



CHAPTER 1: THE PRINCESS AND THE PIRATE

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 Broekhart'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.

'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.

The pair proceeded across the barbican, she *ooing* and he *arring*, drawing fond but also wary looks from those they passed.

They crossed the bridge into the main keep, which housed the king's residence, office and meeting rooms.

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.

‘Arrrrr,’ 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.

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 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.

Suddenly Conor 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.

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.*

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.

‘Did you touch something?’ he asked Isabella.

Isabella was haughty even in the face of disaster. ‘I am the princess of this palace, so I am quite entitled to touch whatever I wish.’

The tower shook again. This time the smoke was green and it was accompanied by a foul smell.

‘What did you touch, Isabella?’

The princess of the palace turned as green as the smoke.

‘I may have removed the cap from the wooden box. The one with the pretty lenses.’

‘Oh,’ said Conor. ‘That could be trouble.’

King Nicholas had explained the lens box to Conor once, delighted to find that the boy’s passion for learning equalled his own.

The lenses are arranged in a very specific order, he had said, squatting low so that his own eye appeared monstrous through the first lens. So when I remove the cap, and light comes in one end, it’s concentrated by successive lenses until it can set paper alight at the other. With this little gadget it might be possible to start a fire from a distance. The ultimate safe fuse.

Conor remembered thinking at the time that you could leave the box by the window and have it light the fire for you each morning, a chore that he was none too fond of.

And now Isabella had removed the cap.

‘Did you move the box?’

‘Mind your tone, commoner!’

Commoner? Isabella must really be terrified.

‘Isabella?’



‘I possibly placed it on the table, by the window to see the colours passing through.’

Obviously the device had caught the afternoon light, releasing the power of the lenses into the king’s laboratory, filled with the fertilizer, jugs of fuel and various explosive materials. The concentrated light had obviously landed on something combustible.

‘We have to go,’ said Conor, all thoughts of Captain Crow forgotten. He was no stranger to the power of explosives. His father was in charge of the Wall defence and had brought Conor along on a trip to collapse a smugglers’ cave. It was a birthday treat, but also a lesson to stay away from anything that went boom. The cave wall had collapsed like toy bricks swatted by a toddler.

The tower shook again, several floor blocks rattled in their housings, then dropped into the apartment below. Orange and blue flames surged through the holes, and the snap and grind of breaking glass and twisting metal frightened the two children.

‘Up on the wall,’ said Conor urgently. ‘The floor is falling.’

For once, Isabella did not argue. She accepted Conor’s hand and followed him to the lip of the parapet.

‘The floor is a foot thick,’ he explained, shouting over the roar of the flames. ‘The parapet is four feet thick. It won’t break.’

The explosions went off below like cannon fire, each one issuing different odours, different colour smoke. The fumes were noxious, and Conor presumed his own face was as green as Isabella’s.

It doesn’t matter if the parapet holds, he realized. The flames will get us long before then.



To Isabella and Conor it felt as though the entire world shook. The stairwell spewed forth flame and smoke as though a dragon lurked below, and from the courtyard came the screams of islanders, as chunks of the tower crashed down from above.

I need to get us out of this place, thought Conor. No one else can save us, not even Father.

There was no way to walk down, not through the inferno below. There was only one way down, and that was to fly.

Find out what happens next. Read

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