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Opening extract from

Vampirates Blood Captain

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CHAPTER ONE

The Crow's Nest

"Come on, Connor. You can do it!"

"Come on, buddy! Keep climbing!"

Connor Tempest grimaced. His legs felt simultaneously as heavy as lead and uncontrollable as jelly. It was a mistake to have paused halfway up. He'd been doing so well. He wanted to conquer this fear. It was time. Way past time. But the fear was deep inside him, weighty and immovable as an anchor caught beneath a rock.

He wanted to look down. He struggled to keep his head straight, knowing that looking down was the worst thing he could do. He felt his eyes being pulled like magnets down to the deck, many metres – *too* many metres! – below. And then down the side of *The Diablo* and deep into the ocean. When you stopped to think about it – and you should *never* stop to think about it – there was a very long way to fall.

"Don't look down!" Cate's voice sailed through the air, strong and certain. If only he could be as confident as the deputy captain always sounded.

"Come on, lad!" Captain Wrathe called to him. "You've taken on worse foes than a few metres of rigging!"

This was certainly true, thought Connor, his mind flashing with dark snapshots of the past three months. His dad's funeral. Nearly drowning before he was rescued by Cheng Li. Being separated from Grace. The death of his dear comrade Jez. His betrayal by Cheng Li, Commodore Kuo and Jacoby Blunt. The terrible night when he'd led the attack on Sidorio and Jez . . . no, *not* Jez, but the thing Jez had become. The memory of that night burned in him like a fire, as hot as the torches he had sent across the water to the deck of the other ship. As consuming as the flames which had engulfed his friend . . . the *echo* of his friend . . .

"*Come on, Connor!*"

It was Grace! Even though she was back on the Vampirate ship, it *was* her voice – as clear as anything. It gave Connor the extra fortitude he needed. After everything they had been through, he could no longer be defeated by this one remaining fear. This *ridiculous* fear of heights.

Carefully, he removed his right hand from the rigging. It came away with the indentation of rope deeply imprinted, red and raw, across his palm. He realised how tightly he'd been clinging on. The ship's bell rang. The surprise of it made him lose his balance for a moment but

it was only the bell announcing the changeover of shifts. He steadied himself. It was now or never. He reached up to the next square of rigging and took a deep breath.

He didn't look down. He didn't look up either. He just kept his eyes focused on his hands and the squares of rope. Each square was the same as the last – a rope window framing a patch of sky. If he just focused on this, it was as if he wasn't climbing at all.

Suddenly, he realised that his legs were no longer shaking. Instead, they were moving steadily, seeking out the next foothold, finding their rhythm. His breathing had settled too. He was calm. He was doing this. Conquering the fear. It felt good. It felt *so* good.

He lost himself in the movement and it was only when he heard the sound of cheering from below that he realised he'd reached his goal. He looked up and his hand touched not rope but the wooden frame of the crow's nest. All that remained was to haul himself up onto the lookout point.

A coldness sliced through him. There was no ignoring the sense of how high he was above the deck. With no harness to protect him. It was madness to be up here. At the mercy of the swell of the waves far below. Once more, an icy wave of fear tore through his insides. He gritted his teeth, waiting for it to pass. The fear clung onto him, but Connor was not about to be defeated. Not now.

There was good reason to be up here. Someone had to man the crow's nest – to keep a lookout and give early warning of attack, or opportunities *to* attack! Coming up

here was about protecting your mates. And in the three months since he'd joined *The Diablo*, these guys had become more than mates. Bart, Cate and Captain Wrathe were his new family. They'd never replace Grace, of course, but Grace had had to embark on her own journey. Besides her, everyone he cared about in the world was aboard this ship. When you looked at it like that, it made absolute sense to be up here, in a position to safeguard them. Effortlessly, he climbed up into the crow's nest.

As he planted his feet on the wooden platform, he heard a fresh round of cheers from below. The temptation to glance down was strong now. Resisting it, he looked straight ahead. As far as the eye could see, there was the endless sprawl of glittering blue ocean. His new home.

