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Opening extract from

The Airman

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<ch>PROLOGUE

Conor Broekhart was born to fly, or more accurately he was born flying. Though Broekhart's legend is littered with fantastical stories, the tale of his first flight in the summer of 1878 would be the most difficult to believe, had there not been thousands of witnesses. In fact, an account of his birth in a hot-air balloon can be read in the archives of the French newspaper, *Le Petite Journal*, available to all for a small fee at the Librairie Nationale.

Above the article, there is a faded black-and-white photograph. It is remarkably sharp for the period, and was taken by a newspaperman who happened to be in the Trocadéro gardens at the time with his camera.

Captain Declan Broekhart is easily recognizable in the picture, as is his wife, Catherine. He, handsome in his green-and-gold Saltee Island Sharpshooters uniform, she shaken but smiling. And there, protected in the crook of his father's elbow, lies baby Conor. Already with a head of blond Broekhart hair and his mother's wide, intelligent brow. No more than ten minutes old and through some trick of the light or photographic mishap, it seems as though Conor's eyes are focused. Impossible of course. But imagine if somehow they had been, then baby Conor's first sight would have been a cloudless French sky flashing by. Little wonder he became what he became.

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<sub>Paris, summer of 1878

The World Fair was to be the most spectacular ever seen, with over 1,000 exhibitors from every corner of the world.

Captain Declan Broekhart had travelled to France from the Saltee Islands at his king's insistence. Catherine had accompanied him at her own request, as she was the scientist in the family and longed to see for herself the much heralded Galerie des Machines, which showcased inventions promising to make the future a better one. King Nicholas had sent them to Paris, to investigate the possibility of a balloon division for the Saltee Wall.

On the third day of their trip, the pair took a buggy along the Avenue de L'Opéra, to observe the Aeronautical Department's balloon demonstration in the Trocadéro gardens.

'Do you feel that?' asked Catherine. She took her husband's hand, and placed it on her stomach. 'Our son is kicking to be free. He longs to witness these miracles for himself.'

Declan laughed. 'He *or she* will have to wait his time. The world will still be here in six weeks.'

When the Broekharts arrived at the Trocadéro gardens, they found the Aeronautical Squadron in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, or rather that of her head. The statue would be presented to the United States when completed, but for now Lady Liberty's head alone was being showcased. The copper structure dwarfed most of the fair's other exhibits and it was amazing to imagine how colossal the assembled statue would be when it finally stood guard over New York City's harbour.

The Aeronautical Squadron had inflated a dirigible balloon on a patch of lawn, and was politely holding the crowd back with a velvet rope. Declan Broekhart approached the soldier on sentry duty and handed him his sealed letter of introduction from the French ambassador to the Saltee Islands. Within minutes they were joined by the squadron's captain, Victor Vigny.

Vigny was lithe and tanned with a crooked nose and a crown of jet-black hair that stood erect on his scalp like the head of a yard brush.

‘*Bonjour*, Captain Broekhart,’ he said, removing one white glove and shaking the Saltee Island officer’s hand warmly. ‘We have been expecting you.’ The Frenchman bowed deeply. ‘And this must be Madame Broekhart.’ Vigny checked the letter in mock confusion. ‘But, madame, nowhere here does it say how beautiful you are.’

The Frenchman’s smile was so charming that the Broekharts could not take offence.

‘Well, Captain,’ said Vigny, sweeping back his arm dramatically to introduce his balloon. ‘I give you *Le Soleil*, the Sun. What do you think of her?’

The dirigible was undeniably magnificent. An elongated golden envelope swaying gently over its leather-bound basket. But Declan Broekhart was not interested in decoration, he was interested in specification.

‘A bit more *pointed* than others I’ve seen,’ he noted.

‘*Aérodynamique*,’ corrected Vigny. ‘She glides across the sky like her namesake.’

Catherine unhooked herself from her husband’s arm.

‘A cotton-silk blend,’ she said, craning her head back to squint at the balloon. ‘And twin screws on the basket. A neat piece of work. How fast does she travel?’

Vigny was surprised to hear such technical observations from a female, but he disguised his shock with a few rapid blinks, then smoothly delivered his answer.

