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Vampirates

Tide of Terror

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PROLOGUE

Night Surfer

Sunset. A deserted cove. The waves reach out hungrily for the sand, which changes hue from white to honey gold to fiery amber as the sun grows weary and dips down into the inky waters. The hungry waves soon swallow the ball of light.

Now it is a world of shadow upon shadow. No human eyes could discern the joins between land and water or between water and sky. No human eyes could make out the insistent rush and tumble of the ocean. For this isn't the lacklustre darkness of towns and cities. This is *real* darkness – deep and strong and velvet black.

Where is the moon? It's as if she chose not to come out tonight, reluctant to witness the happenings of the coming hours. Where are the stars? They too seem to have elected to keep a quiet distance. No moon. No stars. On a night like this, you could be forgiven for thinking

that the world was about to end. And, for one of you, that might be true.

For the dark waves protect a secret. A man – at least, the *semblance* of a man – riding a surfboard. It's no free ride. The black waves are as tall as they are fierce, testing the surfer to the very limits of his strength and endurance. He never loses his footing, in spite of the swell, in spite of the lack of light to guide his way. His musclebound body twists and turns, locked to that board. It's a battle for respect that he fights with the mocking waves. And he's holding his own out there.

At last, the waves seem to grow tired of their sport and reward the surfer's determination by easing him into the shallows. Still, he moves at speed, the knife-edged surfboard skimming the thin sheet of opal water.

He jumps from the board, his feet touching the sandy floor. The waters make a final teasing grab for the board but the surfer reaches into the foam and lifts it out of their clutches. Board under his arm, he strides across the dry sand.

He does not pause for an instant, in spite of the weight of the board. Nor does the night air chill him. And, strangely, though he has come from the depths of the water, his skin and hair are already dry. His clothes too are dry as bone. He isn't wearing a wetsuit, just regular clothes – trousers and a shirt, the sleeves ripped off at the shoulder to allow his arms maximum motion. His feet are bare.

He comes to the foot of a cliff and props the board

against the rock, leaving it behind as he begins his ascent. At first there's a path for him to follow but, as the rock climbs higher, so must he reach out with his hands to haul himself up, using his feet with equal dexterity. Now he seems less like a man, more like a wild animal. In truth, he's a little of each. And a little more besides.

He reaches the top of the cliff and pauses for an instant, looking back with satisfaction down the sheer rock he has climbed, looking out across the sand to the rough sea by which he arrived here. No human eyes could make out the joins between land and water. But his eyes drink it all in. *His* eyes are at ease with darkness.

He wastes no more time on self-congratulation but turns forward instead. There's a high fence but, after all the other hurdles he's jumped, this one is easy. His feet land on soft grass. He looks ahead, far ahead, to the house in the distance – its windows lit up, even at this late hour. It's almost on fire with so much light. It brings a lightning crack of pain to his eyes but he bites it down and keeps on walking.

His long strides make short work of these grounds, so sizeable are they. He passes a field where horses are running. For a moment, he pauses to watch them. They do not see him but sense him, freezing still for a moment. They are frightened by the stranger, as well they might be. But tonight, they need have no fear. He moves on.

There's a vast swimming pool and, ever the showman, he can't resist diving into it and swimming a powerful

crawl from one end to the other. He hauls himself back out, and again his clothes are bone dry.

Up ahead is a tangle of trees, a fruit orchard. As he walks through it, brushing against the branches, ripe fruit falls to the ground. Carelessly, he crushes peaches and pomegranates under his thick feet.

Beyond the orchard is another stretch of lawn, this one even softer than the last. He smears the fruit off his soles as he continues on. He's almost at the house now. All that stands between it and him is a garden of roses – a profusion of twining stems, sharp thorns and thick, velvet blooms. And, in the centre of the flowers, is a woman. He knew she was here. Now he stands still to view the curious sight.

She's a middle-aged woman, round in the figure from a life of too much ease. Dressed in a pink silk kimono, she has a basket looped over one arm and, clasped in her plump fingers, a pair of secateurs. On her head is a band with a small flashlight at the front. She looks utterly ridiculous but is smiling happily to herself as she reaches out to the roses and snips at their stems, before sniffing at the blooms and laying them tenderly in her basket.

