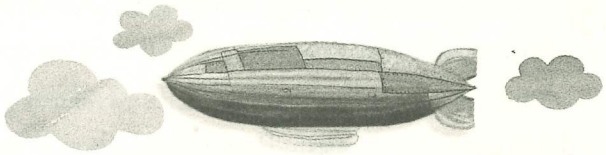
older and wiser than you. You'll stay in here until you learn the value of manners."

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.



CHAPTER 2

Malkin ran for a long time; taking care to keep out of sight, he zigzagged between the trees in short bursts. He had to put as much distance between himself and the crash site as possible. He needed to get to Lily and give her John's last message, before his ticks ran out.

The sun had long gone and the air was thick with grey mist, its cold dew clinging to his fur in droplets. Bushes shook their damp leaves as he brushed past and, far above, the hulking engines of the silver airship chugged in unison, while its searchlight swept the forest looking for him.

He reached the trunk of an old oak and stopped under cover of its ivy-swollen canopy; his black eyes

glinted in the haze, taking in the murky view. Ahead, the path was strewn with broken branches, and those spiky bushes whose burrs always caught in his tail fur. He twitched his nose in disgust. Perhaps he should turn back, go another way... But his senses told him the men were following, so he pressed on, treading carefully.

The ground was boggy and as he ran beads of mud squished between his claws and spattered the pouch round his neck. He was leaving paw prints that could easily be tracked – practically marking his route for them – he cursed the damp ground, the foul weather, the men, the airship, everything. He was a precision machine. Not built for this kind of adventure. The indignity of it: to be chased through the woods like a common scavenger!

More prickly bushes – they were everywhere.

He found a gap in the corner of a thicket and squeezed through.

A tunnel ran under dense vegetation for a few feet, then opened out into a narrow track, scattered with droppings. He stopped to sniff them – an old fox trail, but it had obviously not been used in a while.

He ran on, the undergrowth thickening around him once more. A solid arm of bramble blocked his path. He wiggled past it, and its fiendish barbs caught his leg – this was intolerable!

He scrambled onwards, glancing about. Now he was further into the woods the airship's searchlight was no longer visible and the hum of its engines had subsided. Far off, a distant owl let out a warning cry.

The harsh sounds of the men's voices and the barking of their wretched dog suddenly came close, echoing around him; then their lanterns appeared among the trees nearby, hovering like fat fireflies, and winking as they passed behind the trunks.

Malkin glanced briefly over his shoulder and counted the lamps. There were three in total. But there would be more men than that – one would be handling the dog, others weapons. They had descended from the airship like a swarm.

He skirted round a deep gully filled with rainwater; then a large millpond. The hulking silhouette of a derelict watermill sat on its far side.

He wished he could hurl himself in and paddle across, but he knew mechanimals and swallowing water should never mix. John had warned him: only a pint or two was enough to rust his insides.

John. He was gone now. Probably burned to death or worse inside *Dragonfly*'s tin belly. The thought of it made the cogs of Malkin's innards turn queasily.

On the far side of the pond he scrambled over a mossy

outcrop of boulders; tripped on a root, and tumbled forward, slamming into a pile of damp leaves.

He must concentrate. Time enough to think about John later.

He stood and shook off the leaf-dust, checked the pouch around his neck – it was still there, thank tock.

The dog barked closer. Mechanical barks, much deeper than his own.

Then the gruff voices of the men came through the winter air, from behind the pile of rocks.

"I think he went this way. Bracken's trampled."

"Here too. There's tracks by the water's edge."

"Keep looking. He's close by."

Malkin caught a glimpse of something – a fat black silhouette, with silver eyes, pointing towards him through the trees – and glanced around for somewhere to hide. He was in a hollow with only a few bare logs around. He had to keep moving.

He crawled forward, slinking across the clearing, keeping his belly low to the ground and checking for twigs which might snap under his weight.

He smelled them approaching, heard their feet climbing the boulders. Their clanking mech-dog barked ferociously and pulled forward, but the men kept him

leashed. Lucky there was so much fog, or they would've let the dog run for sure.