‘Ten miles an hour. With the help of God and a fair wind.’

Catherine peeled back a corner of leather, revealing the woven basket underneath.

‘Wicker and willow,’ she said. ‘Makes a nice cushion.’

Vigny was enchanted. ‘Yes. *Absolument*. This basket will last for five hundred hours in the sky. French baskets are the best in the world.’

‘*Très bien*,’ said Catherine.

She hoisted her petticoats and climbed the wooden steps to the basket, displaying remarkable agility for a woman eight months’ pregnant. Both men stepped forward to object, but Catherine did not give them time to speak.

‘I daresay I know more about the science of aeronautics than both of you. And I really don’t think I have crossed the Celtic Sea to stand in a glorified field while my husband experiences one of the wonders of the world.’

Catherine was perfectly calm as she made this statement, but only a dullard could have missed the steel in her voice.

Declan sighed. ‘Very well, Catherine. If Captain Vigny permits it.’

Vigny’s only answer was a Gallic shrug that said, *Permit it? I pity the man who tries to stand in this woman’s way.*

Catherine smiled.

‘Very well, it is settled. Shall we cast off?’

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Le Soleil loosed its anchors shortly before three that afternoon, quickly climbing to a height of a few hundred metres.

‘We are in heaven,’ sighed Catherine, clutching her husband’s hand tightly.

The young couple looked upwards into the belly of the balloon itself. The silk was set shimmering by the breeze and sparkling by the sun. Golden waves billowed across its surface, rumbling like distant thunder.

Below them the Trocadéro gardens were emerald lakes, with Lady Liberty's head breaching the surface like a Titan of legend.

Vigny fed a small steam engine, sending power to the twin propellers. Fortunately, the prevailing wind snatched the smoke away from the basket.

'Impressive, *non*?' shouted the Frenchman above the engine's racket. 'How many are you thinking of ordering?'

Declan pretended not to be impressed. 'Perhaps none. I don't know if those little propellers would have any effect against an ocean wind.'

Vigny was about to argue the merits of his steam-powered dirigible when a sharp flat crack echoed across the skies. It was a noise familiar to both soldiers.

'Gunshot,' said Vigny, peering towards the ground.

'Rifle,' said Declan Broekhart grimly. As captain of the Saltee Sharpshooters he knew the sound well. 'Long range. Maybe a Sharps. See, there.'

A plume of grey-blue smoke rose into the sky from the western border of the gardens.

'Gun smoke,' noted Vigny. 'One cannot help wondering who the target might be.'

'No need to wonder, *monsieur*,' said Catherine, her voice shaking. 'Look above you. The balloon.'

Both men searched the golden envelope for a puncture. Both found one. The bullet had entered through the lower starboard quadrant and exited through the upper port section.

'Why are we not dead?' wondered Declan.

'The bullet was not enough to ignite the hydrogen,' explained Vigny. 'An incendiary shell would have done so.'

Catherine was badly shaken. For the first time in her short life, mortality was at hand, and not just her own. By stepping into the balloon's basket she had put her child's life at risk. She folded her arms across her stomach.

'We must descend. Quickly. Before the envelope rips.'

In the fraught minutes that were to follow, Vigny proved his skill as an aeronaut. He perched on the basket's lip, gripping a stanchion in one hand and the gas-release line in the other. With a tap of his boot he pushed the tiller wide. *Le Soleil* swung in a gentle arc. Vigny intended to set her down inside the velvet rope.

Declan Broekhart stayed at his wife's side. Strong and stubborn as Catherine was, the gunshot had shocked her system. This had the effect of bringing forward her child's due time. The body realized that it was in mortal danger, so the best chance for the baby was in the wide world.

A spasm of pain buckled Catherine's knees. She collapsed backwards, cradling her stomach.

'Our son is coming,' she gasped. 'He refuses to wait.'

Vigny almost fell off his perch. 'Mon Dieu. But, *madame*, this is impossible. I cannot allow it on my ship. I do not even know if this is good luck or bad luck. I will have to check the aeronaut's manual. It would not surprise me if we had to sacrifice an albatross.'