For a time she is oblivious. Then his foot, half intentionally, crushes a fallen branch.

"What was that? Who's there?"

She spins around, the light on her head darting about like a firefly.

Still she does not see him. After a moment's pause, she

returns to her sweet labours, humming to herself. She sounds like a demented bumble bee. He decides to have some fun and breaks another twig underfoot. It works. She jumps into the air – well, as high as her plump body will propel her.

He steps out of the shadows, directly across the pool of light.

Now she sees him. She looks up to take in the vast measure of him. Still, to give her credit, she's not as scared as he might have expected. Instead, she bristles with anger.

"Who are you?" she asks. "What are you doing here?"

He stares at her.

"Who are you?" she repeats.

"Who are *you*?" he asks.

"I'm Loretta Busby, of course. And this is my rose garden. And you have no business being here."

He takes a step towards her and smiles, reaching into her basket and grabbing one of the roses. He lifts it to his nose. It smells sickly – overpoweringly sweet. He crushes the bloom in one hand and tosses it away.

"How dare you, you brute!" she cries. "Do you know who I am? Do you know who my husband is?"

"Busby," he says. Does she think he's stupid? He isn't stupid.

"That's right," she says. "Lachlan Busby – Director of the Crescent Moon Bay Cooperative Bank, President of the North East Region Board of Trade, Elder of the Crescent Moon Bay Progressive Church and the most

powerful man for miles around." She fixes him with a glare, literally, as her flashlight catches him in the eyes. "You've walked into the wrong rose garden tonight, you halfwit."

He's insulted now. Insulted and irritated. The light is boring into his eyes and the smell of the roses is thick and syrupy. He looks down at the woman, who continues yapping at him like an annoying little puppy. Finally, he can take no more.

He reaches out his muscular arms and lifts her up, until her face is level with his. Shocked, her legs paddle through the air, as if she still thinks she might run away from him. She stares at him indignantly but now, for the first time, she sees his eyes properly. Or rather the holes where the eyes should be. For they are merely pools of fire – deep pools of spitting flame. There are no more words, for her voice has gone. Her legs cease their useless motion. Her flashlight slips lower and the last thing she sees is his teeth. Twin gold teeth, like daggers, bearing down towards her.

Her blood is good – if a little over-refined for his taste. He drinks deeply and swiftly, making short work of it. Then he lays her down in the centre of the rose garden. A sudden gust of wind tears some of the weaker petals from the blooms and they swirl like confetti above her, before fluttering down to cover her corpse.

His business here is done. He walks away, back across the manicured lawn, back past the pool and the field of horses, back to the edge of the dark rock. As if to greet

him, the moon at last pushes the dark clouds aside. Silver light showers down over his vast body. He smiles, feeling reborn, as the new blood pulses through him. Then, with a roar, he jumps from the edge of the cliff, somersaulting through the soft night air.

The adrenaline rush is enormous. *This* is what it means to be free, he thinks. How he endured so long aboard that ship is a mystery to him. How he ever put up with that captain – with his rules and regulations . . . No more of that for *me*, he thinks, as his feet thud back onto the sand. No more rules for Sidorio. From now on, I make my own way through this world. No limits.

High above him, in the centre of her beloved rose garden, Loretta Busby's flashlight flickers briefly then cuts out. The battery is as dead as the woman lying beneath.



Chapter One

The Three Buccaneers

Cutlass Cate strode across the deck of *The Diablo*, surveying her elite pirate attack force. The attack would commence within the hour and already her chosen pirates filled every space on the deck, preparing themselves mentally and physically for the challenge ahead. Cate walked slowly down the centre of the deck, monitoring them all as they trained, making mental notes to pass on to individuals and teams. It was still strange, but exciting, to think of herself as Deputy Captain. Much had changed aboard *The Diablo* in the past few months. Cheng Li had left the ship – on a teaching assignment of all things! – and opened up the post of Deputy, which Cate had needed little urging to fill. Captain Molucco Wrathe was back in his old high spirits now that Cheng Li had gone. She had always been something of a thorn in his side. He seemed far happier having Cate as his number two. They might

not always agree on strategy but they maintained a friendly respect and, in matters of attack-planning, he generally let her have the final say. But, of all the changes that had occurred these past few months, to Cate the most important had been the arrival on board of the Tempest twins.