In the distance, he saw the outline of a ship, silhouetted against the afternoon sun. Attached to the crow's nest was a small telescope. Connor reached for it and looked through the glass out to the horizon. It took him a moment to find the ship but then he caught it in the circle of his vision. It was a galleon, not dissimilar to *The Diablo*. A pirate ship, perhaps. He zoomed in still further and raised the telescope to get a better look at the flag. Yes, another pirate ship for sure! It seemed to be heading around the bay, the bay that could be seen curving into the horizon behind the vessel. Connor grinned. He knew *exactly* where that ship was heading. To every pirate's favourite watering hole – Ma Kettle's Tavern.

As Connor replaced the telescope in its clip, a small bird

came to rest on the crow's nest. From its forked tail, Connor recognised it as a sooty tern. It gave Connor a quick glance then flapped its wings and took off again, soaring away into the blue. Connor watched the bird until it lost its distinctive shape, contracted to a black speck, then disappeared entirely. He smiled to himself. That's my fear, he thought. Gone now.

"Good goin,' buddy!" Bart high-fived Connor as he jumped down the last metre onto the deck.

"Very impressive," said the pirate at Bart's side.

"Thanks, Gonzalez."

"No, I mean it," the pirate replied. "Half an hour to get up there and straight down in thirty seconds!" He grinned.

Connor shook his head. He'd only started to know Brenden Gonzalez since Jez Stukeley's death. Gonzalez could never take Jez's place but he shared a similarly dry sense of humour.

"I'm really proud of you!" Cate said, stepping forward and – most uncharacteristically – hugging him. "I know how hard that was for you," she whispered in his ear.

"An excellent effort!" said Captain Wrathe, beaming at him. Scrimshaw, the captain's pet snake, was coiled about his wrist, and even he seemed to be looking at Connor with fresh admiration.

"Well, gather round everyone," called Captain Wrathe. "I think Mister Tempest's accomplishment is cause for celebration, don't you?"

There was a rousing chorus of "Aye, Captain!" from up and down the deck. Once more, Connor had a sense of belonging to a vast, extended ocean-faring family.

"Tonight, we shall visit an establishment by the name of Ma Kettle's!" cried Captain Wrathe.

There was much cheering. Bart and Gonzalez hoisted Connor up onto their shoulders.

"Put me down!" he cried.

"Oh, dear!" said Bart. "You haven't got a fresh attack of vertigo, have you?" He and Gonzalez laughed good and hard at that.

"No," said Connor. "Put me down! I have news for the captain."

"A likely tale!" cried Bart.

"It's true!" Connor persisted. "Put me down!"

"If you've news for the captain," cried Molucco Wrathe, "you may tell him from up there on your perch."

"All right," Connor said, still balancing on his mates' shoulders. "It's probably nothing to worry about. Just that when I was up in the crow's nest, I saw another pirate ship."

"In our sea lane?" boomed Molucco. The irony of his comment was not lost on the crew, who greeted his indignation with hearty laughter. They all knew that Captain Wrathe had little – or rather, no – respect for the system of sea lanes instigated by the Pirate Federation.

Connor nodded. "It's in our lane, but I don't think it's going to cause us any bother. It looked to me like it was just taking a short-cut to Ma Kettle's."

"I see," Molucco said. He reached into his blue velvet coat and retrieved his own silver retractable telescope. He extended it fully, then raised it to one eye, closing the other eye tight. "Which direction was it coming from?" he asked.

"North-north-west," Connor said.

One eye attached to the telescope, the other still closed, Molucco swung around and narrowly missed whacking Cate in the nose. Fortunately, the deputy captain had quick reflexes.

"Ah yes! I see." He fiddled with the telescope lens. "Let me get a better look."

For a moment, the captain was silent.

"Do you see it now?" Connor asked.

There was a pause and Connor was about to repeat his question. But then the captain spoke. "Yes, lad. Yes, I see it."

They could tell from his voice that something wasn't right. Cate stepped closer to the captain's side. Bart and Gonzalez eased Connor from their shoulders and returned him gently to the deck.

"What's wrong, Captain?" Cate asked.