It was Vigny's habit to chatter wittily when anxious. Wit in times of danger was, in his opinion, very cavalier. This did not stop him performing his duties. He guided the dirigible expertly towards the chosen landing spot, compensating for the leaks with expert tugs on the gas line.

On the basket's cramped floor, Catherine struggled to deliver her child. Her leg shot out involuntarily as the pain hit. The stroke was a lucky one, catching her husband on the shin and snapping him out of his near panic.

'What can I do, Catherine?' he asked, keeping his voice steady, his tone light, as though giving birth in a falling balloon was the most natural thing in the world.

'Hold me steady,' replied Catherine through gritted teeth. 'And give me your weight to push against.'

Declan did as he was told, calling over his shoulder to Vigny.

'Steady. Keep her steady, man.'

'Talk to the Almighty,' retorted Vigny. 'He is sending the gusts of wind, not I.'

They were in reasonably good order. The envelope was damaged, but holding her integrity. The Broekharts huddled on the floor, engrossed in the business of bringing life to the world.

They would have made it. Vigny was already imagining the first sip of the champagne he planned to order the moment his feet touched solid ground, when the air was split with a brace of gunshots. Both bullets pierced the balloon, and this time their effect was more severe. One passed straight through as its predecessor had, but the second clipped a seam, sending a rip racing to the crown of the balloon. Air and gas screamed from the distressed dirigible like a company of banshees.

Vigny pitched forward into the basket, bouncing off Declan Broekhart's broad back. They were in God's hands now. With the envelope so grievously ruptured, the Frenchman could not claim a single degree of control over the balloon's path. They dropped rapidly, the deflating envelope flapping above them.

Catherine and Declan ignored their own fates, concentrating on their child's.

‘I see the baby,’ said Declan, shouting into the wind. ‘Almost there, my darling.’

Catherine Broekhart held back the despair clamouring in her mind and pushed her baby into the world. He arrived without a cry, reaching out to grip his father’s finger.

‘A boy,’ he said. ‘My strong son.’

Catherine gave herself not a minute to recover from her brief labour. She leaned forward and grasped her husband’s lapel.

‘You cannot let him die, sir.’ It was an order, plain and simple.

Vigny swaddled the newborn in his blue Aeronautical Squadron jacket.

‘We can but pray, *monsieur*,’ he said.

Declan Broekhart climbed to his feet, taking in the literal gravity of their situation at a glance. The basket was in virtual freefall now, slicing east directly towards Lady Liberty’s head. Any considerable impact would surely result in the baby’s death, and he had been forbidden to allow that. But how to avoid it?

Fortune saved them, at least temporarily. The envelope spent its last breath, then impaled itself on the third and fourth rays of the Liberty’s crown. The material ripped, bunched and jammed between the rays, halting the basket’s murderous descent.

‘Providence,’ breathed Captain Broekhart. ‘We are spared.’

The basket swung like a pendulum, grazing the lower curve of Lady Liberty’s cheek with each pass. The copper bust rang, attracting gawkers like church worshippers. Catherine held on to her baby son, absorbing the impact as best she could. The envelope’s threads popped with cracks like gunfire.

‘The balloon will not hold,’ said Vigny. ‘We are still twenty feet up.’

Declan nodded. ‘We need to lash her to the statue.’ He grabbed *Le Soleil*’s anchors, tossing one to Vigny. ‘A case of the finest red wine if you make the shot.’

Vigny tested the anchor’s weight. ‘Champagne, if you don’t mind.’

Both men threw their anchors high between the last two rays of Lady Liberty’s crown. Their aim was true and the anchors bumped the statue’s ringlets, then slid back down, raising sparks as the metal surfaces cracked together. The anchors bit on both sides of the crown and stuck fast. Declan and Vigny quickly pulled a loop of rope through the basket’s bow and stern rings, cinching them tight.

Not a moment too soon. With the screech of a seabird, the balloon material ripped itself free of the statue’s crown, dropping the basket a further stomach-lurching yard until the anchor ropes took the strain. The ropes groaned, stretched and held.