Their advent had been in the most tragic circumstances. Connor had turned up first, a week or so ahead of his twin sister Grace. In the days following their father's death, they had fled from their hometown – Crescent Moon Bay – in the family's old wooden yacht. But misfortune had piled upon misfortune and the boat had been caught in the fiercest of storms. The twins had almost drowned, but fate had brought them to safety, though it had kept them separate for a time.

Cate knew what a testing time that separation had proved for Connor but, to the boy's credit, he had thrown himself into life aboard *The Diablo* with every fibre of his being. She could see him now, at the very end of the deck, practising his swordplay with his two best buddies – Bartholomew "Bart" Pearce and Jez Stukeley. She hastened her pace towards them. Bart and Jez had each been members of the crew for several years and were two of the most popular pirates on board. Both were in their early twenties now but had signed up to the articles whilst in their teens. Even as a teenager, Bart had been one of the strongest men aboard. Under her guidance, he had acquired expert swordsmanship to complement his

muscles. Jez was smaller and leaner but, truth be told, the more accomplished swordsman. While Bart used the broadsword and often led the attack force, Jez – like Cate – was a precision fighter who, with his rapier skills, could determine the success of the day.

And then there was Connor Tempest – still just fourteen years old. He had only been aboard a little over three months and had no previous pirate training. Cate had introduced him to the rapier and was delighted with both his natural ability and his commitment to training. Now, as Cate observed the three young pirates executing their manouevres, there was very little to separate them in terms of talent. Cate was especially delighted that Jez had taken Connor under his wing. Hopefully, the full genius of his rapier-handling would rub off on his young apprentice.

"And how are the Three Buccaneers, this fine day?" Cate asked, with a smile. She had come up with the nickname and it had stuck. The three pirates were inseparable. Each one looked out for his comrades – in and out of attack.

The three of them looked up from their swords, smiling as they saluted the deputy captain.

"We're doing good, thank you, ma'am," said Bart, with a grin. He and Cate had an ongoing flirtation, which she secretly enjoyed but could not encourage when she was on attack duty.

"At ease, lads," she said, drawing closer. Though she was

giving them permission to relax, the command also served to demonstrate her authority over them.

Bart took the hint. "So," he asked, "tell us more about this ship we're pursuing."

"It's a container ship," Cate said. "We've been following it all morning. Captain Wrathe received a tip-off early yesterday from one of our most reliable sources. Apparently, it's loaded with cargo – and under-defended. Better yet, it's in our own sea lane."

"Should be an easy victory then," said Jez Stukeley.

"Never assume that," Cate said. "The odds are in our favour, but we mustn't be complacent."

"No, sir!" exclaimed Jez.

"No *sir*?" echoed Bart. He and Connor grinned at their mate's slip-up.

Jez shrugged, flushing red. "I'm sorry, *ma'am*. I don't know what . . ."

"That's *quite* all right," said Cate, amused but keen not to let it show. She turned her eyes towards Connor. "And how's young Mister Tempest feeling today?"

Connor looked her in the eye. "Poised and ready for attack!"

"Excellent!" said Cate. "And how's Grace?"

Connor shrugged. "Fine, I guess. I haven't seen her since breakfast. She was on early swords-maintenance duty, I think."

"She's making good progress with her own swords skills," Cate said. She noted that Connor immediately tensed up,

as he always did when the subject of Grace and swords came up. Surely he couldn't be worried that she would prove a rival to him? As good as Grace was – and she certainly showed some natural flair for attack – she just didn't apply herself as consistently to swordplay as Connor. It was a shame, Cate thought. Why should the boys have all the glory for themselves? She must have another word with Grace and get her to take things a bit more seriously. Maybe a little one-on-one training with another of the women pirates – perhaps Johnna? – was the way forward.