He seemed too lost in his own thoughts to answer. As if in slow motion, he dropped the telescope from his eye and compacted it once more. He looked dazed.

"The day has come," he announced.

"What do you mean?" Cate asked. "Is there something we should know about that ship?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Molucco said. "Cate, I'm going to my cabin. Make sail for Ma Kettle's."

"But, Captain," said Cate. "If there's something wrong, I'd really like to know . . ."

"Just do it," Molucco said wearily, striding away across the deck.

"What's eating him, I wonder?" Bart said, when the captain had disappeared below deck.

Cate shrugged. "Like he says, we'll find out soon enough." She sighed. "Of course, it might be nice to get a heads-up once in a while. I *am* Deputy Captain of this ship . . . in name, at least."

"Chin up, Cate," Bart said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "Don't take it personally."

Cate lifted her hand and removed Bart's from her shoulder. "That," she said, "is a highly inappropriate," she dropped her voice "but much appreciated show of support." Smiling, she turned to address the crew. "Chop chop! Change tack for Ma Kettle's. Now!"

Connor headed off along the deck.

"Where are you going at such a stride, buddy?" Bart called after him.

"I'm going to grab a shower," Connor said. "I'm all grimy after my climb and I want to freshen up for Ma Kettle's."

Bart gave him a knowing glance. "Freshen up, eh? That wouldn't be to impress any particular lady who might happen to work at Ma's, would it?" He grinned at Connor. "Hey, are you *blushing*?"

"No!" Connor said. "I must have got sunburned up on the crow's nest, is all."

"Aw," said Bart, "our boy sure is growing up fast!" He and Gonzalez grabbed Connor and ruffled his hair.

"Stop it!" cried Connor, breaking free from their clutches and darting inside to get ready.

It was always reassuring entering the familiar terrain of Ma Kettle's. If *The Diablo* felt like Connor's home these days, then Ma's ran a close second. Connor always felt a sense of expectation as he heard the great waterwheel sloshing overhead and made his way with his comrades across the threshold.

Connor, Bart and Gonzalez strode into the main bar. Several faces turned as they did so. Connor noticed that a couple of the serving girls gave him a smile. Blushing, he smiled back. He was still unused to the growing amount of attention he had been receiving of late. Being one of Molucco Wrathe's crew gave you instant celebrity status in the pirate world. Love Molucco or loathe him, it seemed you just couldn't help talking about him.

The bar was bustling with activity, as always. Crews from numerous pirate ships spilled out across the main bar area. Some were lucky enough to be welcomed beyond the velvet rope into the VIP area. Others sought out the private curtained booths up above. Connor saw Cate standing at the bar. She gave him a wave and beckoned the three of them over to join her.

"So did ya find out what's eating the captain?" Bart asked Cate as he, Connor and Gonzalez caught up with her.

"No." She shook her head. "No, he's barely said a word to me since he saw that ship."

"Where is he now?"

"Over there." She pointed. "No doubt telling Ma everything he doesn't see fit to tell me."

They looked over to a roped-off section of the tavern, where Molucco was sitting with Ma Kettle. She was nodding sympathetically, rubbing his shoulder with one hand and pouring him a hefty drink with the other.

"They *are* old friends," Bart said to Cate.

"Yes," Cate said. "But I'm the deputy captain. I'm supposed to know some of what's going on in his head." She sighed. "Of course, you know what this is really about, don't you? He blames me for what went down on *The Albatross.* It's fair enough. Lord knows, I blame myself."

Connor hung his head. It was hard for all of them to move on from that fateful day – from the apparently easy victory that had turned into a nightmare for them all. It was the day that had ended with the death of their friend and comrade, Jez.

"Hey," Bart said. "We were all caught unawares by that."

"Yes," Cate said. "But *I'm*—"

"We know," said Bart. "You're *Deputy Captain*!"

Cate shook her head. "I was going to say that I'm not supposed to be caught unawares by anything."

Connor could see the hurt in her face. He wished he could say something to make her feel better but he felt a little out of his depth.