‘My basket is now a cradle for your baby,’ panted Vigny, and then, ‘Champagne. A case. The sooner the better.’

Declan squatted below the basket’s rim, tugging the Frenchman’s cuff until he too bent low.

‘Your hunter may have more bullets to spend,’ he said.

‘True,’ agreed Victor Vigny. ‘But I think he will have fled. We no longer present such an enormous target, and by now the gendarmes will be on his trail. I imagine it was an anarchist. They have been making threats.’

In the Trocadéro gardens, the entire crowd had pooled below the basket. They had come to the World Fair expecting spectacle, but here was high adventure. The Aeronautical Squadron leaned long ladders against the wicker basket to rescue *Le Soleil*’s stranded passengers. Catherine climbed down first, aided by the gallant Captain Vigny. Then came the proud father, cradling the miraculous baby in his arms. People gasped and surged forward.

A child. There had been no child in the basket when it took flight.

It was as if the world had never before seen a baby.

Born in the sky. Imagine it. A child of wonder.

Ladies and gentlemen elbowed each other shamelessly, longing for a glimpse of his cherubic face.

Look, the eyes are open. His hair is almost white. Perhaps the altitude?

Someone popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, and an Italian count passed around Cuban cigars. It was as if the entire assembly were celebrating the baby's survival. Vigny snagged the bottle, quaffing deeply.

'Perfect,' he sighed, passing it to Declan Broekhart.

'He is a charmed boy. What will you call him?'

Broekhart grinned, deliriously happy.

'I thought perhaps Engel. He came from the skies, after all. And our family name is Flemish.'

'No, Declan,' said Catherine, stroking her son's white-blond hair. 'Though he *is* an angel, he has my father's brow. Conor is his name.'

'Conor?' said Declan, in mock protest. 'Irish from your family. Flemish from mine. The boy is a mongrel.'

Vigny lit two cigars, passing one to the proud father. 'Now is not the time to argue, *mon ami*.'

Declan nodded. 'It never is. Conor he shall be called. A strong name.'

Vigny bonged a knuckle on Lady Liberty's chin. 'Whatever he is called, this boy is indebted to Liberty.'

This was the second omen of the day. Conor Broekhart would eventually pay his debt to liberty. The first omen was, of course, the airborne birth. Perhaps he would

have been a sky pilot even without *Le Soleil*, or perhaps something *was* awakened in him that day. An obsession with the sky that would consume Conor Broekhart's life, and the lives of everyone around him.

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And so a few days after Conor's famous birth, Captain Declan Broekhart and his family sailed from France back to the tiny sovereign state of the Saltee Islands off the Irish coast.

The Saltee Islands had been ruled by the Trudeau family since 1171 when England's King Henry II had given them to Raymond Trudeau, a powerful and ambitious knight. It was a cruel joke as the Saltee Islands were little more than gull-infested rocks. By placing Trudeau in charge of the Saltee Islands, Henry fulfilled his contract of granting his knight an Irish estate, but also made it clear what happened to overly ambitious knights.

When Raymond Trudeau objected to the king's grant, Henry delivered the often-quoted Trudeau Admonishment.

'You disagree with an appointee of God Himself,' Henry is recorded as saying. 'Perhaps Monsieur Trudeau considers himself above his king. Perhaps Monsieur Trudeau considers *himself* fit for royal office. So be it. You shall take the Saltee Islands with my blessing, but not as baron. You are their king. King Raymond the First. I will demand neither tithe nor tribute from you or your descendants in perpetuity and, as an added reward, you may wear your crown to my court. Whatever you may find on those most bountiful isles is yours to keep.'

Trudeau could do nothing but bow and stammer his thanks, bitter though the words were. This was a terrible insult, as there was nothing to be found on the Saltee Islands but sea birds and their droppings, and little grew there thanks to the showers

of sea spray that coated both islands during rough tides, giving nothing to the Saltees but their name.

But Raymond Trudeau's fortune was not as bleak as it seemed. Following his effective banishment to the Saltee Islands, a strange glowing cave was discovered by one of his men who was burning gulls from their perches. The cave was a glacial deposit of diamonds. The largest mine ever discovered, and the only mine in Europe. Henry had ordained Raymond Trudeau king of the most valuable estate in the world.