"You're not going to put her into attack for the moment, are you?" Connor asked.

"No," said Cate, shaking her head. "No, she's not quite ready." She saw Connor's shoulders immediately relax. Now she thought she understood. He was simply a brother, being over-protective. He didn't like to think of Grace putting herself into danger. But there was no free ride on a pirate ship and, besides, Grace had proved that she was able to deal with significant danger. After all, she had been "rescued" by a ship of vampires – or rather *Vampirates* – and lived to tell the tale. In spite of her crewmates' urging, Grace had said very little about what she had endured aboard that ship. She had only confided in Connor and, though he had steadfastly kept his sister's secrets, he had hinted that she had faced some truly horrific situations on board. It was understandable that he wanted to protect her from further trauma.

"You mustn't worry about her," Cate said to Connor. "She's as tough as the leather on my sword-hilt."

Connor smiled, but only faintly. "She's my sister, Cate. She's all I have left in the world."

"Na-hah, buddy," said Bart, reaching out a hand to Bart's shoulder. "What about us?"

"Yeah," added Jez, digging Connor in the ribs. "What about the Three Buccaneers?"

"All for one and one for all!" added Bart.

"Very original," said Cate, with a sigh.

But their clowning had done the trick. Connor was smiling again.

"All right, lads," Cate said, "I'm off to make the final preparations for attack."

"Yes, *sir*!" Bart said, saluting her.

Cate tried to frown but she couldn't stop the laughter breaking through. "Enough of your cheek, *Mister* Pearce. Any more lip and you'll be on toilet duty tonight, while the rest of us are off to Ma Kettle's." She turned and walked away, before another wave of laughter broke through her serious demeanour.

"Ohh, I love it when she gets all uppity," said Bart to his mates.

Connor rolled his eyes at Jez.

"Come on, Connor," Jez said, "let's leave Mister Pearce here to his lovesick fantasies while we get on with some serious rapier manoeuvres."

"You're on," agreed Connor.

*

After spending the morning cleaning swords, Grace Tempest was in need of a good wash herself. She scrubbed away at her hands and arms but, though she managed to get rid of most of the grime, she couldn't extinguish the smell of oil and metal. Oh well, she'd just have to let it wear off, she decided. Bidding farewell to her fellows, she headed back down to her cabin for a well-earned break. As she walked down the corridor, she could hear the pirates on the top deck getting ready for the attack. Connor would be amongst them. She felt an instinctive wave of nerves for him. After three months, it was still strange to think of her twin brother as a pirate prodigy.

Sometimes, she wondered at the way things had turned out. After their father's death, there had been nothing left for them in Crescent Moon Bay – nothing save a life of drudgery at the orphanage or being adopted by the lunatic bank manager, Lachlan Busby, and his demented wife Loretta. And so they had taken to the ocean in their old boat, *Louisiana Lady*, not exactly sure where they were heading, but certain that wherever they ended up would be better than what they left behind.

Neither one of them could have ever imagined what lay ahead though, thought Grace, pushing open the door to her small cabin. Her brother had been rescued by this pirate ship. And as for her, well, she had been brought to the Vampirates – creatures she had only heard of in the strange shanty her dad had sung to both twins.

"I'll tell you a tale of Vampirates,
A tale as old as true.
Yea, I'll sing you a song of an ancient ship,
And its mighty fearsome crew.
Yea, I'll sing you a song of an ancient ship,
That sails the oceans blue . . .
That haunts the oceans blue."

As many times as they had heard the shanty, they had never thought that the ship might actually exist. But it did! And she had found herself on board, coming face to face – or rather, face to mask – with its enigmatic captain.

"They say that the captain, he wears a veil
So as to curtail your fright
At his death-pale skin
And his lifeless eyes
And his teeth as sharp as night.
Oh, they say that the captain, he wears a veil
And his eyes never see the light."

The captain did *not* wear a veil, but rather a mask. This was just one of the ways in which the reality of the Vampirate ship contrasted with the words of the shanty. The ship *was* as mysterious as she might have anticipated. But it certainly *wasn't* the place of unalloyed horror that everyone expected. At least, it hadn't been for her.