"Now look," Bart said. "Young Tempest here conquered a major fear today and we're supposed to be celebrating. So can we all put a smile on our faces and get a bit merry?"

"Amen to that," said Gonzalez, grabbing some drinks from a passing serving girl.

"My but you're pretty!" Gonzalez said. "Are you new?"

The girl blushed, shook her head and continued on her way. Bart laughed. "That's little Jenny, you drongo," he said. "Haven't you seen her before?"

"Can't say I have," Gonzalez said. "But I'll be looking out for her now! Little Jenny!"

Hearing her name, the girl glanced over her shoulder. Gonzalez raised his tankard in salute. "Ah, she's like a little angel, that one."

Bart shook his head with a smirk. Cate came over to Connor. "I'm sorry about before," she said. "You did good today and you deserve a celebration."

"It's OK," Connor said. "I know things aren't easy for you."

"No," Cate said. "But those are my problems. And I shouldn't have bothered you with them."

"Yes you should," Connor said. "You might be Deputy Captain, but first and foremost you're our friend."

Just then, there was a loud cry across the tavern.

"Molucco Wrathe!"

Connor, Bart, Cate and Gonzalez turned. Across the room, they saw Molucco and Ma freeze and then look slowly round. The voice boomed across the room again.

"Molucco Wrathe!"

A tall, imposing man strode across the room into the centre of the light. A striking woman and gangling boy followed some steps behind. Connor could tell by the man's clothing he was a captain. There was something strangely familiar about him.

"So *that's* why the captain was all worked up!" exclaimed Cate.

"What do you mean?" Connor asked. "Who is that?"

"That's Barbarro Wrathe," Bart said. "Molucco's brother."



Chapter Two

The Expedition Party

The chill night air licked the deck of *The Nocturne* as the galleon rested in the waters of a small cove at the foot of a vast mountain. So vast was this peak that it was impossible to see just how far it stretched into the air, however much Grace Tempest strained her neck backwards to look. It didn't help, of course, that it was pitch black, save for the sliver of moonlight which fell unhelpfully across the other side of the deck. To most ordinary people, it would seem incredibly foolhardy to embark on an expedition up icy, unknown mountain passes in the middle of the night. But, Grace reminded herself, not one of the people embarking on this expedition could be termed "ordinary". Indeed, some would say it was stretching things to even describe her travelling companions as "people".

As she leaned backwards in vain, Grace felt the woollen beret slipping from her head. Feeling an immediate

resulting chill, she pushed the hat back into position and resumed an upright position. The beret, like the rest of her outer clothes, had been loaned to her by her friend Darcy Flotsam, who now stood beside her on the deck.

"Are you sure you're warm enough, Grace dear?" she inquired. "I could easily pop back into my cabin and fetch you one of my furs. Just say the word!"

Grace shook her head. "I told you before, Darcy. I won't wear fur. No animal should have to die to keep me warm."

Darcy shook her head in disbelief. "But it's so soft and toasty! And it's not like the poor fox what made my coat is about to spring to life again any time soon. So where's the harm, eh?"

"No, Darcy," Grace said, firmly. "Not under any circumstances. This coat is quite warm enough, thank you."

Darcy smiled at Grace as they waited for the others. "I so wish I was coming with you," she said. "I don't think I'd enjoy the climb, it's true, but I'd do it to stay close to you and Lieutenant Furey."

"I know, Darcy, and Lorcan does too." Grace smiled at her companion. "But the captain seems to think that the less of us leave the ship the better."

They both looked towards the closed door of the captain's quarters. Inside, he was briefing his deputies on how to manage the ship during his absence.

"It's *very* rare for the captain to leave the ship," said Darcy, turning back to Grace. "It shows how much he cares for Lieutenant Furey that he would take this risk."