Seven hundred years later and the Trudeau family were still in power in spite of over a dozen invasion attempts from English, Irish and even pirate armies. The famous Saltee walls held fast against cannon, shot and ram, and the celebrated Saltee Sharpshooters were trained to shave the whiskers off a pirate a mile away. There were only two industries on the Saltees. Diamonds and defence.

The Saltee prison was packed to bursting with the foulest dregs of murdering humanity that Ireland and Great Britain had to offer. They worked the diamond mine until they had served their time or died. Most died. A sentence on Little Saltee was a death sentence. Nobody really cared. The Saltees had been making many people rich for centuries, and none of those *many people* wanted the status quo to change.

Nevertheless change *was* afoot. Now, there was a new king on the Saltee throne, an American, King Nicholas the First, or Good King Nick as he was known in an increasing number of households. Barely six months in power and already King Nicholas had drastically improved the quality of life for his 3,000 subjects, abolishing taxes and building a modern drainage system, that ran through the town of Promontory Fort on Great Saltee's northern tip.

When the royal yacht, *Razorbill*, pulled into Saltee Harbour at dawn after a three-day voyage from France, King Nicholas himself was there to meet her. Truth be

told, he did not much look like the other kings of the day, a youthful thirty-seven, dressed in stout hunting leathers and a flat cap. His sideburns were trimmed back, and hair cut military style close to the skull. His face was tanned, with a tic-tac-toe pattern of faded scars on his forehead from a close call with a landmine. A stranger might assume Nicholas to be the king's gamekeeper, but never the king. There was no pomp or circumstance about the man, and he lived as plainly as one could in a stately palace. Nicholas had served as a skirmisher and a balloonist during the American Civil War, and it was said that he slept on the window seat in his royal chamber because the bed was too soft.

Nicholas was a new breed of European king. One who was determined to use whatever power he had to improve the quality of life for as many people as possible. Good King Nick. Declan Broekhart loved him like a brother.

Declan hitched the yacht's bowline, then leaped on to the jetty to greet his monarch.

'Your Majesty,' he said, bowing slightly.

King Nicholas returned to the bow, then punched his friend on the shoulder.

'Declan! What kept you? I read about your miraculous airborne baby before I see him. I can only pray that he has inherited his mother's features.'

While the men shared a chuckle, Catherine stepped on to the gangplank, holding her precious bundle wrapped in a blanket.

'Catherine,' said Nicholas, taking her arm. 'Shouldn't you be resting?'

'I had my fill of rest on board.' Catherine pulled little Conor's blanket down past his chin. 'Now, your newest subject would like to meet his king.'

Nicholas peered into the swaddling clothes, finding a baby's face in the shadows. He was a little disconcerted to find the child's eyes focused and seemingly taking his measure.

'Ah,' he said, rearing back slightly. 'So . . . alert.'

'Yes,' said Catherine proudly. 'He has his father's sharpshooter eyes.'

But King Nicholas saw more.

'Perhaps. But he has the Broekhart chin too. Stubborn to a fault. Your brow though, Catherine. A scientist perhaps, like his mother.' He tickled baby Conor's chin. 'We need scientists. There's a new world coming our way from America and Europe too. The Saltees won't stay independent unless we have something to offer the world, and the diamond mine on Little Saltee won't last forever. Scientists, that's what we need here.' King Nicholas tugged on riding gloves. 'Teach him well, Catherine.'

'I will, Your Majesty.'

'And take him up to the palace. Introduce him to Isabella.'

'I'll take him up after breakfast,' promised Catherine.

'And now, Declan, sorry to drag you away, but apparently some opium smugglers have dug themselves into Lady Walker's Cave. Right under our noses.'

'I'll take care of it, Majesty. Perhaps you would escort Catherine to our quarters?'