"This way."

"I thought I heard him."

"He was here a moment ago."

Malkin scrambled over a bank, sliding behind a line of trees. As he darted across a gap between two bushes, he risked a glance back.

The mech-dog must have caught a brief flash of his white neck; it strained at the leash and bounded towards him, pulling its handler along behind.

Malkin picked up pace. He was at least thirty feet ahead of them now – or so he thought, through the fog. He needed to keep his distance.

He jumped a trickling stream and wove through a line of firs – let those stupid meatheads try and follow him here. Ahead, the gaps between the trees became wider, patches of grey mist separated the trunks and their number thinned; he glimpsed the last few firs standing alone in a sea of bracken, pushed up against a wooden fence that flowed into an adjoining field.

He crept out of the woods and waded through the tall ferns, arriving at a break in the fence. Tucking his tail in, he shimmied under a crossbar, and stepped out into an empty field.

It was colder out here, and the frosted topsoil meant his paws would leave no prints. He had to be careful on open ground, but the dense fog made for adequate hiding.

He stepped forward warily. In the distance, between the grey patches of air, he spotted the outline of a drystone wall and the hint of a cart track.

The voices were getting close again, but the field wasn't as big as he'd first thought and there was every chance he could reach the other side before they arrived. He took a diagonal path across its centre, running briskly.

Halfway across, the airship's searchlight blasted on above him, cutting the sky in two with a bright white column. Its engines pushed swathes of fog away, and suddenly he was exposed, his bright shape singing out against the landscape.

A crackle of gunfire.

Malkin glanced back.

"Stop there!" The silhouette with silver eyes emerged from the wood, and raised a steam-rifle.

Malkin froze, facing his enemy. His heart thrumming against his ribcage. Slowing time.

He stared, unblinking, at the mirrors in the dark face, trying to make out any flicker of expression in them.

The man let out a blast of breath. Malkin shuffled

backwards, slowly widening the distance between them. Was he really going to shoot?

The man squinted into his gunsight, taking aim, and brought his finger to the trigger. Malkin turned and ran, hoping the density of the fog would be enough to save him...

Crack!

A searing explosion pierced his shoulder.

The ground dipped under him. He rolled forward, somersaulting across the icy surface, spinning to a stop at the base of the field. The airship's searchlight flashed wildly around him, picking out circles of frost in the grass. A ghostly after-image of those mirrored eyes burned in his field of vision. He shook it away.

The men's long shadows chased across the open field towards him, lamplights floating before them.

"He's down!"

"I think you got him."

"I can't see where he's at. Where'd he go?"

Malkin staggered to his feet, shell-shocked, and limped towards the boundary wall. The dog, freed from its leash, barked and leaped after him; the men ran with it, firing wildly. The mirror-eyed shooter lagged behind, trying to reload his rifle, while others, without weapons, waved lanterns at the airship.

Malkin reached the wall, and slumped over it, tumbling onto the track beyond, loose stones scattering in his wake. He struggled to his feet and loped on.

Pain seared sharply through his shoulder. He rubbed his snout against it, feeling for an exit wound, but found none. The bullet must be lodged somewhere deep inside, like a stone in a paw. He heard the men's distant shouts – they hadn't given up. At least he still had his pouch. He couldn't let them have that.

The track branched in two and Malkin chose the left fork at random. He slowed, hobbling onwards, looking for an outhouse or barn where he could hide, but there was nothing. He was running out of tocks. Pretty soon he'd wind down – and if that happened in the open they'd be sure to catch him.

Suddenly, around the next corner, a cottage appeared; beyond it, dotted in the distance, were more. Brackenbridge village – he was nearly home. If he could just get to the other side safely…

He checked the pouch one last time for John's letter, and was relieved to find it still there. He'd made a promise to get it to Lily, for it contained great secrets. The last words of a father to his daughter was the sort of message one should deliver no matter the cost. And now his master was gone, Malkin was determined not to fail.