphantly at Alice.

Lily had never wanted to hit anyone so much – she could barely stop herself. But she did, because she'd made a promise to Papa to behave, and behaving meant not causing trouble. Even so, as she ground her teeth and watched Molly hurry from the room, the anger ticked away inside her chest, threatening to explode.

Lucretia gave a haughty snigger, and Alice joined in.

Finally, Lily could take it no more – there was not causing trouble, and then there was standing up for what was right. Because mechanicals deserved to be treated like anyone else.

"Listen, you pair of simpering, fat-headed dolts," she said, "if you ever speak to Molly that way again I'll…I'll…"

"You'll what?" Alice sneered. "Don't *you* threaten me."

Lily bit her lip and thought better of her reply. Alice broke into a horsey smile. "See, you snotty little runt? You won't do anything – and that's the truth. Just because you're a mech-lover you think you can boss us around.

Well, you can't. Now, apologize immediately and we'll forget the whole thing."

Lily shook her head. "You'll never apologize to Molly, so I'm not apologizing to you."

"As you wish." Alice lunged at Lily, making a grab for her hair. Lily ducked away and the girl's hand scratched at her collar, pulling at her bun. She tried to push back, but Lucretia had joined in with her friend – she'd got a hold of Lily's other arm, and wouldn't let go.

Alice's long nails raked at Lily's scalp, scratching her ears. There was nothing for it, she would have to retaliate. She swung her balled fist at Alice's face.

Crack. Her knuckles made contact.



"I said I was sorry," Lily protested as the Kraken dragged her down the corridor, pulling her along by the scruff of her blouse. "Besides, she hit me first."

"Nonsense," the Kraken blustered. "Anyone can see she has the complexion of a bruised beetroot."

"Her face always looks a bit purply."

"What lies you tell, child."

They passed the main entrance, and Lily glanced at the Academy's motto carved in the granite lintel. *Vincit Omnia Veritas* – Truth Conquers All.

Not in this case, Lily reflected, as the Kraken manhandled her down a flight of stone steps, and out into the courtyard.

In the quad, girls in thick winter blousons and woollen hats and scarves strolled arm in arm, or perched birdlike on benches, their backs as straight as ironing boards. They whispered behind gloved hands as they watched the Kraken shove Lily down a narrow alley on the far side of the square.

Everyone knew where *that* led – past the row of tumbledown sheds and an outside latrine with flaky wood panelling, past a high wall fringed with crenellations of broken bottles, all the way to the coal bunker crouched in the far corner of the grounds, its doorway dark as a demon's mouth.

Rumour had it the bodies of the worst offending former residents were buried in that bunker, and when the coal ran dry their white bones would be revealed, poking from the dust.

"Please, Mrs McKracken," Lily cried, "don't put me in there, I'm afraid of the dark."

"Rubbish. The dark never hurt anyone." The Kraken unlocked the bunker and pushed Lily inside. "If you insist on behaving like a common chimney sweep, then you will have to live like one. Never speak back to those

older and wiser than you. You'll stay in here until you learn the value of manners."

The Kraken's angry face disappeared with the slit of light as she slammed the door, and Lily heard the snap of the padlock and then her heavy footsteps lurching away across the yard.

Alone in the cold, dark bunker, fear pricked at Lily's heart. She felt around her, her hands brushing icy lumps of coal. Against the far wall, she found a wonky stool; she sat upon it, and it rocked back and forth precariously – one leg rotten. When she tried to put her feet on the crossbar, she discovered that was broken too, so she pulled her knees up onto the seat and hugged them to her. Their warmth, tight in her chest, felt mildly comforting.

Something crawled across her ankle and she brushed it away with the tip of her boot. Faint scuttlings echoed around the space and she tried not to think of all the horrible things it might be. Earwigs, spiders, mice, rats… But, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw something far worse: a dismembered arm, sticking out from beneath the pile of coal.