'Nice try, Captain,' grinned Nicholas, clapping his hands. 'Trying to keep me out of harm's way. Weren't you? That's what I pay you for. Nightmare, is it? Working for me? I give you instructions, then refuse to let you follow them.' The king was excited again, the old soldier in him relishing the chase. Unlike most old soldiers,

he did not relish the kill. These smugglers would be sent to work the diamond mine on the prison island of Little Saltee, but not harmed unless it was unavoidable.

‘Come now, we have dawn light and low tide. Criminals do not like to get up early, so we should catch them napping.’

The king touched his cap to Catherine, then strode off down the jetty towards a small company of Saltee cavalry on horseback. It was, in fact, the entire Saltee Army mounted division. A dozen expert horsemen on Irish stallions. Two of the horses were without riders.

Declan was anxious to stay with his wife, but more anxious to be about his work.

‘I must go, Catherine. The Kking will injure himself swinging into those caves.’

‘You go, Declan. Keep him safe; the islands need Good King Nick.’

Captain Broekhart kissed his wife and baby, then followed King Nicholas to where the cavalry waited, horses carving spiralled shavings from the jetty planks with their hooves.

‘Your father, the hero,’ Catherine told baby Conor, waving his tiny hand towards Declan. ‘Now, let’s go home and make ready to meet a little princess. Would you like to meet a princess, my stubborn scientist?’

Conor gurgled. It seemed as though he would.

<ch>CHAPTER 1: THE PRINCESS AND THE PIRATE

Conor Broekhart was a remarkable boy, a fact that became evident very early in his idyllic childhood. Nature is usually grudging with her gifts, dispensing them sparingly, but she favoured Conor with everything she had to offer. It seemed as though all the talents of his ancestors had been bestowed upon him. Intelligence, strong features and grace.

Conor was fortunate in his situation too. He was born into an affluent community, where the values of equality and justice were actually being applied, on the surface at least. He grew up with a strong belief in right and wrong, which was not muddied by poverty or violence. It was straightforward for the young boy. Right was Great Saltee, wrong was Little Saltee.

It is an easy matter now, to pluck some events from Conor's early years and say, *There it is. The boy who became the man. We should have seen it.* But hindsight is an unreliable science and, in truth, there was perhaps a single incident during Conor's early days at the palace that hinted at his potential.

The incident in question occurred when Conor was nine years old and roaming the serving corridors that snaked behind the walls of the castle chapel and main building. His partner on these excursions was the Princess Isabella, one year his senior and always the more adventurous of the two. Isabella and Conor were rarely seen without each other, and often so daubed with mud, blood and nothing good that the boy was barely distinguishable from the princess.

On this particular summer afternoon, they had exhausted the fun to be had tracking an unused chimney to its source and had decided to launch a surprise pirate attack on the king's apartment.

‘You can be Captain Crow,’ said little Conor, licking some soot from round his mouth, ‘and I can be the cabin boy that stuck an axe in his head.’

Isabella was a pretty thing, with elfin face and round brown eyes, but at that moment she looked more like a sweep’s urchin than a princess.

‘No, Conor. You are Captain Crow, and I am the princess hostage.’

‘There is no princess hostage,’ declared Conor firmly, worried that Isabella was once again about to mould the legend to suit herself. In previous games, she had included a unicorn and a fairy that were definitely not part of the original story.

‘Of course there is,’ said Isabella belligerently. ‘There is because I say there is, and I am an actual princess, whereas *you* were born in a balloon.’

Isabella intended this as an insult, but to Conor being born in a balloon was about the finest place to be born.

‘Thank you,’ he said, grinning.

‘That’s not a good thing,’ squealed Isabella. ‘Doctor John says that your lungs were probably crushed by the alti-tood.’

‘My lungs’re better than yours. See!’ And Conor hooted at the sky to show just how healthy his lungs were.

‘Very well,’ said Isabella, impressed. ‘But I am still the princess hostage. And you should remember that I can have you executed if you displease me.’

Conor was not unduly concerned about Isabella having him executed as she ordered him hung at least a dozen times a day and it hadn’t happened yet. He was more worried that Isabella was not turning out to be as good a playmate as he had hoped. Basically he wanted someone who would play the games he fancied playing, which generally involved flying paper gliders or eating insects. But lately Isabella had been veering towards dress-up and kissing, and she would only explore chimneys if

Conor agreed to pretend they were the legendary lovers Diarmuid and Gráinne, escaping from Fionn's castle.