Risk? Grace hadn't thought of it in those terms before, but now she realised that with the recent turmoil on the ship and the rebellions following Sidorio's departure, it would indeed be a risk for the captain to leave the other Vampirates for even a few days. Sidorio had questioned the rules of the ship, in particular the captain's limiting of blood-taking to the weekly Feast Night. Though Sidorio had been banished and was now gone, he had left the seeds of discontent behind him. Others amongst the previously compliant crew were now asking why *they* could not take blood more often. Grace knew that the captain had exiled three more of the crew since Sidorio had left. They had joined up with the renegade Vampirate and embarked on a terrible spree of wanton bloodshed until they had all been destroyed – by her brother, Connor. Connor the hero.

It was strange to think of her twin in such a way. So much had happened to them both in the few short months since their father had died and they had left their home in Crescent Moon Bay. How naïve they had been then, thought Grace. They had thought that leaving would offer them an escape route. And, in some ways, it had. But their journey had thrown them both into dangerous situations, where their very lives were under threat. Now Connor was, to his sister's great discomfort, a pirate warrior aboard the notorious ship *The Diablo*. And, perhaps to her brother's even greater alarm, Grace was a regular passenger aboard the ship of vampire pirates, or Vampirates, called *The*

Nocturne. Both brother and sister yearned for the other twin to see sense and join them – to see that *their* choice of ship was the right one. But it was a tribute to their relationship that they had lately come to the understanding that each must go their own way, for now at least.

And so here she was, on the deck of *The Nocturne*, awaiting the captain and her dear comrade Lorcan, about to embark on an important mission to the top of the mountain and a mysterious place called Sanctuary. There, they would meet the Vampirate guru, Mosh Zu Kamal, and appeal to him to cure Lorcan of his blindness.

Glancing back up towards the mountain, Grace wondered just how long it would take to reach Sanctuary. It might prove to be a very arduous trek indeed. Already, she was concerned about how Lorcan would manage. It was not just a question of his blindness but the fact that he had recently grown so weak. Why, just a few days earlier, it had been effort enough just to get him up onto the top deck.

"My business is concluded." She heard a familiar whisper, and saw a new figure emerge onto the deck. Clad from head to toe in black, it was as if he had been sculpted out of the dark night itself. Others would be perturbed by the sight of this tall, imposing man with his leathery cape, which sometimes flickered with veins of light, like the winged sails of the Vampirate ship. They would be intimidated by the fact that he always wore a mask and never removed his hands from their dark gloves. Some might recoil at his voice, which did not go out into the air,

as other voices do, but instead arrived in your head as an icy whisper, never varying in volume or pitch.

But in her relatively short acquaintance with the Vampirate captain, Grace had come to know him as a wise and compassionate being – more humane than anyone she had ever met before, save perhaps her dear departed father. In a way, she realised, she had come to view the captain as a father figure.

"Let us go." Once more the captain's words arrived in her head.

As the captain walked towards them, Darcy suddenly threw her arms about Grace's shoulders. "Oh, Grace," she said with a sob, "we always seem to be saying goodbye, don't we?"

Grace nodded, smiling. She was a little surprised to feel a tear roll down her cheek. Sometimes, she forgot just what a good friend Darcy Flotsam had become to her. It was no longer sufficient to think of her as the ship's quirky but beautiful figurehead; a wooden sculpture by day, but a girl full of life by night. Darcy was as much flesh and blood and emotion as anyone Grace had ever met.

Grace wiped away the tear. "I'll be back soon, Darcy," she said. "I promise. Just as soon as Lorcan is on the mend, we'll return to *The Nocturne.*"

Darcy nodded. And so they hugged once more and repeated their farewells, both hanging onto the pretence that Lorcan was sure to recover. Neither could bear to even entertain the alternative.

The captain gently leaned forward. "Goodbye for now, Darcy," he whispered, laying a gloved hand on her shoulder. "I know I can depend on you to obey the deputy and do your best for the good of the ship."

"Yes, Captain!" Darcy exclaimed, giving him a crisp naval salute.

