

Cogheart by Peter Bunzl

Extract from Chapter One

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 steam-horn.

"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.