Needless to say, Conor had no wish to be a legendary lover. Legendary lovers rarely flew anywhere, and hardly ever ate insects.

'Very well,' he moaned. 'You are the hostage princess.'

'Excellent, Captain,' Isabella said sweetly. 'Now, you may drag me to my father's chamber and demand ransom.'

'Drag?' said Conor hopefully.

'Play drag, not real drag, or I shall have you hung.'

Conor thought, with remarkable wit for a nine-year-old, that if he had actually been hung every time Isabella ordered it, his neck would be longer than a Serengeti giraffe's.

'Play drag, then. Can I kill anyone we meet?'

'Absolutely anyone. Not Papa, though, until after I see how sad he is.'

Absolutely anyone.

That's something, thought Conor, swishing his wooden sword, thinking how it cut the air like a gull's wing.

Just like a wing.

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The pair proceeded across the barbican, she *oohing* and he *arring*, drawing fond but also wary looks from those they passed. The palace's only resident children were well liked, not at all spoilt, and mannerly enough when thei parents were nearby, but they were also light-fingered and would pilfer whatever they fancied on their daily quests.

A certain Italian gold-leaf artisan had recently turned from the cherub he was coating one afternoon to find his brush and tray of gold wafers missing. The gold

turned up later coated on the wings of a week-dead seagull that *someone* had tried to fly from the Wall battlements.

They crossed the bridge into the main keep, which housed the king's residence, office and meeting rooms. And this would generally have been where the pair would be met with a good-natured challenge from the sentry. But the king himself had just leaned out of the window and sent the fellow running to catch the Wexford boat and put ten shillings on a horse he fancied in the Curracloe beach races. The palace had a telephone system, but there were no wires to the shore as yet, and the booking agents on the mainland refused to take bets over the semaphore.

For two minutes only, much to the princess's and the pirate's delight, the main keep was unguarded. They strode in as though they owned the castle.

'Of course, in real life, I *do* own the castle,' confided Isabella, never missing a chance to remind Conor of her exalted position.

'Arrrr,' said Conor, and meant it.

The spiral staircase passed three floors, all packed with cleaning staff, lawyers, scientists and civil servants, but through a combination of low infant cunning and luck the pair managed to pass the lower floors to the king's own entrance: impressive oak double doors with half of the Saltee flag and motto carved into each one. *Vallo Parietis* read the words. *Defend the Wall.* The flag was a crest bisected vertically into crimson and gold sections with a white blocked tower stamped in the centre.

The door was slightly ajar.

'It's open,' said Conor.

'It's open, hostage princess,' Isabella reminded him.

'Sorry, hostage princess. Let's see what treasure lies inside.'

'I'm not supposed to, Conor.'

‘Pirate Captain Crow,’ said Conor, slipping through the gap in the door.

As usual, Nicholas’s apartment was littered with the remains of a dozen experiments. There was a cannibalized dynamo on the hearthrug, copper-wiring strands protruding from its belly.

‘That’s a sea creature and those are its guts,’ said Conor, with relish.

‘Oh, you foul pirate,’ said Isabella.

‘Stop your smiling then if I’m a foul pirate. Hostages are supposed to weep and wail.’

In the fireplace itself were jars of mercury and experimental fuels. Nicholas refused to allow his staff to move them downstairs. Too volatile, he explained. Anyway, the fire would only go up the chimney.

Conor pointed to the jars. ‘Bottles of poison. Squeezed from a dragon’s bum. One sniff and you ’vaporate.’

This sounded very possible, and Isabella wasn’t sure whether to believe it or not.

On the chaise longue were buckets of fertilizer, a couple gently steaming.

‘Also from a dragon’s bum,’ intoned Conor wisely.

Isabella tried to keep her scream behind her lips, so it shot out of her nose instead.

‘It’s fert’lizer,’ said Conor, taking pity on her. ‘For making plants grow on the island.’

Isabella scowled at him. ‘You’re being hanged at sundown. That’s a princess’s promise.’