Watching them, Grace pondered the word "deputy". She realised that she had no idea who the captain had left in charge of *The Nocturne* during his absence. She was aware of a certain hierarchy aboard the ship – Lorcan, for instance, now held the post of Lieutenant, as Sidorio had before him. But she had no clue as to who the deputy captain was or even who might be of senior rank amongst the crew. This was in marked contrast to her time aboard the pirate ship, *The Diablo*, where it had been crystal clear that the deputy captain was first Cheng Li and latterly Cutlass Cate. Grace was reminded that, in spite of her already deep attachment to several of the crew of *The Nocturne*, there was still much she had to learn about the Vampirates. Perhaps her time at Sanctuary would give her more of an insight. She fervently hoped so.

"Ah," said the captain, his whisper cutting through her thoughts. "And here come the final members of our expedition party."

He nodded as Lorcan made his way out onto the deck. He was dressed in a heavy army greatcoat he had borrowed from another member of the crew. A medal still hung over the front of the chest. It looked rather good, thought

Grace, wondering which conflict it commemorated and what noble and violent deeds had secured the honour. With his military boots, Lorcan cut a dashing figure. On his back was a small kitbag, filled with a few articles to make his stay at Sanctuary more comfortable. Across his eyes was the fresh bandage Grace had helped to apply earlier. It obscured the livid burns, with which she was now all too familiar, and shone dove white in the moonlight.

Lorcan was not alone, however. Beside him strode Shanti, his beautiful but vicious donor. Her high-heeled boots drummed on the wooden deck and she gripped a vanity case in a small, suede-gloved hand. So, she was coming along with them too, thought Grace. It made sense. If Lorcan was to fully recover then he'd have to start taking blood again. Shanti was his given donor and he'd need her close at hand when the time came. Shanti, Grace now noticed, was wearing a matching fur coat and pillar-box hat. She didn't need to think very hard to realise where *that* outfit had been procured.

Darcy's face flushed red at Grace's stare. Grace shook her head. Darcy was such a generous soul – but how typical it was of Shanti not to give a thought to what dead creature she might be wearing. The most annoying thing of all, though, thought Grace, was that Shanti looked so pretty in the outfit.

As the new arrivals reached the group, Grace and Shanti exchanged strained smiles. There was no love lost between the two and clearly neither could quite hide the displeasure

they felt in travelling together. Close up, Grace noticed how much older Shanti looked, even from the last time she had seen her. She was still beautiful, there was no question about that. In some ways, she was *more* beautiful, as lines wove their way about her eyes and lips. This made her beauty seem more fragile and therefore more precious. To Shanti, however, the lines were abhorrent. The donors were only immortal whilst their given vampire was sharing their blood. As soon as this stopped, mortality wasted no time in reclaiming the donor's body. Since Lorcan had ceased sharing with her, Shanti had begun to age at an alarming rate. If he did not start taking her blood again soon, she would be in severe danger. She too might be growing weak. Grace shook her head. What an unlikely expedition party they were, she thought, looking from one face to another.

"Come on," said the captain. "Let's not waste any more time. Sanctuary and Mosh Zu await us. Come, my friends."

"Goodbye, dear Lieutenant Furey," Darcy said, hugging Lorcan tightly. "I wish you the most speedy recovery."

"Thanks, Darcy," said Lorcan, warmly. "You be a good girl while I'm away, you hear me?"

Grace was pleased that he had managed to muster some of his old cheek. That had been missing for too long. Shanti looked displeased, her lips pursed tightly. She was, Grace had noticed, remarkably possessive of Lorcan. Now she looped a fur-wrapped arm through the sleeve of his greatcoat. Grace lifted her own small pack onto her back,

then took Lorcan's other arm. They followed the captain gingerly down the gangplank and onto land.

Behind them, mist rose from the dark waters, stealing its way gently but firmly up the sides of the ship. Darcy stood on the deck, waving to the departing travellers until the very last. Then the mist drew a curtain between them and *The Nocturne* disappeared from sight.

"And now a new journey begins," announced the captain.

Grace nodded. She wanted to say something enthusiastic, to generate some positive energy amongst the group, but catching sight of Lorcan's downturned mouth and Shanti's cold, sharp eyes, she could see exactly what they were both thinking. This might be their final journey. If Sanctuary and the mysterious Mosh Zu Kamal couldn't heal Lorcan, there was no further hope for either of them.