READING PASSAGE

A girl called Connie is with a seagull she names Scark.

"Go on, I dare you." The beady eye of the seagull twinkled at Connie from on top of the lifebuoy.

"But Scark, I can't!" Connie whispered back, scuffing her trainers on a coil of rope on the quayside. "What if someone sees?"

Scark cocked his head and opened his beak in silent mockery of her cowardice. Connie glanced over her shoulder. She really wanted to do it. No-one was watching her. She was just another young girl spending her days hanging out by the marina. There was no-one close enough to see that she was set apart from the others by her mismatched eyes, one green, one brown, and by the fact that she talked to seagulls. The fishermen were too busy washing down their decks to notice the girl with ripped jeans and a mop of black hair. The parties of tourists by the coach park had eyes only for the straw hats and seashell mementoes in the gift shops. Nobody seemed to care that something extraordinary was about to happen a stone's throw away.

"Okay, I'll do it!" Connie said, giving in to her desire. "Bet I'll beat you this time."

Taking a crust from her pocket, she threw a few crumbs into the air as practice runs. Scark flapped from his perch and caught them easily. Play begun, other gulls circled out of the sky and landed on the harbour wall, a row of eager spectators.

"Here goes!" called Connie to them. "It's me against you lot. If one crumb falls to the ground, I win."

The seagulls screamed their approval and flapped into the sky. Connie threw a handful of crusts high. Birds mobbed them from all sides, effortlessly plucking them from the air. Scark gave an ear-splitting mew.

"So I can't catch you out that easily?" laughed Connie. She threw the bread faster and faster, spinning on her heels in an attempt to confuse her opponents. Gulls darted nimbly left and right, splitting their flock, spinning on the wing, diving, anticipating every feint, every low trick she could devise to outwit them. The billowing cloud of birds swarmed around her, responding to the movements of her body as if she were a conductor and they her orchestra, becoming an extension of her mood and music. She swirled them around her like a vast cloak, wrapping herself in their delight in showing off their skill on the wing. A power flowed from her to the birds: it seemed to them almost as if she had shed her human skin and become flight itself, the heart of the flock. The seagulls shrieked with joy, urging her to fly with them out to sea and join them in their raucous colonies on the ledges of cliffs and rock stacks. The mass of birds formed into the shape of two vast wings extending from her fingertips. She felt that, if she just tried a little harder, she too would lift from the earth and

fly, but her feet could not quite leave the ground. Taking the last piece of crust in her fist, Connie threw it high into the sky.

"Catch!" she cried.

The seagulls zoomed upwards like Spitfires in a dogfight*, vying with each other for the prize. With a beat of his broad grey wings, Scark snatched the morsel from under the beak of a small white female and returned to the lifebuoy, ack-acking triumphantly.

"Hey, that wasn't very polite of you," Connie scolded him affectionately, "stealing it from her like that! Whatever am I teaching you?"

Scark bobbed his head in indignation, telling her with a puff of his wings that a mere chick – for so he considered her – could teach him nothing.

*dogfight = a fight between aeroplanes