The apartment was a land of twinklings and shinings for a couple of unsupervised children. A stars-and-stripes banner was draped round the shoulders of a

stuffed black bear in the corner. A collection of prisms and lenses glinted from a wooden box closed with a cap at one end, and books old and new were piled high like the columns of a ruined temple.

Conor wandered between these columns of knowledge, almost touching everything, but holding back, knowing somehow that another man's dreams should not be disturbed.

Suddenly he froze. There was something he should do. The chance may never come again.

'I must capture the flag,' he breathed. 'That's what a pirate captain is supposed to do. Go to the roof, so I can capture the flag and gloat.'

'Capture the flag and goat?'

'Gloat.'

Isabella stood hands on hips. 'It's pronounced goooaaat, idiot.'

'You're supposed to be a princess. Insulting your subjects is not very princessy.'

Isabella was unrepentant. 'Princesses do what they want – anyway we don't have a goat on the roof.'

Conor did not waste his time arguing. There was no winning an argument with someone who could have you executed. He ran to the roof door, swishing his sword at imaginary troops. This door, too, was open. Incredible good fortune. On the hundred previous occasions he and Isabella had ambushed King Nicholas, every door in the place had been locked, and they had been warned by stern-faced parents never to venture on to the roof alone. It was a long way down.

Conor thought about it.

Parents? Flag?

Parents? Flag?

‘Some pirate you are,’ sniffed Isabella. ‘Standing around there scratching yourself with a toy sword.’

Flag, then.

‘Arrr. I go for the flag, hostage princess.’ And then in his own voice, ‘Don’t touch any of the experiments, Isabella. ’Specially the bottles. Papa says that one day the king is going to blow the lot of us to hell and back with his concoctions, so they must be dangerous.’

Conor went up the stairs fast, before his nerve could fail him. It wasn’t far, perhaps a dozen steps to the open air. He emerged from the confines of the turret stairwell on to a stone rooftop. From dark to light in half a second. The effect was breathtaking, azure sky with clouds close enough to touch.

I was born in a place like this, thought Conor

You are a special child, his mother told him at least once a day. *You were born in the sky, and there will always be a place for you there.*

Conor believed that this was true. He had always felt happiest in high places, where others feared to go.

Conor climbed on top of the parapet, holding tight to the flagpole. The world twirled round him, orange sun hanging over Kilmore Quay like a beacon. Sea glittering below him, more silver than blue, and the sky calling to him as though he actually were a bird. For a moment he was bewitched by the scene, then the corner of the flag crept into his vision.

Arrr, he thought. *Yon be the flag. Pride of the Saltees.*

The flag stood perfectly rectangular, crimson and gold with its tower so white it glowed, held rigid by a bamboo frame so that the islands’ emblem would stand proud

no matter what the weather. It struck Conor that he was actually standing on top of the very tower depicted by the flag.

This may have caused a tug of patriotic pride in an older islander, but to a nine-year-old all it meant was that his picture should be included on the flag.

I will draw myself on after I steal the flag, he decided.

Isabella emerged on to the rooftop, blinking against the sudden light.

'Come down from the parapet, Conor. We're playing pirates, not bird boy.'

Conor was aghast. 'And leave the flag? Don't you understand? I will be a famous pirate, more famous than Barbarossa himself.'

'That wall is old, Conor.'

'Pirate Captain Crow, remember.'

'That wall is old, *Conor*. It could fall down. Remember the slates came off the chapel during the storm last year?'

'What about the flag?'

'Forget the flag and forget the goat. I'm hungry, so come down before I have you hanged.'

Conor stamped down off the wall, sulking now. He was about to challenge Isabella, say that she could go ahead and have him hanged for all he cared, *and* she was a rotten hostage. Whoever heard of a hostage *giving* the orders. She should learn to weep and wail properly instead of threatening to execute him a hundred times a day.

He was about to say all of this, when there came a dull thump from below that shook the blocks beneath their feet. A cloud of purple smoke oomphed through the doorway, as though someone had cleared a tuba.

Conor had a suspicion bordering on certainty.